

## **Statement**

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### **Effective Strategies to Increase Children's Fruit and Vegetable Consumption**

I am Esperanza Zendejas, the proud school superintendent of the Alisal Union School District in Salinas, California. Thank you for the opportunity to share how our schools are working to increase student's fruit and vegetable consumption, specifically the importance of salad bars to our school lunch program.

The Alisal Union School District is located in the heart of the Monterey County which is known as the "salad bowl" of the world. We are literally surrounded by strawberry, lettuce, and artichoke fields. Our school district consists of 11 schools with 7500 students. Over 96 percent of our children are Hispanic with many of them facing high poverty levels. All of our students participate in the School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program and the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program. Our school district was one of the first districts in California to receive funding for the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program; now we have funding for all 11 schools and one Charter school. Our district is engaged in the three C's for better children's nutrition. We promote healthy eating habits in the classroom, cafeteria and in our community.

All of our schools have salad bars. I am a strong proponent of salad bars, placing these in schools since 1988 during my first superintendent position. I see significant benefits for the children and for the overall district lunch program. In our school district, we find that using salad bars increases the number of children eating fresh fruits and vegetables and the amount of fruits and vegetables they eat.

Contrary to popular belief, children in our school district love the fresh vegetables we serve in our salad bars, including broccoli, cherry tomatoes, snow peas, cauliflower, zucchini, winter squash, carrots, celery, jicama, garbanzo beans, red and green bell peppers, garden salad mix, radishes, and fresh green beans, to mention a few.

We also serve lots of different fresh fruits: honeydew, pineapple, grapes, apples, raspberries, blueberries, strawberries, mangos, bananas, peaches, plums, cantaloupe, watermelon, oranges, and kiwi.

You can imagine how proud I am to see five and six year old children serving themselves the fresh vegetables! Most of these vegetables are grown locally year-round. When a child reaches out for some broccoli, you know that they will be reaching for this vegetable for a long time to come.

Our salad bars provide many benefits to our students and their families:

- With the growing concern of childhood obesity, school districts with salad bars seamlessly educate children about eating more fruits and vegetables.
- The salad bars add to our children's learning through their understanding of a simple process for selecting the fresh vegetables and fruits they love.
- Children grow up knowing the taste of a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables thanks to the early introduction of these foods from school salad bars.
- In many cases, the school district provides the only nutritious meals some of the children will eat on any given day. With the salad bars, children can fill their plates with the fruits and vegetables they enjoy.
- The classroom nutrition instruction in our school district is reinforced by actual experiences in the lunch room when children go through the salad bar to choose their fresh fruits and vegetables.

- Salad bars help the school cafeterias improve student engagement by having the students talk and share about the foods that they enjoy. Traditionally, students form a line to pick up their lunches; the salad bars allow two lines where children see each other serving themselves. This helps improve the students' confidence about the foods they chose and in turn this adds sustainability to the choices students make.
- Our lunch program is visited by parents during the week. Parents are able to see their children at the salad bars and observe the happy faces of the children as they make their selections. We believe this also influences the parents to serve more fresh fruits and vegetables in the home.
- Parents report that their children are happy to have the salad bars because they provide the option to select the fruits and vegetables they enjoy and to try new fruits and vegetables.
- Since many of our families work in the agricultural fields, the families introduce other types of vegetables or fruits that parents work with. The salad bars introduce children to other vegetables that they do not see on the home menu.
- Our school-based gardens help our students and community also understand the importance of eating more fresh fruits and vegetables.

## **Conclusion**

I can't say enough about the value and benefits of implementing salad bars in our schools and specifically in our elementary schools. Children eat more fruits and vegetables and eat a wider variety. The results are immediate and will last a life time, benefiting thousands of future families in our community. In our district, when we enroll a child, we enroll an entire family and the salad bars are helping the entire family learn to eat healthier. In conclusion, salad bars add to the positive educational outcomes for our students. I believe that all students would benefit from having a salad bars in their school.