

NEWS

Salad Days

Local students try out a wellness blueprint for the county.

BY MARK C. ANDERSON

The Tater Tot is in trouble. In the ongoing battle against the obesity epidemic in Monterey County, a local partnership of nonprofits is taking a step forward in fostering healthier lifestyle habits for local students—and replacing traditional fatty cafeteria foods with locally-grown fruits and vegetables.

The launch of phase two of the group's project was heralded Wednesday with the first of three events at Kammann Elementary School in Salinas. At Kammann and each of the two other local schools, three classes will sow vegetables in refurbished school gardens, complete nutritional education programs, and change their school menus. They'll also visit farms, take part in fitness programs and participate in campus health festivals.

The project is managed by a coalition of nonprofits focused on agriculture, healthcare, and education, and is coordinated by Healthy Eating Lifestyle Principles (HELP). HELP Executive Director Mike Pippi is anxious to get started.

"Phase one was training the districts on how they would be implementing the project," says Pippi. "The exciting thing about phase two is actually giving them the chance to implement the program, to move from concept into actualization."

In a national landscape dotted with more and more wellness programs—inspired by chronic obesity rates and a federal mandate requiring local schools to develop wellness policies—the success of the local project's first phase

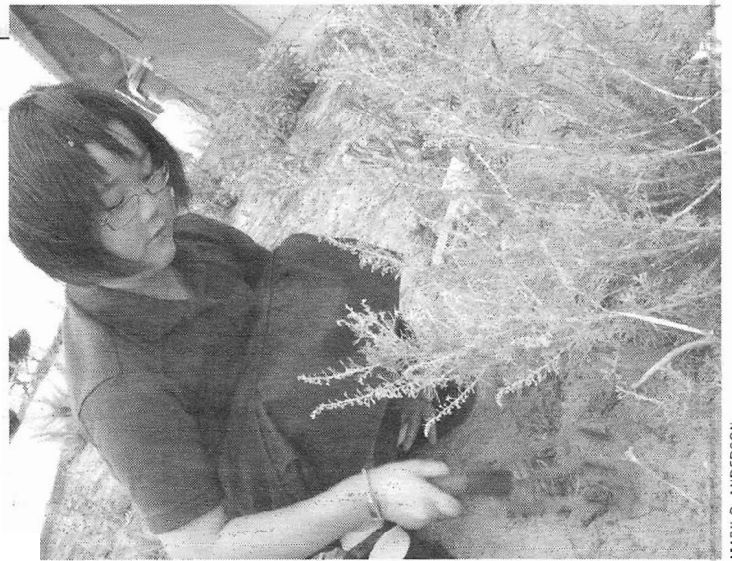
stood out. It won an award from the Congressional Hunger Center for helping 22 regional Monterey County school districts, representing roughly 70,000 students, develop the means to comply with the federal government's School Wellness Policy.

"There were 84 agencies nominated by Congressmen," says Edward Cooney, the center's executive director. "Only 20 won awards...this is nice thing. This is a big win. These programs are helping America."

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Pippi says the Hunger Center recognized the program's impressive collaboration. "A lot of people all over the country are doing amazing work," he says, "But the Monterey county model is exciting because of the strategy behind it: uniting partners."

The partners bring diverse expertise to the project. They include Life Lab Science Program, a garden-based program that trains educators in nutrition; CSU Monterey Bay's Farm to School Partnership (full disclosure: co-founded by *Weekly* CEO Bradley Zeve); the Community Alliance of Family Farmers; the Agriculture Land Based Training Association, which helps farmworkers get into business; and Just Run, a student fitness program operated by the Big



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True Growth: Jessica, an International School of Monterey second grader, works in ISM's Ocean View Garden in Seaside, which will be greatly expanded as part of the pilot program.

Sur International Marathon. The primary sponsor of the pilot program is Salinas Valley Memorial Healthcare System.

The partnership selected schools for phase two's Farm Fresh Schools Pilot Program from different communities—with the hopes of making the program replicable. Kammann is an urban public school in Salinas with a large population of Hispanic students on the federal school lunch program. Mission Union Elementary in Soledad is a one-building district in the middle of South County farm fields; the International School of Monterey in Seaside is a progressive charter school with ample parental support.

"We wanted to cover all the bases," says Pippi. "Our goal is, through constant evaluations, to find what works, what doesn't, and what are best practices that could be funded countywide."

Pippi notes that the pilot program shares its title with a bill carried by Assemblymen Pedro Nava and John Laird and state Senator Jeff Denham. Co-authored by HELP, AB 2121 Farm Fresh Schools has currently stalled in the Assembly's Appropriations Committee. The bill would fund pilots in six California counties. ☒