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Lunchroom Heroes

Melea Reicks Licht

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Students in the San Diego Unified School District are trading cards of a different variety these days. One “Farmer Bill Brammer” card could equal a “Robin and Lucila from Suzie’s Farm.”

Complete with crops grown, farm size and brand of tractor driven, farmer trading cards are one of the many ways Vanessa Zajfen, the school’s farm to school specialist, connects kids to those who grow their food.

Zajfen, (’05 MS sustainable agriculture) coordinates local food purchasing and programming for the second largest school district in California.

“My favorite course was an immersion course in Iowa agricultural systems,” she says. “One day after I arrived in Iowa I piled into a van with other sustainable agriculture students and for 24 hours a day for two weeks we traveled the state visiting big and small farms, conventional and organic, processing plants, dairy farms, beef cattle farms, pig farms. We could compare and contrast those systems easily.”

She draws upon her education and practical experience when she visits with farmers about how they can meet the district’s needs. Zajfen helps place local foods on menus according to seasonal availability and coordinates how both farmers and the district can meet U.S. Department of Agriculture regulations.

“Our biggest challenges are finding enough supply to meet our needs and training staff. Not only do we need to find enough raw broccoli to feed all our students, but we need to train our staff how to prepare it rather than using processed frozen,” Zajfen says.

She says price is always on her mind as well. “We have $1.03 to create a school meal. When a local apple makes up 25 cents, things add up really quickly.”

For Zajfen it is rewarding to see the program grow into a framework through which the district’s entire food system is moving to healthier meals. “Farm to school is a radical shift and a lot of people have been inspired,” she says.

HOW LOCAL IS LOCAL?
For the San Diego Unified School District’s Farm to School Program Vanessa Zajfen categorizes farms into tiers: “San Diego Local” is within 25 miles of the county border; “Local” is within 150 miles of the school’s distribution center; and “Regional” is over 150 but within 250 miles of the distribution center.