

DAILY REPUBLIC



FAIRFIELD — Fourth-grader Kevin Melendez didn't always like vegetables, like most children his age.

Melendez enjoyed “potato french fries” and still does. Since the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano introduced some new foods to him, his palate has expanded.

“My favorite is carrots,” Melendez said eagerly.

His least favorite? Sweet potatoes, even the french-fry version.

Melendez and many of his peers at Suisun Elementary School say they indeed like vegetables now.

John Ford, a teacher at Suisun Elementary, said he is glad to see children enjoying and eating more-nutritious foods such as fruits and vegetables. For some families, though, good produce is often too costly.

That's where the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano comes in.

A few years ago, the food bank implemented the Farm 2 Kids program in a few Fairfield-Suisun School District schools.

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Now that program has expanded to six Fairfield elementary schools, two Suisun City schools and Crystal Middle School. It also partners with the Fun on the Run mobile recreation program.

Farm 2 Kids expanded its program significantly at Grange Middle School this year after several hundred students transferred from Sullivan Middle School, which closed its doors.

The program doesn't target a specific demographic. Any school that has 50 percent or more of its children enrolled in the free- or reduced-lunch program is eligible.

Each week, the program gives out five-pound bags of fresh fruit and vegetables to children and their families. There are no eligibility requirements; any family can take a bag or even two when in need.

It's an effective way to help out families and incorporate produce into children's diets, according to program proponents.

The program is cost-effective as well. Caitlin Sly, the coordinator for Farm 2 Kids, said the fruit and vegetables are too large to be sold at a grocery store, so farmers sell them to the food bank at a much lower cost. The majority of the produce comes from the Central Valley.

Children at Suisun Elementary School assemble their own bags of produce, about 70 to 80, every Wednesday after school, Ford said. Though not all of the children are vegetable-loving converts, Ford said the parents appreciate the weekly groceries.

"I think Mom and Dad get most excited about vegetable bags," he said.

Suisun Elementary parent Nicki Sellars said she appreciates her vegetables more than her daughter Rhyan does, though they both enjoy the fruit.

As a busy mom, Nicki Sellars said she uses her vegetables for quick stews for dinner.

"It helps cut back from my grocery bill," she said. "Every Wednesday, I come in and I want to get my bag."

For more information about the program, visit <http://www.foodbankccs.org>.