

Economics and ecology meet in the lunchroom

AT A COMMUNITY HALL in Half Moon Bay, a Berkeley school chef was getting rowdy with the crowd. Ann "Renegade Lunch Lady" Cooper was hired 2½ years ago by the Berkeley Unified School District to turn around its lunch program. She urged the audience to be responsible caregivers for our children's future, bemoaning how many adults spend more on their morning coffee than the \$2.75 the school district receives for each child it feeds. "It all comes down to money," Cooper said.

Cooper was the opening act of a screening organized by Erin Tormey of Coastside Farmer's Markets of the underground movie phenomenon "Two Angry Moms." The movie is riding a wave of popularity, spreading a heart-felt message of hope in the power of community involvement in changing the way our children eat.

"Today's schoolchildren are overfed, yet undernourished" is a central message from the movie. "Two Angry Moms" asserts that our federal school lunch standards are crippled by conflicting mandates given to the United States Department of Agriculture. One moment they're an advocate for the consumption of American meat, milk and produce, the next they are regulating what and how much food American children eat. The movie also draws a correlation between worsening nutritional quality and profit motive, as when schools bring in big companies and fast-food chains to help raise revenue.

School lunch is not a trivial issue — it affects us all. Today's children, largely due to poor diet, are the first generation in U.S. history predicted to have shorter life spans than their parents. And while Americans spend less than 10 percent of their household budget on food, we spend more than 17 percent of our national budget on healthcare. Lisa Bennett of



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DETAILS

■ **The Movie:** "Two Angry Moms." Go to www.angrymoms.org for information about hosting or attending a screening in your area.

■ **The Book:** "Lunch Lessons: Changing the Way We Feed Our Children," by Ann Cooper and Lisa Holmes (HarperCollins, 288 pages).

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A recipe for Quinoa Salad with Dried Apricots and Currants at www.ContraCostaTimes.com/foodandwine.

the Center for Ecoliteracy cites annual hospital costs related to childhood obesity at \$127 million, up from \$35 million per year in the 1980s.

Effecting change requires a two-pronged approach: 1) Change the food that is served, and 2) Educate children about where their food comes from.

It's a challenging mandate. Carolyn Federman of the Chez Panisse Foundation cites both government regulations and commodity subsidy programs as obstacles to buying whole, unprocessed foods. The lack of the proper infrastructure is another problem. Many institutions have become accustomed to warming pre-made meals, and thus lack the stoves and equipment basic to even a small restaurant. But things are slowly changing. For example, there are 2,000 farm-to-school

programs nationally that connect schools with local farms to improve meals and provide educational opportunities. Those opportunities have inspired many school lunch initiatives, many of which have originated in the greater Bay Area.

The Life Lab program, affiliated with UC Santa Cruz, has been promoting garden-based education since 1979. And the Center for Ecoliteracy and the Chez Panisse Foundation, both in Berkeley, have been working together in Bay Area schools and independently around the country for well over a decade. All share the belief that connecting children directly with nature will change how they eat. "What we are trying to do is use food as a way to connect young people to their community and the planet," says Federman.

John Fisher, program director of the Life Lab Garden Classroom, takes it a step further. "Agriculture has become one of the most destructive activities in the world," he says, "and the more we can teach children how to grow food in a way that is in tune with the environment, the better."

Fisher shares Federman's belief that eating whole foods will connect people to their local communities. When our schools stop buying ready-made food from large companies, he says, more of that money starts to flow into the local economy. Beyond those issues, Bennett pointed to the growing body of academic research showing the connection between a healthful diet and a child's ability to perform well in school. And, of course, the sooner one learns good eating habits, the likelier it will become a lifelong practice.

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