

Success Story: Pixley's School-Based Food Access

## A Popular School Produce Stand Improves Community Nutrition And Health, And A Step-By-Step Handbook Shows How

**P**ixley is a small, unincorporated rural community of just over 2,500 residents. The majority earn a living as farmworkers or in other agriculture-related jobs, and nearly half live below the poverty line. Though they live and work in the heart of the fertile San Joaquin Valley, which produces nearly half of the nation's fruits and vegetables, their own access to fresh produce is extremely limited, with the nearest supermarket almost 20 miles away in Tulare.

Unlike middle-class communities in larger cities, “this community, like many in the Central Valley, is too small and too poor to support a traditional farmers market,” says Susan Elizabeth, the Community Lead for the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) in Tulare County. Elizabeth works closely with schools and community-based organizations to find creative and low-cost ways to improve the local food and physical activity environment. In 2007 she facilitated a survey of Pixley residents, asking what would make it easier for them to raise healthy children. Affordable access to fresh fruits and vegetables emerged as a top priority, along with safe places to play. These results resonate with numerous scientific studies showing that

children who eat nutritious meals and healthy snacks and get vigorous daily exercise do have more energy, are more alert, and perform better in school.

Pixley is home to mostly young families—more than 78 percent of the population is under 44—and the local K-through-8 school is the focal point of community activity. So an idea was born: Why not set up a produce stand at the school?

It was a novel concept and Elizabeth knew there would be stumbling blocks, cutting through red tape and addressing issues such as licensing and liability. She began by enlisting a small group of concerned parents and residents, some of whom she first met in the course of the survey process. She then asked for a meeting with school officials, with whom she had already been working on other health-related efforts, including making school facilities available after-hours to a community-based folkloric dance troupe which provided physical activity for dozens of local youth. She reached out to representatives of county health organizations and programs aimed at nutrition education, health promotion and obesity prevention, as well as faith community representatives. “We



*A school-based produce stands expands food options for residents of tiny Pixley.*

also included local store owners,” says Elizabeth, “to reduce the risk that the school fruit and vegetable stand operation would be seen as a competitive economic threat.”

This multi-sector workgroup, working closely with the school's food services director, developed a plan that was “not prohibitive in terms of bureaucracy,” Elizabeth explains. The key was to operate the produce stand as a charitable organization raising funds for afterschool activities—activities that provide further healthful benefits to students; and to sell only whole, bagged produce. (The sale of whole, bagged produce that is not cut or consumed on school premises does not require certification by the county environmental health department. The pre-sold and unsold fruits and vegetables are stored in the regulated cold storage unit used by the school kitchen.)

## Pixley's School-Based Food Access (*Continued*)

Now in its second year, the Pixley school produce stand is open every Wednesday afternoon from 12:30pm to 3:00pm, making it convenient for parents to pick up a supply of fresh fruits and vegetables when they come to pick up their children. The stand sells between 75 and 100 packages of fruits and vegetables a week, including strawberries and oranges in spring, peaches and green peppers in summer, apples and cabbage in the fall, and oranges and onions in winter.

The produce is purchased wholesale by the food services vendors and sold through the stand at a modest mark-up (maximum 15 percent). Profits from sales go directly back into the school, supporting activities such as after-school sports, a folkloric dance group, and the annual eighth-grade field trip.

The sales process is streamlined and moves quickly. Produce is

pre-packaged in plastic bags and priced in round numbers, eliminating the need for weighing each order individually and for making change. The students involved in bagging (an energetic group of special education students, aged 10 to 13), and the parents involved in selling the produce (many with limited English skills), learn multiple skills relevant to future employment. Most importantly, the students' families and other residents consume more fresh fruits and vegetables on a regular basis.

Pixley is a small school, but the success of its produce stand has become a model for other communities; Fresno schools are now piloting a similar program. With support from CCROPP and The California Endowment, Pixley's project leaders created a colorful handbook, *10 Steps to Setting Up a School Fruit and Vegetable Stand*, available online. In simple and concise language, it provides

all the information needed to replicate the project, including details on inventory control, accounting and publicity, and tips on overcoming potential challenges along the way.

The Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program is the Central California Public Health Partnership's initiative to create environments that support healthy eating and active living in the San Joaquin Valley. The regional obesity prevention program is administered by the Central California Center for Health and Human Services and is housed under the College of Health and Human Services at California State University, Fresno. The program is funded by The California Endowment.

### For more information:

Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program, (559) 228-2140, [www.ccropp.org](http://www.ccropp.org)

To learn more about Tulare County, go to:

[www.csufresno.edu/ccchhs/institutes\\_programs/CCROPP/partners/tulCo.shtml](http://www.csufresno.edu/ccchhs/institutes_programs/CCROPP/partners/tulCo.shtml)

For the handbook, *10 Steps to Setting Up a School Fruit and Vegetable Stand*, go to:

[www.csufresno.edu/ccchhs/institutes\\_programs/CCROPP/publications/TenSteps\\_Rev2.09.pdf](http://www.csufresno.edu/ccchhs/institutes_programs/CCROPP/publications/TenSteps_Rev2.09.pdf)

**Brandie Banks-Bey**, Communications Specialist, Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP), California State University, Fresno, (559) 228-2144, [bcampbell@csufresno.edu](mailto:bcampbell@csufresno.edu)

**Susan Elizabeth**, Capacity Builders, Consultant and Community Lead for CCROPP, (559) 738-9167, [skycat1941@sbcglobal.net](mailto:skycat1941@sbcglobal.net)