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“Honor our School Lunch ‘Heroes’”

Friday, May 1 is National School Lunch Hero Day, a perfect time to recognize the hard work that school nutrition staff do to feed thousands of kids every school day in Humboldt County.

Given that children spend a majority of their eating hours in the school setting, it’s an ideal venue for modeling good nutrition and influencing children’s diets through the meals served. In fact, our local “lunch ladies” are serving over 10,800 meals a day, including breakfast lunch and even supper. This impressive act places them on the front lines in the fight against childhood hunger. In Humboldt County, over 50% of schoolchildren are eligible for free or reduced price lunches, meaning their families are at or below 185% of poverty level. In some cases these families are homeless. The work of school food service staff ensures that these kids have the nutrition they need to thrive and to focus in the classroom.

Most school nutrition professionals will say that they got into their line of work because they love to cook and that they care about the kids. However, the job involves much more than that. Between adhering to strict nutrition standards, staying within a limited budget, following extensive reporting protocols, navigating student food allergies, and offering service with a smile, these nutrition professionals have a lot on their plate.

The majority of meals served in our county are cooked from scratch, but there is still room for improvement in our school meal programs, and our local heroes are up for the challenge. The Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) and Humboldt County Office of Education (HCOE) have been supporting school food nutrition staff by providing trainings, peer to peer networking opportunities, one-on-one support for Farm to School efforts, and assistance in complying with federal guidelines. The results are starting to show.

CAFF and HCOE recently gathered information from school nutrition staff across the county about their meal programs based on the 2013-14 school year. The survey was a follow up to one done in 2012, allowing CAFF and HCOE to see whether schools’ efforts to move towards healthier meals are working. Some highlights include:

- Number of schools using salad bars or offering salads on the serving line went up, as did the frequency that salad is offered. 15 of 21 respondents (71%) offer salad 5 days a week.
- While pizza still ranks as one of the top three most popular entrees in most schools, so do dishes such as Mandarin chicken with brown rice, the salad bar, and chicken noodle soup.
- New recipes tried in 2014 include porcupine sliders (made with turkey), orange chicken, Tuscan turkey and bean soup, and potato and green chili enchiladas.

- New produce and grain items tried in 2014 include crenshaw melons, kale, snow peas, farro, and quinoa.
- At least \$12,000 spent was on local produce and grass fed beef from 7 local farms.

Remember to thank a School Lunch Hero for their hard work on May 1 and join the national celebration!

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