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Bill Cirone: Orfalea Foundation Gives the Gift of Teaching Healthy Nutrition

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By **Bill Cirone**



In this season of goodwill and generosity, it's hard to top the [Orfalea Foundation](#), which has given the gift of good nutrition and healthy choices to thousands of students and families countywide. I speak on behalf of the entire educational community in saying thank you and congratulations for all that has been accomplished through these efforts.

The Orfalea Foundation has embodied the art of the possible, truly changing the culture of school nutrition in Santa Barbara County through the [S'Cool Food initiative](#). That program provided expert assessment of school food programs and more effective use of fresh ingredients and school gardens. Through the initiative, schools were able to purchase more fresh items from small farmers as well.

Menus were scrutinized with an eye toward using healthier items and less processed food. Chicken patties were grilled instead of breaded. Soups and sauces were made from scratch. More protein was added to breakfast. Build-your-own yogurt parfait bars drew crowds of eager students.

Through the initiative, school lunch workers were trained in time management in a kitchen, menu planning and local procurement. Children were encouraged to have fresh fruits and vegetables between breakfast and lunch for healthy snacks. Most importantly, the program helped make it "cool" to eat healthy, which was critical to changing the culture.

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The need was evident. Obesity is a serious problem throughout our state. Childhood obesity can cause devastating health issues, including diabetes, which is being diagnosed in ever growing numbers. Toward that end, the initiative also provided funds for helping educate parents and children in terms of eating better at home as well.

As one school food director said, “Kids come to school to learn math, science, history and English; we can help them learn to make better choices in terms of food as well, which will help them over a lifetime.”

During the worst fiscal crisis since the [Great Depression](#), schools clearly did not have funds to change and sustain good nutrition programs. The Orfalea Foundation, dedicated to having an impact on children’s health and nutrition even in difficult financial times, stepped in to provide the funding and expertise needed.

The program flourished countywide, with model nutrition programs ranging from Carpinteria and Goleta in the south, Solvang and Santa Ynez High in the middle of the county, to Lompoc, Santa Maria-Bonita and Guadalupe in the North County, and many in between. These programs have made an enormous difference. Community and school gardens are used as classrooms, and dietary programs have been truly revolutionized.

When the program began 12 years ago, the goals seemed daunting because the cafeteria programs and operations were doing all they could, and children were notorious for leaving or tossing food they didn’t like. By providing the seed money and support, the Orfalea Foundation has truly met its goals of changing the food culture in schools, enabling districts to take the programs to scale and now focus on sustainability.

As the Orfalea Foundation now moves in a new direction, the entire community is grateful for the impact and results of this highly successful effort. It will have a lasting impact on thousands of students and families countywide.

Teaching good nutrition for a lifetime is among the greatest gifts anyone can bestow. Congratulations and enormous thanks go to the Orfalea Foundation for a job well done. It is greatly appreciated.

— *Bill Cirone is [Santa Barbara County’s](#) superintendent of schools. The opinions expressed are his own.*