



The State of

FARM TO SCHOOL

in San Diego County

December 2013



COMMUNITY HEALTH
IMPROVEMENT PARTNERS
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San Diego County Farm to School Taskforce

The San Diego County Farm to School Taskforce (F2S Taskforce) is a subcommittee of the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative, a project facilitated by Community Health Improvement Partners, and supported through partnerships with Whole Foods Market and the San Diego Hunger Coalition.

The vision of the F2S Taskforce is that all San Diego County school children enjoy healthy foods that maximize seasonal and local products and bolster student achievement and wellness. Its membership includes school, business, and public health leaders, who are actively working in collaboration to increase consumption of local, healthful, seasonal foods and to improve food literacy within schools.



Current members of the F2S Taskforce include:

School Districts

Alpine Union School District
Alvord Unified School District
Cajon Valley Union School District
Carlsbad Unified School District
Chula Vista Elementary District
Coronado Unified School District
Escondido Elementary School District
Escondido Union High School District
Julian Union High School District
Julian Union School District
Lemon Grove School District
National School District
Oceanside Unified School District
Poway Unified School District
San Diego Unified School District
San Dieguito Union High School District
San Marcos Unified School District
San Ysidro School District
Solana Beach School District
Sweetwater Union High School District

Growers & Distributors

American Produce Distributors
Food 4 Thought, LLC
Go Green Agriculture
Moceri Produce
Solutions Farms/Solutions for Change
Old Grove Oranges, Inc.
Rancho J'Baile
Sage Mountain Farm
Sahu Subtropicals
Stehly Farms Organics
Sunrise Farms, Inc.
Suzie's Farm

Community & Government Organizations

Alchemy Scratch Culinary Education
County of San Diego, Health and Human Services Agency
Dairy Council of California
Harder + Company
Neighborhood House Association
Network for a Healthy California/University of California, San Diego
North County Community Services
Olivewood Gardens & Learning Center
Resource Conservation District of Greater San Diego
San Diego County Farm Bureau
San Diego County Office of Education Outdoor Education Program
San Diego County Sheriff's Department
San Diego Hunger Coalition
Terra American Bistro
Whole Foods Market



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Executive Summary

The San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative (Initiative), a program facilitated by Community Health Improvement Partners (CHIP), conducted the Farm to School (F2S) baseline survey in the spring of 2013 to support its work with the San Diego County Farm to School Taskforce (F2S Taskforce); 24 of 42 school districts responded, representing 80% of school meals and snacks served daily in San Diego County.ⁱ

The survey report below illustrates three related points. First, the sheer size and variety of the school food programs in San Diego County are striking. Together, 19 of the 24 responding districts (which represent 78% of all school meals and snacks served daily in the county) reported estimated annual produce purchases totaling \$7.3 million, with a vast range of produce estimates among the individual districts.

Second, San Diego County school districts are extremely interested in F2S programming and local product procurement. Among the 18 survey respondents already involved in the former, 17 have asked their suppliers to carry local, regional, or California products; 13 reported purchasing local, regional and California products in the last year; and 11 purchase directly from producers.

Third, despite the interest and participation in F2S programming, districts face a number of systemic obstacles to local purchasing. Of 18 districts already involved in F2S programming, only seven use geographic preferences and/or product specifications to support local procurement and only five buy products labeled by origin. Districts need more assistance: training in specific local sourcing topics (such as geographic preference, product specifications, and cooperative purchasing agreements), competitive pricing, easier delivery and ordering methods, and more product origin labeling. With these tools, San Diego County's schools will be better equipped to support the local farming economy.

Background

In 2010, the federal government, responding to the national obesity epidemic and food insecurity concerns, passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, renewing funding for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and other child nutrition programs and setting new nutrition standards for schools. Because 88% of school-age children in the United States (U.S.) attend public school,ⁱⁱ and because "the risk of obesity in adulthood is greater among obese children,"ⁱⁱⁱ enhancements in the school meal program represent a significant opportunity to improve the health of an entire generation.

In San Diego County, 34.5% of children are overweight or obese.^{iv} San Diego County has 42 school districts serving 498,003 students,^v one of the larger student populations among U.S. counties. Due to San Diego County's large land mass and diverse topography, districts range drastically in size and setting. For example, San Diego County is home to both the eighth largest urban district in the U.S.^{vi} and rural districts serving fewer than 500 students.

Of the 42 school districts in San Diego County,



24 districts (57%) responded to the survey, representing



80% of all school meals and snacks served in San Diego County and



Both large urban and small rural districts.

San Diego County school districts spend **\$8.8 million** on fresh fruits and vegetables every year.

San Diego County growers annually produce fruits and vegetables valued at **\$513 million**

2X Local purchasing can return twice as much money to the local economy as purchasing from outside sources.



The NSLP requires schools to serve at least ½ cup of fruits and vegetables per meal.^{vii} Assuming full compliance, San Diego County school districts serve at least 83,872 cups of fruits and vegetables daily as part of the NSLP. On an average day, the 24 districts that responded to the F2S survey each serve between 63 and 29,655 cups of fruits and vegetables, depending on school district population size. Studies have linked F2S programming with increased school meal participation, increased fruit and vegetable selection at school, and healthier eating habits when supplemented by educational activities.^{viii} The potential health benefits of both F2S programming and greater local, fresh produce procurement for school meals are therefore extremely high.

Local procurement also has economic benefits. Studies show that purchasing locally produced items can return twice as many dollars to the local economy as conventional purchasing practices, and can increase jobs.^{ix} San Diego County stands particularly well poised to access these benefits due to the sheer number of small growers: San Diego boasts the largest numbers of small and organic farms of any county in the nation.^x Forty-three thousand acres are dedicated to fruit and vegetable production valued at over \$513 million;^{xi} based on the proportion of annual produce purchases to the number of meals each school district serves (ADP^{xii}), the Initiative estimates that the total annual produce purchases of San Diego County's school districts is roughly \$8.8 million. Directing a small percentage of schools' annual produce budgets to the purchase of local fruits and vegetables could offer a major boon to San Diego County's economy.

Methodology

The F2S survey was developed in early 2013 based on a review of state and national best practice examples, contextual knowledge of local data gaps and needs, and input from stakeholders (e.g., school food services, growers). The survey included questions about food service programs and F2S practices, challenges, and opportunities. The F2S Taskforce invited each of the 42 school districts' food service directors in San Diego County to voluntarily participate in the electronic survey, which remained open for two weeks. School food service representatives from 24 districts (57% response rate, see appendix for list) completed the survey. Over the next several months, CHIP staff members organized, analyzed, and translated the data (which is all self-reported) into an accessible format for local F2S stakeholders. CHIP plans to further utilize the data in individual district profiles to help local growers and distributors better understand specific local produce market opportunities.

Purpose

The F2S Taskforce is a subcommittee of the Initiative, a program facilitated by CHIP, and supported through partnerships with the San Diego Hunger Coalition and Whole Foods Market. The F2S Taskforce's mission is to increase consumption of local, healthful, seasonal foods and to improve food literacy within schools. The F2S Taskforce's vision is for all San Diego County schoolchildren to enjoy healthy foods that maximize seasonal and local products and bolster student achievement and wellness. Its membership includes school, business, and public health leaders who actively collaborate to increase consumption of local, healthful, seasonal foods and improve food literacy within schools.

To achieve its mission, the F2S Taskforce set out to gather critical school food service data that could help inform and support local F2S activities. The goals of the F2S survey were to:

- 1 Capture a snapshot of current F2S activities across San Diego County school districts,
- 2 Create a baseline for comparing and measuring future F2S activities,
- 3 Inform the F2S Taskforce on how to both reduce barriers to and create opportunities for F2S programs in San Diego County, and
- 4 Provide growers and distributors with key information to expand local procurement in the school setting.



Definitions

F2S Taskforce three-tiered sourcing

- **Local products** are grown or raised in California within 25 miles of the San Diego County line.
- **Regional products** are grown or raised in California within 250 miles of the San Diego County line.
- **California products** are grown or raised in the state of California.

F2S programming “connects schools (K-12) and local farms with the objectives of serving healthy meals in school cafeterias, improving student nutrition, providing agriculture, health and nutrition education opportunities, and supporting local and regional farmers.”^{xiii}

- **Cafeteria integration** is the use of local, regional, and California products in school meals.
- **Staff lead** is a staff person hired or selected to carry out district F2S activities.
- **Staff education** activities include trainings on F2S activities for food service and other staff.
- **Classroom education** is the use of food systems and/or nutrition education in the classroom.
- **Garden programming** includes garden to cafeteria programming and classroom gardens.
- **Farm connections** include school-hosted grower visits, farm tours, and similar programs.

A **production kitchen** is equipped to prepare food that is then sent to site kitchens.

A **site kitchen** is equipped to heat and warm food, but not to otherwise prepare it, although in some cases a district may use it to lightly process select fruits and vegetables.

A **grower** or **producer** grows and sells food.

A **grower-distributor**, as defined by the F2S Taskforce, is a California grower who distributes food from one or more farms.

A **produce distributor** sells fruits and vegetables to institutions.

A **broadline distributor** sells both perishable and non-perishable food to institutions.

A **cooperative purchasing agreement** is a formal agreement between two or more institutions that they will purchase products—such as food—together, potentially reducing overall costs.

Bidding process

- A **formal bid** is necessary for all California districts’ purchases over \$83,400, the annually adjusted bid threshold per *Public Contract Code (PCC)* Section 20111(a)^{xiv} and requires public advertising and a competitive bidding process.
- An **informal bid** can be used for purchases of up to \$83,400, and requires price quotes from at least 3 bidders.
- A **geographic preference** allows districts to set a predetermined quantitative advantage to bids that include unprocessed fruits and vegetables grown within a specified geographic area, without disqualifying any bidders.
- **Product specifications** are exact product requirements included in a bid that do not provide a predetermined quantitative advantage to bidders and do not overly restrict competition.



Key Findings

Findings include data from responding districts (see appendix); percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

School Food Services

- Fourteen of 24 districts (58%) prepare meals in at least one production kitchen. Districts each operate between 0 and approximately 300 site kitchens, with a median of 7.5.
- Of 19 districts, estimated annual produce purchases range from \$18,000 to \$4 million, with an average of \$380,000 and a median of \$150,000. Absent the two largest districts, which are statistical outliers, the average estimated annual produce purchase is \$150,000 and the median is \$100,000. The annual produce purchasing power of these 19 districts is approximately \$7.3 million.
- Eleven of 24 districts (46%) participate in the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, a federal grant program that helps low-income school districts provide an additional serving of produce during the school day.
- Nineteen of 24 districts (79%) reported that they have salad bars in some or all of their cafeterias.
- Seventeen of 24 districts (71%) named one of three common produce distributors as their top produce vendor; of the respondents who identified their second top produce vendor, many named a local grower-distributor. Two school districts named a local farm as their top produce vendor and a local produce/fruit stand as their second top produce vendor.
- Fourteen of 21 districts (67%) named one of three common broadline distributors as their top entrée vendor.



17 of 24 districts are served by **one of three** common produce distributors.

Many districts use common distributors, but the scale of districts' food programs varies widely. This diversity could provide opportunities for growers of all sizes. Districts' use of common distributors presents the chance to more easily accelerate F2S by working with distributors that reach the greatest number of districts.

F2S Capacity

- Seventeen of 24 districts (71%) reported having designated a staff point person at their district to speak to local growers, and another 6 districts (24%) expressed willingness to do so.
- Eight of 24 districts (33%) expressed definite interest in entering into a cooperative purchasing agreement to buy local products; another 15 (63%) said they might be interested in doing so.
- Of 18 districts that participate in F2S programming, 3 districts (17%) include specifications (e.g., freshness, ripeness, time elapsed between harvest and delivery) that support local sourcing, and 6 districts (33%) include geographic preferences (e.g., grown within 50 miles) in their bidding processes; 6 districts (33%) expressed interest in receiving more information and training on one or both of these topics.
- Seven of 18 districts already involved in F2S programming (39%) have set defined goals for advancing F2S.
- Eleven of 24 districts (46%) are able to purchase products that growers need to sell quickly (e.g., with a week's notice or less) due to early harvest, weather, or other conditions.



17 of 24 school districts have designated a staff member to serve as a contact for local growers.



Among districts that participate in farm to school programming, **39%** have set specific farm to school goals.

Most districts have designated or are interested in designating a staff point person to connect with local growers, but many districts do not use geographic preferences or specifications or set F2S goals.








Buying Practices

Unless otherwise indicated, this section of the survey was directed toward 18 respondents: the 15 districts that do participate in F2S programming and the 3 districts unsure about whether they participate in F2S programming.

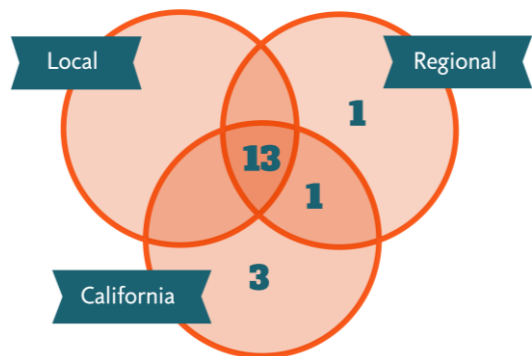
- The top 5 annual unprocessed fresh produce purchases (in descending order) were lettuce, oranges, apples, carrots and bananas. Districts also reported the significant purchase of grapes, tomatoes, spinach, and strawberries.
- Seventeen districts (94%) have asked their primary vendors to carry local, regional, and California produce. Yet only 5 of 18 districts (28%) report that their vendors label the product origin (i.e., name and locality) of produce. The 4 vendors for those 5 districts are among the 3 top produce distributors for all 24 districts. School districts served by these vendors did not consistently report that their vendors specify product origin.
- Thirteen districts (72%) reported purchasing products in all three of the following categories in the last year: local, regional, and California. Eighteen districts (100%) report purchasing in at least one of these three categories.
- Eleven districts (61%) buy directly from local, regional, and/or California producers.

Districts' top five produce purchases:

-  1. lettuce
-  2. oranges
-  3. apples
-  4. carrots
-  5. bananas

An extraordinary number of districts have asked their distributors to carry local, regional, and California produce, and have purchased such produce within the past year, but few distributors specify product origin. School districts served by the few distributors that do specify product origin do not report equal access to such information.

How many districts purchase local, regional, and California-grown produce?



- Local** Grown or raised in California within 25 miles of the San Diego County line
- Regional** Grown or raised in California within 250 miles of the San Diego County line
- California** Grown or raised in the state of California

18 districts purchase local, regional, and/or California grown products.

17 districts have asked their primary vendors to carry local, regional, or California-grown produce.

11 districts buy directly from local, regional, and/or California growers.



F2S Programming

This section of the survey was directed toward 18 respondents: the 15 districts that do participate in F2S programming and the 3 districts unsure about whether they participate in F2S programming.

- Sixteen districts (89%) participate in cafeteria integration. The next most common activities were having a staff lead (8 districts, or 44%), staff education, garden programming, and farm connections (7 districts, or 39%, each).
- Five districts (28%) include classroom education as part of their F2S programs.

Many respondents are actively engaged in F2S activities that range broadly in scope and scale, but most commonly involve integration of local products in the school meal program. Very few districts use classroom education, a key component of F2S, as part of their F2S programs.

Obstacles and Opportunities

- The most common concerns with regard to purchasing local foods involved delivery (15 districts, or 63%), ordering method (12 districts, or 50%), volume requirements (13 districts, or 54%), and food safety and liability (11 districts, or 46%).
- Districts were asked to identify the top 3 activities that would encourage them to purchase more local, regional, and California products. The most common choices were competitive pricing (14 districts, or 58%), availability of partially processed products (10 districts, or 42%), food safety assurances (9 districts, or 38%), and high quality product (8 districts, or 33%). Other common choices included grower contact and product samples, and vendors labeling product origin.

Districts identified many conditions necessary for more local produce procurement, mainly involving easier purchasing and processing and competitive pricing.

Challenges to buying local, regional, and California-grown produce

- Delivery
- Ordering methods
- Volume requirements

Strategies to encourage local, regional, and California-grown product purchases

- Competitive pricing
- Partially processed product
- Food safety assurances

F2S Taskforce Participation

- Of the 12 districts that identified themselves as active (frequently attend meetings) or maintaining (occasionally attend meetings) members of the F2S Taskforce, 10 (83%) are involved in F2S programming; of the other 12 districts, 5 (42%) reported involvement.
- The survey revealed statistically significant relationships between F2S Taskforce participation and 8 indicators of F2S activity: purchase of local products last year, purchase of regional products last year, participation in cafeteria integration, participation in classroom education, utilization of a staff lead, designation of a staff person to connect with local growers, F2S programming, and whether districts know the frequency of their local product purchases.^{xv}

There is a relationship between participation in the F2S Taskforce and numerous F2S activities.



Conclusion

Districts are quite interested in F2S and many have begun to formalize F2S practices. Most responding districts have designated or are interested in designating a food service staff member to serve as a contact for local growers. Several districts have set formal F2S goals, and a slightly larger number has begun to incorporate geographic preferences and local produce specifications into produce solicitations—which are important strategies for ensuring product origin. Furthermore, the majority of responding districts purchase local, regional, and California grown products.

Despite these positive signs, districts face considerable challenges to sourcing local product and offering F2S programming. District food services identified delivery reliability and individual site drop-off capacity, ordering methods, and volume requirements as major concerns. Districts also indicated that more competitive pricing, more lightly processed products, and better food safety assurances could increase local purchasing. And although demand for local product is notably high, few districts reported that their vendors label product origin (e.g., farm name and location), making it more difficult to purchase and track local, regional, and California products.

The survey also demonstrates opportunities for accelerating F2S. For example, the majority of districts use one of three produce distributors, which offers an exciting chance to rapidly scale up F2S by partnering with a few produce distributors. And the diversity of school district sizes and produce requirements suggests the presence of a market for growers of all scales. Based on district location, scale, and site drop-off requirements, growers can better determine whether to sell directly or through a local distributor. These findings motivate the following recommendations for accelerating F2S in San Diego County.

Recommendations

The F2S Taskforce will work with all partners identified below to provide support and training as needed; recommendations are categorized by type of lead partner(s).

Growers and Distributors

Label product origins on availability sheets and invoices.

Nearly all districts involved in local sourcing have asked their primary produce distributor to offer local, regional, and California products; yet only five districts recall vendors specifying product origin (e.g., farm name and location) on product bid sheets and invoices. Districts served by the same distributors do not consistently report being offered product origin labeling. Districts are thus often unable to easily identify and select existing local products, verify product origins, and track local product purchases. *Distributors should work with local districts, growers, and other stakeholders to make product origin labeling the standard for all local, regional, and California produce.*

Expand the availability of lightly processed, local products.

Districts identified lightly processed products as the second most important activity for increasing local, regional, and California product purchases. Districts, which are required to serve a certain amount of produce with each reimbursable meal, face limitations (e.g., staff capacity, skilled labor, and equipment) in processing fresh product. Lightly processed and pre-portioned products help school food services meet serving requirements while sourcing locally. *Distributors and growers should offer districts lightly processed, local product in pre-portioned servings. Districts and other institutions with processing equipment should also explore opportunities to process product for multiple districts.*



Offer high quality, competitively priced local product.

Districts ranked high quality and competitive price as crucial for increasing local product purchases. Growers are interested in serving the school community, but need fair compensation to keep their businesses financially viable. *Growers should explore win-win opportunities that benefit both local farms and schools, such as cooperative growing, bulk purchases, and “seconds.” Growers should also ensure that their product meets institutional food service product standards.*

Improve local product ordering and delivery.

Districts identified local product ordering and delivery—including volume requirements, procedures for buying product from local growers, reliability of delivery, and grower capacity to meet drop site requirements—as significant challenges. *Growers and distributors should work with school food services to better understand ordering and delivery concerns and simplify the processes. Solutions may include new grower and distributor partnerships and grower training on delivery requirements and best practices.*

Grow products commonly used in the school meal program.

Lettuce, oranges, apples, carrots, and bananas are the five most commonly purchased unprocessed, fresh products in San Diego County school districts. Grapes, tomatoes, spinach, and strawberries are also frequently purchased. With the exception of bananas, all of these products are commercially grown in San Diego County. *Growers should collaborate with the F2S Taskforce and districts to boost production of regularly purchased items.*

Districts

Leverage shared purchasing power.

Nearly all districts expressed some level of interest in cooperative purchasing agreements to buy local products. Combined purchasing power could empower districts to acquire better products for better prices, achieve standardized product origin labeling, and increase local product availability. Collective purchasing agreements may also help smaller districts meet minimum sourcing requirements, although distribution issues may still need to be addressed. *Districts should explore opportunities for cooperative purchasing agreements and enter into agreements when possible and beneficial.*

Set defined F2S goals for school food services.

Goal setting creates direction, transparency, measurable outcomes, and urgency for F2S practices. Formalized goals also sustain F2S programs through staff changes. *Districts should set and achieve clear, measurable short- and long-term F2S goals.*

Increase nutrition and food systems education in classrooms.

Classroom education helps create demand for healthy food, promotes lifelong healthy habits, and is a core component of F2S programming, but surprisingly few districts reported the presence of F2S-related classroom education. Although this data may result from reporting error (e.g., because food service directors and not educators responded), it indicates the need for more nutrition and food systems education. *Many organizations offer free curricula and training on these topics; districts should engage with them to regularly provide classroom education.*

Strengthen cafeteria and classroom connections.

The aforementioned potential reporting error illustrates a need for more collaboration between teachers and food services. Teachers can model healthy eating behaviors and build links between classroom nutrition and food systems education and the cafeteria. School food services can act as nutrition educators and prompt students to make healthy choices. *Cafeterias should model healthy food environments for students to practice nutrition lessons from the classroom.*



Identify products on existing menus that could be sourced locally.

Many products on school menus are already grown in San Diego County. *Districts should work with growers and local agriculture-minded organizations to identify and prioritize the local purchasing of these items.*

Join the F2S Taskforce.

The survey revealed statistically significant relationships between F2S Taskforce participation and numerous F2S activities, including F2S programming and local and regional product purchases. *Districts should join the F2S Taskforce to connect with local growers, learn about F2S best practices, and implement F2S.*

F2S Taskforce

Provide training on high-impact F2S topics.

Districts expressed interest in learning more about geographic preferences and local specifications, F2S goal setting, and cooperative purchasing agreements. *The Taskforce should deliver trainings in these and other important F2S topics to help institutionalize and support F2S programming across San Diego County.*

Create clearinghouse for local best practices.

By creating a single platform for locating replicable F2S best practices, the Taskforce could save districts valuable time establishing, evaluating, and refining F2S programs, and encourage collaboration between districts. *The Taskforce should create an online database of local and national F2S best practices.*

Work with top produce distributors to offer more local products.

The centralization of school produce distribution allows the Taskforce to focus on a few distributors while advancing F2S in many districts. *The Taskforce should work with and further engage these distributors in implementing F2S best practices to maximize local, regional, and California sourcing opportunities among districts.*



Endnotes

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- ^{xi} County of San Diego Department of Agriculture, Weights and Measures. 2012 Crop Statistics and Annual Report. To calculate the total value for fruit and vegetable production, the Initiative added the totals for Fruit and Nut Crops (pages 6-7) and Vegetable and Vine Crops (page 8) and subtracted the values of Macadamia Nuts and Misc Fruit & Nuts (page 7).
- ^{xii} ADP refers to Average Daily Participation. See endnote (i) for data source information.
- ^{xiii} National Farm to School Network. (n.d.). Our Work. Retrieved from <http://www.farmtoschool.org/aboutus.php>.
- ^{xiv} California Department of Education. (December 20, 2012). Annual Adjustment to Bid Threshold for Contracts Awarded by School Districts. Retrieved from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/ac/co/bidthreshold2012.asp>. For more information, see Liebert Cassidy Whitmore. (January 31, 2013). Business & Facilities Update: New Bid Limit of 83,400 for School and Community College District Contracts. Retrieved from http://www.lcwlegal.com/files/125697_BFU_1-31-13-New-Bid-Limit-.pdf.
- ^{xv} Chi-Squared (Fisher's Exact) Test: p-values of .045, .043, .013, .019, .013, .040, .040, .036, respectively. A p-value of less than .05 is considered statistically significant.



About Us

The San Diego County Farm to School Taskforce (F2S Taskforce) is a subcommittee of the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative, a project facilitated by Community Health Improvement Partners, and supported through partnerships with Whole Foods Market and the San Diego Hunger Coalition.

The vision of the F2S Taskforce is that all San Diego County school children enjoy healthy foods that maximize seasonal and local products and bolster student achievement and wellness. Its membership includes school, business, and public health leaders, who are actively working in collaboration to increase consumption of local, healthful, seasonal foods and to improve food literacy within schools.

Contact

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