

# Programs strive to foster healthy relationships with food

By Deborah Busemeyer | For The New Mexican

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Photo by: Natalie Guillén/The New Mexican

Randy Moquino looked across Tesuque Pueblo's 50-acre farm and recalled planting crops with his grandfather decades ago. Today, it's not as common to see the pueblo's youth involved in growing healthy food.

"We want to try to get the young people to start learning about farming and the benefits of it," Moquino said. "Nowadays, we get into our vehicles and go to McDonald's and get a Dollar Menu deal. Now everything's getting us sick. I'd rather get back to the way it was a long time ago, when we ate good food."

As the nation grapples with a rising obesity epidemic, local organizations are helping children establish healthy relationships with food, hoping they will create lifelong habits that will involve and benefit their families.

With a doctorate in plant genetics, Emigdio Ballon has been Tesuque Pueblo's agricultural director for the last six years. He would like to see the pueblo return to its roots of being self-sufficient and producing fresh, healthy food for its members. The farm preserves its own organic seeds through a seed bank, and workers care for crops traditionally by hand.

They share the crops of herbal medicine, traditional tobacco, vegetables and fruits with pueblo members and other tribes. Schoolchildren visit the farm to play games and learn about farming. In the last few years, Ballon and his crew of three installed a drip irrigation system to maximize the scarce water available. They are building hoop houses so they can grow crops year-round.

In addition to operating the farm, workers prepare the land for about 50 pueblo members who plant food for their families. The work is part of the pueblo's efforts to encourage a healthier, more traditional lifestyle for its members.

"I always tell the kids, 'Go tell your fathers, your uncles, your grandfathers that you want to plant this year,' so they can get out there and be active, and they are also growing healthy food," said Gailey Morgan, a

farmworker and Tesuque Pueblo member.

## **Empowering community's kids**

In a first-grade classroom at Amy Biehl Community School at Rancho Viejo, children jostled for their turn to tear kale, cut onions and measure flour for the Egyptian meal they were preparing through Santa Fe's Cooking with Kids program.

"Experience matters," said Lynn Walters, executive director of Cooking with Kids. "That's the message I can give and what our program is really trying to do. I think the right message is, 'Explore a variety of foods.'"

Cooking with Kids exposes children to foods from a variety of cultures, teaches them to prepare meals together, sends recipes home and serves the meals in the cafeterias of the 11 participating elementary schools.

"This is exactly what we need to be doing," said Patty Morris, director of the New Mexico Department of Health's Office of Nutrition and Physical Activity. "It's a great strategy in Santa Fe in terms of trying to get the kids to learn about cooking and fresh foods in a very hands-on, skilled way. It's fun, interactive, age-appropriate and all targeted to the curriculum."

In a two-year impact study of fourth-graders in 11 Santa Fe schools, Colorado State University researchers found that children participating in Cooking With Kids ate more fruits and vegetables than children who didn't participate in the program.

National studies also have found that the most effective way to increase a child's appetite for fruits and vegetables and to encourage lifelong healthful eating habits is to teach a child about healthy choices and nutrition concepts in the elementary years.

Cooking with Kids aims to empower children to help their families develop healthy habits. That program and another Santa Fe nonprofit, Earth Care, invite parents to serve as cooking volunteers, hold family cooking nights and develop community gardens.

Creating school gardens has been a focus of Earth Care, which encourages young people to make a difference in their community. One of the organization's goals is to collaborate with young people, schools and the community to develop a local, sustainable food system, according to Christina Selby, who founded Earth Care with her husband in 2001.

"With the growing obesity epidemic, it's a lot about the quality of food families are getting that they can afford," said Selby, who serves as Earth Care's education director. "So, our work with the school gardens is giving kids the experience of freshly grown, local produce that they can get their hands on and see where it comes from in an effort to shift their eating habits."

Earth Care trains AmeriCorps volunteers to be environmental educators in six of Santa Fe's elementary schools. At Salazar Elementary School, 23-year-old Paige Hopkins taught 19 classes a week last semester. She connected her classes to the students' curricula. In a second-grade class, she showed students how seeds grow into plants when they were learning about plant development.

Hopkins tended to the school's large garden and compost piles that face Osage Avenue, as well as the hoop house at the front of the playground. Kale, cabbage, a mix of lettuces and peas were growing there in April.

In the fall, Salazar will offer fresh food from the school's garden to students and their families, as well as residents in the neighboring Casa Alegre community.

“We have such a disconnect with where our food comes from and what we eat,” Hopkins said. “Having kids see a different side of how food is grown — that it's not just in a plastic bag at the store, but it comes from the earth and we can use it to sustain ourselves — is important. I give the knowledge, and they can make their own decisions.”

### **Enhancing school nutrition**

Judi Jacquez has been a registered dietitian and the director of student nutrition at Santa Fe Public Schools since 1998. “I'm concerned with doing the best I can for the kids and exposing kids to nutritious food,” she said. “I try to have as many fruits and vegetables as possible because kids are not eating enough and are missing out on key nutrients. If they aren't exposed at school or at home, how are they going to learn to have those in their diet?”

The Farm to School Program makes it easier for Santa Fe schoolchildren to choose fruits and vegetables in the cafeteria. Betsy Torres, the program's coordinator, spends about \$40,000 a year — less than 1 percent of the school district's estimated \$4.7 million food budget — on fresh produce from local farms. Depending on what is in season, Torres said, she buys sprouts, lettuce, apples, melons, carrots, peaches and plums.

“Our managers are required to keep track of what they put out and what was left, and the kids love the local foods,” Torres said. “They always know when we have apples in season. They really enjoy the sunflower sprouts. Any of the local stuff — it tastes so good, the kids love it.”

The 10-year-old program is district-wide but is limited due to procurement regulations. Local farmers compete with large vendors in an open bid process, Torres said, and large vendors can offer lower prices.

“Sometimes we have to say, ‘We can't do it,’ ” she said of buying local produce. “It's a shame because the quality is good, but it's way out of our budget. We only get reimbursed for a small amount. You have to keep all that in perspective.”

That's where Farm to Table's work comes into play. Ensuring people of all ages and incomes can access fresh, affordable, culturally appropriate foods is a goal of the Santa Fe nonprofit, which is working to create long-term changes in the statewide food culture.

One of Farm to Table's key programs is working with farmers to get fresher options on kids' plates in 11 school districts that serve about 185,000 children across the state.

“We see the school program as being a really good avenue for addressing a large population of our community and one where we can create some systemic change,” said Pam Roy, Farm to Table's director.

Roy cited a 2011 Department of Health obesity report that used body mass index measurements from 28 schools across New Mexico. It found that 15 percent of kindergarten students and more than 21 percent of third-graders are obese.

“We recognize that to shift that situation is going to take a decade or two,” she said. “It's going to take extensive partnering between public agencies and the private sector over a long period of time to make that

change happen.”

One of Farm to Table’s efforts is to promote policies that increase access to fresh food. Roy and her partners on the public-private Santa Fe Food Policy Council are considering ways to make it easier for government to procure local food for institutions, such as senior centers, jails and schools.

“If we can provide a fixed demand for local food, it helps farmers and the local economy and reduces food miles,” said Katherine Mortimer, the city’s Sustainable Santa Fe program manager and member of the Santa Fe Food Policy Council. The council makes recommendations to the city and county on food policies.

Roy also serves on the statewide New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council. In 2006, the council worked to pass legislation that eliminates junk-food sales in New Mexico’s elementary schools and restricts them in middle and high schools.

Roy emphasized how important it is to connect agencies and individuals addressing people’s health and food needs. For example, New Mexico needs to link children’s school lunches to nutrition education, school gardens, playground activities and school curricula, she said.

“The more we link all those pieces together, the more opportunity we’ll have to effectively change people’s attitudes and practices,” Roy said. “Kids take home so much of what they are learning to their parents. That’s part of the transformation that’s needed.”

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