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Salad Bar Ambassadors Step Up to the Plate at Washington Elementary

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By **Claud Mann** for the Orfalea Foundation



Through the Orfalea Foundation's School Food Initiative program, salad bar ambassadors at Washington Elementary School in Santa Barbara encourage fellow students to make healthy food choices. (Orfalea Foundation photo)

Working alongside Santa Barbara Unified School District Food Service Director Nancy Weiss, and with encouragement from [Washington Elementary](#) Principal Anne Hubbard, the [School Food Initiative](#) team collaborated with sixth-grade teachers Jackie Bluestein, Lori Salinas and Michael Riley to facilitate what we hope is the first of many Salad Bar Ambassador cohorts to come.

Children who are provided regular access to a variety of fruits and vegetables are more likely to voluntarily incorporate fresh produce into their diets, setting the stage for a lifetime of healthful eating habits. In the school lunch setting, research and experience demonstrate that one of the most effective ways to offer fresh produce is through self-serve salad bars. Salad bars provide additional benefits; children encouraged to choose from a variety of foods are more likely to mature into adults capable of making healthful food choices. There is also evidence that allowing a child to choose some of the items on his or her tray reduces plate waste.

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Organizations such as Let's Move Salad Bars To Schools, the National Council of Fruit & Vegetable Nutrition Coordinators, plus numerous state and local groups have all shown leadership offering mini-grants intended to fund thousands of salad bars nationwide. It makes good sense; investing in school salad bars is a streamlined, economical approach that encourages children to make thoughtful food selections and sample a variety of sometimes-unfamiliar foods, while also fulfilling complex NSLP nutrition regulations.

With abundant persuasive data, a busy food service director could not be faulted for simply filling a shiny new salad bar with variety of goodies, wheeling it into the cafeteria and then waiting for the magic to happen. Sometimes it does; older kids have experience navigating salad bars and are generally familiar with most of the offerings. The youngest students are another story; K-2 students may benefit from explanation, description, encouragement and even assistance using tongs, dressing bottles and serving spoons.

Whether an adult is present at the salad bar and available to offer support is generally hit or miss, depending on staffing, scheduling, and the physical layout of the cafeteria.

An [Orfalea Foundation](#) study conducted earlier this year by our Cal Poly dietetic intern Katy McKauley suggested a correlation between the presence of a salad bar “host” and an increase in the number of students choosing one or more fruits and vegetables.

To prepare for their new responsibilities as ambassadors, sixth-graders received a crash course by Orfalea Foundation chef instructors in safety, sanitation, salad bar etiquette and the art of subtle positive persuasion. Every school day from now until the end of the academic year, this rotating group of volunteer peer mentors will offer guidance to K-2 students traversing a tasty landscape of cauliflower and broccoli florets, kiwi wedges and carrot sticks.

“The sixth-graders have approached the salad bar ambassador program with great enthusiasm and are raring to go, and this makes all the difference,” Hubbard said. “If a sixth-grader tells a first-grader that jicama is cool, then jicama is *cool*.”

Sixth-grade salad bar ambassador Kylan appreciates his responsibility: “I really like helping younger kids choose healthy foods.”

Kylan went on to say that being a salad bar ambassador has caused him to pay more attention to the foods he eats. The Orfalea Foundation looks forward to helping more schools institute salad bar ambassadors, empowering children to make healthy choices that will last a lifetime.

— *Claud Mann is a chef instructor with the [Orfalea Foundation School Food Initiative](#).*