



CENTER FOR
ECOLITERACY



CONTACT:

Jonathan Bash

Brown-Miller Communications
(925) 370-9777 (office)
(818) 205-5532 (cell)
jonathan@brownmillerpr.com

Chris Smith

Center for Ecoliteracy
(510) 845-4595 x124 (office)
(415) 517-2844 (cell)
chris@ecoliteracy.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

58 School Districts Statewide Celebrate Locally-Sourced Food This 'California Thursday'

16 New School Districts Join Movement for Fresher, Healthier School Food

BERKELEY, CALIF., March 17, 2016 ... Today more than 1.5 million California students – over a quarter of the state's children – will be offered a school meal made from foods grown in California and prepared freshly just for them. The [California Thursdays®](#) Network – which includes Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sacramento and San Diego Unified School Districts – is demonstrating that making school meals fresh and local can have a big impact on California children and the state's economy.

How big? The California Thursdays® Network includes 58 public school districts across the state covering at least 2,878 schools. Collectively they serve over 283 million meals each year. When school districts come together like this and increase demand for California-grown food, the supply chain can shift, supporting local businesses and helping children learn about where their food comes from and how to make healthier choices.

School districts across the state are buying more produce from local producers, farms and fisheries than ever. Meanwhile, industry-leading distributors – including Gold Star and AgLink – are developing new California-sourced product lines that cater specifically to school districts in the California Thursdays® Network. According to economists, every \$1 spent on local food fosters \$2.56 in local economic activity, meaning that the California Thursdays® program pays significant dividends for school district taxpayers.

"Fresh and healthy local school meals are great for our students and make perfect financial sense," says Jennifer LeBarre, executive director of nutrition services, who leads Oakland Unified School District's California Thursdays® program. "Any teacher or parent knows that well-nourished children are better learners. Healthy kids put less strain on our district's teachers as well as nursing, counseling and special education services, while also lowering absentee rates. We're funded based on how many students come to school, so it's worth investing in quality meals that kids want."

A Growing Model for the State and the Nation

The California Thursdays® program is predicated on the simple logic that California children will benefit from eating more fresh California-grown food. The program's organizer, the [Center for Ecoliteracy](#), recognizes that freshly cooked meals made with local ingredients are more likely to appeal to students. This theory was proven in the pilot year of the program, when districts reported a 13 percent increase in school lunch participation on days featuring kid-tested California Thursdays® meals.

“Whenever we serve fresh, locally grown food with these recipes, students devour it,” says Zenobia Barlow, executive director of the Center for Ecoliteracy. “That alone is a victory. And when we connect the food back to the people, the places and the farming practices they came from, kids get excited.”

Building on student support, California Thursdays® has grown at a rapid clip. What started as a pilot program with 15 school districts in October 2014, expanded to 42 districts by April 2015 and now includes 58 districts in 24 counties statewide. Altogether, it accounts for 32 percent of California’s school meals. **The 16 new California Thursdays® member districts include:**

- Arvin Union School District
- Buckeye Union School District
- Cajon Valley Union School District
- Chula Vista Elementary School District
- Encinitas Union School District
- Escondido Union School District
- Grass Valley School District
- Julian Union School District
- Nevada Joint Union High School District
- Pajaro Valley Unified School District
- Palm Springs Unified School District
- Rescue Union School District
- San Ysidro Unified School District
- Santa Cruz City Schools
- Tustin Unified School District
- Vista Unified School District

Other school systems around the country are also becoming inspired – Minnesota Thursdays recently launched in Minneapolis and St. Paul. New York Thursdays has just sprung up in schools across New York City.

“We are proud to support the expansion of California Thursdays® through our Farm to School Grant Program,” says Jesus Mendoza, western regional administrator for the USDA Food and Nutrition Service. “Children in schools with farm to school programs eat more fruits and vegetables, and are more willing to try new healthy foods – important steps in the fight against childhood obesity. California Thursdays® helps to make the healthy choice the easy choice for children.”

For more information about the California Thursdays® program, or to see family-sized versions of some of the California Thursdays® recipes and learn the “Five Things Parents Can Do,” visit www.californiathursdays.org.

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EDITORS: A full online pressroom that includes contact information for every participating school district, press kit materials and photographs of meal prep, students eating and product shots is available at: www.californiathursdayspr.org.

The Center for Ecoliteracy is a Berkeley-based nonprofit dedicated to education for sustainable living and a pioneer in school lunch reform. For more information, visit www.ecoliteracy.org.