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Children's Lunch Program Aims To
Bring Better Food, Health to Schools

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School lunch just took a turn for the better for about 1 million California schoolchildren. A program called California Thursdays is bringing locally grown food into school lunchrooms. Well, for one day of the week, anyway. David Gorn, in a collaborative report with *California Healthline*, has the story from Sacramento County.

[AMBI 1 playground, three giggles]

It is lunchtime at Elk Grove Elementary School, about 20 minutes outside of Sacramento, and kids are doing what kids do when they're let loose from the classroom.

[AMBI 1 playground, scream]

And this day has a little extra charge to it. It's California Thursday.

[AMBI 2 YES! Carrot! Yes! Woo hoo, We have a winner! Everybody's a winner]

There's a lottery wheel going, there's someone running around in a carrot suit. And volunteer Katie O'Malley mans the almond butter booth, where whole almonds go in the top and come plopping out below in a thick paste -- that's Giggle City to a 9-year-old. And that's the point, O'Malley said, making food fun.

(O'Malley): "There was a few kids that really liked it, and I saw them go and get their friends and bring their friends back and say, 'You need to try this, this is so good.'"

But of course, like everything in school, even fun has a message.

(Drake): "We are offering a festival for California Thursdays to tie farm to school, into the lunchroom, so they kind of learn the connection."

That's Michelle Drake, director of food and nutrition for Elk Grove Unified School District.

(Drake): "This district is about the fifth-largest district in the state of California, and we feed about 35,000 kids a day."

Today, all those kids are getting whole wheat penne pasta with chorizo and kale, and all the food's from local farms.

(Drake): "I've got persimmons on the lunch line today. How many kids have ever had a local persimmon?"

[FADE out AMBI 2]

In all, the California Thursdays program serves lunch for nearly 1 million schoolchildren in the state. That's about 1,700 schools in 15 districts. Karen Brown is creative director of Center for Ecoliteracy, a nonprofit based in Berkeley working with schools on sustainability. Here's how the program works: The districts pay for the food, and Ecoliteracy keeps cost down and does all the legwork, contacting farmers and setting up the kitchens. Brown says their first test school district was in Oakland -- and what they found there was typical of many school cafeterias across the state.

[AMBI 3 room tone, Brown]

(Brown): "They weren't even doing freshly prepared food then. They were mostly just doing heat and serve. For me, one of the things I find the most remarkable is that they didn't have measuring cups. They serve 7 million meals a year in Oakland Unified, and they didn't have any measuring cups."

Changing the habits of our cafeterias and the diets of our children is crucial, Brown says.

(Brown): "One-third of the kids in America are overweight or obese. A lot of children get 35% of their calories every day at school. Some kids get more than half. So it's very important that those meals be as healthy as possible."

[AMBI 3 out]

[AMBI 4 lunchroom sound, Is this tomatoes?]

Back at the Elk Grove cafeteria, food director Michelle Drake is bracing for the next wave of kids, making sure there's enough tomatoes, strawberries, pomegranates, carrots.

(Drake): "We thought it was cool we put color rainbow cauliflower -- so we have purple green yellow cauliflower, kids love it just 'cause it's colorful."

A fifth-grader named Audrey is checking out the bright orange persimmons. She grabs one from the pile. Takes a nibble. Then a bite. Decides ... Yeah. OK.

(Audrey): "I liked it, it was really good. It was sweet. It was kind of like a light peach, like a really light peach flavor. But it's really good."

Which, of course, brings joy to the ears of project organizers. One kid, liking one persimmon, is a microcosm of a shift in the taste buds and eating habits of a generation that doesn't know how to cook and snacks on Kit-Kats and corn chips. One thing, though, says Audrey.

(Audrey): "It tastes better without the skin. It'd be easier if they had it without the skin when they give it to you."

Ah, see? You get them to try other foods, bring those food ideas home to their families, that's all good. But now you have a discerning eater on your hands. And maybe that's the point.

[AMBI 6 Something smells good here.]

For the California Report, I'm David Gorn, senior editor of *California Healthline*, in Sacramento County.