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### Teaching healthy choices

Written by [Kelley Atherton, The Triplicate](#) February 01, 2010 09:06 am

From pre-school to high school, students learning how to select, grow, prepare wholesome foods



A group of pre-schoolers at Bess Maxwell Elementary School were recently introduced to the "featured fruit of the week."

"What does it feel like?" asked Angela Calleja, a nutrition coordinator, holding a piece of green fruit.

"An apple!" several called out, holding their own pieces of fruit. Calleja took a bite and asked, "What does it sound like?"

"An apple!" the students called out. "What does it taste like?" Calleja asked.

"Sour! "Sweet!" "Like an apple!" were the responses.

Asked if they liked it, almost all gave the fruit a thumb's up.

Then Calleja told the young students that they had just tasted a pear and explained how they come in shades of yellow, brown, green and red.

Del Norte students of all ages are getting lessons in proper nutrition — and not just in a home economics class. Nutrition instructors regularly visit classes where students would normally be studying English, math or other subjects.

Calleja is one of 13 nutrition educators for the Network for a Healthy California who talk to local students every week about fruits and vegetables and how they help the body function.

The nutrition program is a state initiative implemented in the school district about 10 years ago, said Deborah Kravitz, the project coordinator for Del Norte County Unified School District.

Its purpose is to encourage children to eat healthier foods and get lots of exercise. Grants pay for staff

Soda equals sugar

There are no soda machines in local schools, but it's still popular among kids. Research has found that drinking soda is a prime cause of weight gain.

salaries and the food and materials used.

Nutrition educators try not only to get kids to choose nutritious foods, but to take home what they learn to help change the way many families on a limited income eat.

'You think it would be bad'

At Del Norte High School, nutrition educators like Patti Rommel teach students how to cook nutritious meals.

"Some kids don't have home-cooked meals," she said. "I want them to learn how to cook by the time they get out of high school."

Like Calleja in elementary schools, Rommel goes into classes at DNHS every day to talk to students and conduct activities focused on proper nutrition.

Rommel recently had high-schoolers make a grapefruit (Network for a Healthy California's "Harvest of the Month") and avocado salad.

In a sophomore English class, students mixed olive oil, lemon juice, orange juice, Dijon mustard, garlic, salt and pepper for the dressing while others cut up the grapefruit, avocados and red onions and put it all on top of mixed greens.

"You think it would be bad, but it was really good," said student Angela Opboek.

Others agreed, although some would have preferred to remove the onions and garlic.

Tasting, growing new things

Calleja goes to 27 classes at three elementary schools and sees about 600 students per week.

And every week, "we try to do things they haven't tasted before," she said.

Calleja has the students experience food through all of their senses and not just taste. At the beginning of the school year, some are wary of trying something new, but by the end they're more willing, she said.

She gives students recipes to take home and try with their families.

At DNHS, Rommel teaches students how to make easy dishes that they can eat at home.

Rommel thinks more teenagers are trying to cook on their own. They are asking for recipes like stuffed bell peppers and avocado tortilla soup to take home, she said.

Several students said they cook at home or do food "experiments." Some are concerned about developing type 2 diabetes from eating too much junk food.

Asked why it's important to eat healthy, student Ratausha Ray said it's because "America is obese."

Cooking and gardening can be fun ways to learn about food. Calleja also uses a game to learn the basics of nutrition.

A report released last fall called "Bubbling Over: Soda Consumption and Its Link to Obesity in California" by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, found 41 percent of children aged 2-11, 62 percent of adolescents aged 12-17 and 24 percent of adults drink at least one soda or sugar-sweetened beverage every day.

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In addition, the study found those who drink a sugar-laden drink every day are 27 percent more likely to be overweight or obese.

"Think about what you're drinking," said Deborah Kravitz, the project coordinator for the Network for a Healthy California, noting how a 20-ounce bottle of soda has 17 teaspoons of sugar in it.

The Network for a Healthy California's "Rethink Your Drink" campaign encourages educators to push students to drink water, milk or 100 percent juice.

"We're getting that message out and making small changes," Kravitz said.

What nutrition educators can do, she said, is talk to students about reading labels and seeing what's in their drink or food.

"Lessons are designed so that students can make some connection about why this is important."



"We throw around a beach ball with nutrition questions on it, like how much fruit should we eat in a day, and then they try to answer it" she explained. "That opens up a discussion."



Sophomore Ratausha Ray cuts up red onions for grapefruit and avocado salad in an English class at Del Norte High School. The Daily Triplicate/Bryant Anderson

The pre-schoolers at Bess Maxwell Elementary have their own little garden growing broccoli, but it's mainly for them to dig around in the soil, Calleja said.

Older students at the school have a much larger garden that they planted with broccoli, kale, cabbage, peas and garlic. Every school in the district has a garden.

"They're more excited to taste it if it's out of the garden," Calleja said. "Also, we're being physically active," she said

about gardening.

### Taking lessons home

Students learning about nutritious food and eating it at school may not have that option at home.

"You can tell the difference between the kids that are eating healthy and the ones whose families are eating what they can get," Calleja said.



Angela Calleja, a nutrition coordinator, talks about introducing elementary students to fresh fruits and vegetables they might not have tried before.

It can be difficult for families to keep fresh produce at home, she said, even if that's what kids want to eat.

The hope is that students go home and become advocates for healthy food their families can afford to eat.

"I saw a child in a grocery store pointing to bell peppers," said Irene Tynes, a school nurse. "If children learn something, they want to teach you about it."

Kravitz said she hears a lot of stories like that — students want to eat everything from greens like broccoli to "fun things" like kiwis.

"They will make a good choice," she said, "once they're

given the choice."

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