

Exposure to a variety of foods helps kids learn

Moving Grays Harbor

By Maryann Welch

Having grandkids around has made me once again pay attention to the eating habits of children, just as I did when my two were young. It has long been my contention that exposure to a variety of healthy foods on a regular basis will influence the choices young people make as they grow and later as they become adults.

Certainly parents are key contributors in introducing their children to nutritious foods and habits. On the other hand, we all know that many students now eat 2 of their meals in a school setting. So, it's exciting to learn that schools in our area are using some innovative strategies to improve the health of their students.

Bill O'Donnell (principal @ AJ West Elementary in Aberdeen) tells me that they are in their 2nd year of a Washington Grown Fresh Fruits and Vegetables grant. The program currently provides twelve schools (down from 25 last year) around Washington with funding to purchase Washington grown produce for their school's snack program. Schools are encouraged to tie the snack program to education about health and nutrition.

The school will continue to reapply for the grant every year as Bill is sold on the value of healthy snacks to promote better learning. "Some kids, especially in today's economy, don't have access to fruits and veggies, and

this is definitely a positive approach to nutrition. Kids are usually hungry mid-morning and mid-afternoon and are therefore less likely to turn down these healthy snacks. Some of the offerings have included: Asparagus (baked); mushrooms (baked and raw); kohlrabi; rutabaga; and cucumbers. We offer a veggie at morning recess, and a fruit at afternoon recess. I love being able to provide this health benefit to our students."

Because they can only use Washington grown produce, they are somewhat limited, but the cooks do a great job in providing variety in preparing the snacks. Bill shares that he now prepares vegetables at home from recipes he's gleaned from school.

In talking with 5th grader, Norberto, he shares that his favorite vegetable so far has been cooked mushrooms (baked with olive oil and seasoning) and his favorite fruit is a nectarine. He has not like baked squash (but tried it!) and has found that he also likes corn on the cob, asparagus and peaches...things he says he did not ever try before eating them at school.

Megan and Jade, 6th graders, both agree that there is not enough ranch dressing to make them like raw mushrooms. However, both surprisingly love green peppers and their list of fruit likes: pears, nectarines, plums, raspberries, blueberries.... They also share that they are more likely to try new things at home and have even helped pick out veggies and fruit when going to the store with their parents.

The consensus in Mr. Stewart's 6th grade class is that they have all become less picky eaters as far as fruits and veggies are concerned and they mostly all love the roasted potato cubes...a hands-down favorite! In a perfect world, every elementary school

would have the resources to provide this snack program to its students.

Elsewhere in the county, both Montesano and Hoquiam School Districts are taking a district-wide approach to improving the nutritional value of their food programs. They are contracting with a nationwide company, Chartwell, to help them not only meet all of the federal school guidelines but to also focus more attention to nutrition education.

Marti Haruff, Montesano's Superintendent, enthusiastically shared with me her hopes for utilizing Chartwell's expertise to implement innovative ideas and incorporate healthy lifestyle education into not only the food program but into curriculum as well. Chartwell's Food Service Manager for Hoquiam schools, Stephanie Bass, pointed out that her company's broad experience is a great resource for creating menus to include healthy choices, balanced meals and portion sizes that meet the USDA guidelines in addition to appealing to student tastes. That's a big challenge!

As a parent who worked through meal planning and shopping with vague ideas of nutrition (no federal guidelines in my kitchen!) I can appreciate that schools are so attentive to improving their food programs to promote the health of students. Of course, I truly believe that proper sleep and nutrition is the best predictor of academic success with parents and schools sharing the responsibility for creating an environment of learning and success. As I strive to introduce variety and healthy foods into my grandchildren's diets, I invite you to do the same...

Maryann Welch is a life-long harborite, the retired director of Grays Harbor County's Public Health and

Social Services Department, and an avid exercise enthusiast.

If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.healthygh.org.