

Grants given to schools to help kids eat healthy

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Anthony Anderson, a fifth grader at Kathryn Sue Simonton Elementary in Queen Creek, brushes aside the bushy tops of a group of radishes growing in his school's garden. He tugs out a hot-pink bulb.

"Look at this one!" he says, holding it up.

The students at this J.O. Combs Unified District school have been keeping an eye on a large, raised garden that features pest-detering marigolds, sweet corn stalks as tall as a fourth-grader, squash, tomatoes and everything else you'd need for a picnic.

The district's nutrition director, Michelle Swendseid, said the inspiration for this garden actually stemmed from a special fresh fruit and vegetable program run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Swendseid said kids and teachers enjoyed the greens and fruits so much they took the idea to new heights and decided to try growing food in the school yard.

Since 2002, the USDA has been providing grants for schools to buy fresh produce of all sorts. The program was established through the multi-billion dollar farm bill with goals of reducing childhood obesity and educating children about nutrition.

The program also has appealed to fruit and vegetable industry groups that wanted to promote their goods.

More money

Every year, funding for the program is increased, and more schools compete for a piece of the pie. Arizona school officials had until Friday to apply for a share of the \$1.45 million in grants for the upcoming school year. The awards, based on the assumption that it costs about \$50 to \$75 per student to operate, covers purchases of fresh produce and other costs associated with delivering them to schools.

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This year, the state had about \$960,000 to award to schools. That's why only 25 were awarded grants. Federal officials and lawmakers recently determined the program should target only younger children to train them early in life about good eating habits and to prevent the rise in childhood obesity and juvenile diabetes.

"The focus and the target will be grades K-8," said Mary Szafranski, a deputy associate superintendent for Arizona Department of Education's nutrition services, which handles the grant applications.

School lunch directors would like the program expanded to all grades, especially since growing teenagers also tend to be top consumers of junk food.

This year, students at Gililand Middle School in Tempe have gotten to taste exotic fruits, such as star fruit, Tempe School District spokeswoman Monica Allread said.

The district's lunch director and staff have planned themed days where they'll dress up as sports figures - ideas that can prompt the kids to savor fresh apples or bite into melon slices.

Seeking success

The USDA Economic Research Service has conducted studies over the years to gauge what works and what doesn't to make the program successful. Participation in some schools has exceeded expectations, researchers have found. Principals and teachers applaud it.

They've also learned more about kids' taste buds, finding students prefer fresh fruit over dried.

The program has had a few hitches. After all, kids will be kids.

In some schools, servers sometimes found a handful of mischievous children "were unruly . . . wasted food or used food as weapons," USDA researchers wrote in a 2003 study given to Congress.

The program changes slightly with each new farm bill. Policymakers for the 2008 farm bill added one guideline for the program that's a reflection of a recent consumer trend: Schools are encouraged to buy locally-grown products whenever feasible.

The idea appeals to conscientious foodies who subscribe to the "locavore" philosophy - buying healthful food from nearby farmers to support small businesses and cut down on pollution.

Some California schools have passed policies buy fresh items from local farmers. The most famous trend-setter was Berkley Unified in the San Francisco area - a community of foodies.

Arizona officials say they're aware of only a few school districts in Arizona, such as Litchfield Elementary District, that have such arrangements with growers. They recognize that cost is the major sticking point for districts.

"California is ahead of us in building that sort of infrastructure," said Lee Renda, Arizona's director for the National School Lunch Program.