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FEATURED

Sustainable Solano planting seed of new Farm to School program

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Youth Wellness Program students garden as part of the Solano Farm to School Project at Vacaville High School.
(Courtesy photo)



VACAVILLE — Vacaville Unified School District is helping to lead the way for other Solano County districts to benefit from a proposed Solano Farm to School Project.

The district is already "a model for bringing food from local farms to its new central kitchen to ensure that all of the district's schools have access to fresh, seasonal healthy meals," said Allison Nagel, co-executive director of Sustainable Solano.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony for the kitchen is scheduled for 8 a.m. Thursday.

"The Solano Farm to School Project is exploring what school districts need and how they can learn from food service programs that have brought in healthy food successfully," Nagel said.

The organization described the project as an opportunity for Solano County to be a leader in healthy school meals, and to provide healthy, local school lunches made from scratch to TK-12 students.

"Vacaville Unified Director of Student Nutrition Juan Cordon has already developed relationships and contracts with several Solano farmers, and the district is preparing meals from scratch in a new central kitchen unveiled this month under direction of a new chef to ensure that students have access to fresh, seasonal, healthy meals," Nagel added.

As part of the project, district food service leaders will share their insight and successes.

The project is funded through a two-year \$366,597 Patrick Leahy Farm-to-School grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture with in-kind matches from partners Conscious Kitchen, a national program, Innovative Health Solutions and the Vacaville school district.

The USDA has awarded \$20 million nationally, and announced plans for an additional \$25 million.

"The USDA also recently announced its Harvest to Hallways initiative, which will support more funding for equipment and programs that will help to get fresh food into schools," Sustainable Solano reported.

Moreover, Gov. Gavin Newsom, in July, signed a bill that permanently funds California's nation-leading Farm to School Program, "ensuring schools can continue serving students healthy meals made with California-grown ingredients."

The project will bring technical assistance to school districts and farmers, share best practices, and include student voices in meal choice decisions.

The question of how to achieve the goals of the program will be explored during an Oct. 29 forum, 4 to 6 p.m., at the Vacaville Town Square Library. Access is also available through Zoom.

"We would love representatives from other school districts to attend, but we will love for parents, farmers and anyone interested ... to attend," Nagel said.

The Solano Local Food System Alliance, a collaborative of organizations and agencies that work across the local food system, will host the forum, in partnership with the Solano County Department of Agriculture, "which is looking at institutional procurement, such as farm-to-school programs, as part of the strategy for supporting the county's agricultural future."

Conscious Kitchen will explore where Solano school districts are at when it comes to school meals and provide technical assistance on sourcing from area farms and small shifts that can lead to more organic and healthy food in school.

Innovative Health Solutions, which operates senior food programs around the county, will oversee data collection, evaluation and reporting.

In a related matter, Sustainable Solano will hold its Youth Wellness Program, a high school internship that introduces culinary and gardening experience and skills, at a Vacaville Unified school in the spring and two other school districts during the grant period.

"These efforts will build knowledge around local school food procurement among district staff and local farmers, share best practices, and include student voices in meal choice decisions," Sustainable Solano reported.

For more information, visit sustainablesolano.org.

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