

## **Better food, better behavior in schools project**

A Report by Michael Fields Agricultural Institute  
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Five years ago, Natural Ovens and Bakery, a company in Appleton, Wisconsin, took over the cafeteria of a local alternative high school and offered fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grain breads, and entrees free of additives and chemicals, instead of pizza and fries. This together with changes in the length of lunch, type of tables, and other aspects of the lunchroom atmosphere resulted in significant behavioral changes. "I can say without hesitation that it's changed my job as a principal," said LuAnn Coenen. "Since we've started this program, I have had zero weapons on campus, zero expulsions from the school, zero premature deaths or suicides, zero drugs or alcohol on campus." Students became more attentive in class and better able to concentrate.

Parallel to this initiative, there have been an increasing number of programs fostering school gardens and the use of local/regional foods in school cafeterias. Better food for better health, support of local farmers, a greater connection to and appreciation for how food is produced have all been cited as reasons to implement such programs in schools. The Community Food Security Coalition organized a fall workshop on this topic as part of its conference in 2002 and has published a booklet on "Healthy Farms, Healthy Kids: Evaluating the Barriers and Opportunities for Farm-to-School Programs." These are important and exciting initiatives that have the potential for major impacts on schools, students and parents. However, there are many barriers that currently limit the prospects of widespread adoption of such programs.

Although children's health is of interest to schools and teachers, a more direct connection to their educational mission is the student's ability to learn and the effectiveness of the learning environment. We think that more knowledge and evidence supporting the type of behavioral changes documented in the Appleton project would significantly increase the interest and create a powerful incentive for establishing similar healthy school lunch programs throughout the country. Given the ever-increasing focus on violence and schools and its prevention, a merging of the two initiatives of work is needed.

For this project, we are surveying the field of healthy school lunch programs for any data or evidence relating to behavioral changes and report on the status of knowledge and activities. We will evaluate the information to determine the gaps in knowledge and address the implications as well as the need for further research, communication, and activities in a "white paper" that will be widely circulated through electronic media. Finally, we will use local media outlets and other direct connections to raise awareness and develop interest for establishing the collaborations and a plan for a local farm-to-school project in Southeast Wisconsin.

### **Full Reports**

- [Case Study: Appleton Central Alternative Charter High School's Nutrition and Wellness Program \[pdf 339kb\]](#)
- [Better Food, Better Behavior project report \[pdf 225kb\]](#)

