

School Lunches Go Organic

Science supports growing movement

By Aviva Glaser and Michele Roberts

In an effort to keep children's diets free of pesticides, antibiotics and genetically engineered ingredients, increasing numbers of parents throughout the country are purchasing organic food for their children and pushing their schools to do the same. Schools in Washington State and California are leading the nation in introducing organic food into school lunch programs. An organic salad bar started at Lincoln Elementary School in Olympia, Washington has proven so popular and economically feasible, all grade schools in Olympia now have one. California school districts in Berkeley, Santa Monica, and Palo Alto also have organic food programs. In 2004, the Seattle school district adopted H61.01, *Breakfast and Lunch Program Procedure*, a policy banning junk food and encouraging organic food in school cafeterias.

Organic demand growing

Parents are increasingly driving the demand for organic food in their homes as well as in schools. AC Nielsen marketing ratings show that sales of organic baby food have jumped nearly 18 percent since 2004—double the overall growth of organic food sales. Additionally, dairy, produce, and snacks (food purchased often for children) are rapidly growing segments of the organic food market, according to the Organic Trade Association. Due to rising demand, organic food for children is now available in mainstream supermarkets such as Safeway in addition to natural food stores.

Organic companies responding to increasing parent concern have assisted in developing school organic food programs. For example, the organic yogurt company Stonyfield Farm has sponsored organic programs at schools in Rhode Island, California, Massachusetts, New York, New Hampshire and Connecticut. Stonyfield's school program was conceived by president and CEO, Gary Hirshberg. Mr. Hirshberg's wake-up call came after asking his teenage son what he had eaten at school one day. "Pizza, chocolate milk and Skittles," was the reply. Responding to an opportunity, Stonyfield's campaign to put organic foods in schools was born, and refrigerated vending machines selling healthy organic treats replaced junk food vending machines in participating schools around the country.

Stonyfield Farm is not the first company to sponsor school organic food programs. Several years ago, Horizon Organic implemented two school programs designed to educate teachers, children and their families about the environmental and health benefits of organics. As part of the program, Horizon helped bring organic lunches to 12 schools in Palo Alto.

Independent schools are also going organic without corporate sponsorship. The Ross School in New York, along with many Waldorf schools, are leading the way in integrating organic products into their food service. Many colleges have



also started bringing organic food into the dining hall, including Princeton, Stanford, Colorado College, and the Monterey Institute of International Studies.

The increased availability of organic food in schools throughout the country indicates a growing movement towards healthier, more conscious school lunches. "This is the beginning of the sea change," predicts Ronnie Cummins, director of the Organic Consumers Association.

Health benefits of organic food

Advocates say organic food is especially important for children because they face unique hazards from pesticide exposure. Pound for pound, children eat more food, drink more water and juices, and breathe more air than adults, and thus they take in more pesticides relative to their body weight. Their developing organ systems make children more sensitive than adults to exposure to toxic chemicals and less able to detoxify the chemicals.

The schools and parents turning to healthy organic food are doing so as a way to improve children's health. One of the main concerns for parents is the "body burden" of pesticide residues in children's bodies. A study published in *Environmental Health Perspectives* shows that children who eat a diet of organic food exhibit levels of pesticides in their bodies that are six times lower than children who eat a diet of food produced with chemical-intensive methods.¹

Moreover, a new study by researchers at Emory University finds that switching children to an organic diet provides a "dramatic and immediate protective effect" against exposures to two organophosphate pesticides commonly used in U.S. agricultural production. The results were published in the February 2006 issue of *Environmental Health Perspectives*.² "Immediately after substituting organic food items for the children's normal



diets, the concentration of the organophosphorus pesticides found in their bodies decreased substantially to non-detectable levels until the conventional diets were re-introduced,” says Chensheng Lu, Ph.D, one of the study’s authors.

Research shows that organic food also has health benefits. A study published in the February 26, 2003 print edition of the *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry* finds greater nutritional attributes in organically grown food compared with chemically produced food, resulting from the lack of pesticides used.³ The organic and sustainably grown foods contain up to 58% more polyphenolics, which act as antioxidants, and may help prevent heart disease and cancer. According to the study, sustainably grown and organically grown produce also has more ascorbic acid, which the body converts to vitamin C.

How To Get Schools To Go Organic

1. **Familiarize yourself with your child’s school district policy** regarding meals and snack items sold in school stores and/or vending machines.
2. **Eat a typical lunch at the school if possible.** Consult the curriculum, teachers or school health staff to determine if students receive any instruction in nutrition and healthy eating. Talk with food service workers to get their opinions on what students do and do not eat.
3. **Meet with your school’s decision makers,** the school food services director, principal, PTO/PTA, and school board members to discuss your concerns.
4. **Organize a committee.** Enlist other parents, teachers and staff to join.
5. **Recruit members from the community** who will be helpful, such as a pediatrician, nurse or nutrition expert. Identify students to serve on your committee or help with the project. Student participation is key!
6. **Know the reason for organics at schools.** Use the information from the following sources to build your case and become informed: www.beyondpesticides.org, www.farmtoschool.org, www.organicvalley.com, www.organic.org, www.allorganicslink.com, www.organicconsumersassociation.org, www.generation-green.org, www.eatwellguide.com, <http://www.soilassociation.org/foodforlife>, www.freshbaby.com, www.wholefoodsmarket.com and www.stonyfield.com. If you do not have internet access, call Beyond Pesticides 202-543-5450 for help. If you have a co-op in your area, you may want to contact it for resources and help.
7. **Involve the media.** Write letters to the editor about the problems you see and the solutions. Cite statistics. Send press releases to local newspapers and radio stations to announce events or important meetings, and any progress made. Suggest your local paper do a feature story on school lunches. If the school has a newspaper, get students to write articles on the need for organics.
8. **Stay tuned to the process.** Whether your school agrees to ban some junk foods, discontinue vending services, change the cafeteria menu...whatever it is, stay involved. Keep your commitment intact to oversee the process and to step in if implementation doesn’t go as expected. Hold regular meetings to ensure commitment.
9. **Advocate for the issue:** Write letters to public officials to help change public policy. Be sure to include letters from the students.
10. **Inspire others. Celebrate** all victories no matter how small. Tell your story to the media. Share your story with others, such as Beyond Pesticides, at info@beyondpesticides.org, Stonyfield’s Creating Healthy Kids blog at: menuforchange@stonyfield.com.

These steps have been adapted from Stonyfield Farm’s Menu for Change, “Ten Steps to Changing Your School’s Menu” from <http://www.stonyfield.com/MenuForChange/parentsAction/MFCParentActionKit.cfm>

Footnotes

¹ Curl CL, RA Fenske, and K Elgethun. 2003. Organophosphorus pesticide exposure of urban and suburban pre-school children with organic and conventional diets. *Environmental Health Perspectives* 11(3): 377-382.

² Lu C, K Toepel, and R Irish, et al. 2006. Organic diets significantly lower children’s dietary exposure to organophosphorus pesticides. *Environmental Health Perspectives* 114(2): 260-3.

³ Asami DK, YJ Hong, DM Barrett, and AE Mitchell. 2003. Comparison of the total phenolic and ascorbic acid content of freeze-dried and air-dried marionberry, strawberry, and corn grown using conventional, organic, and sustainable agricultural practices. *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry* 51(5): 1237-41.