

Building healthier eaters through repeated produce exposure

AT A GLANCE

Healthy Harvest empowers students to explore and accept new fruits and vegetables by pairing nutrition education with repeated, low-pressure tasting opportunities.

The Situation

Children are far less likely to eat foods they are unfamiliar with, especially vegetables. This challenge is magnified for low-income families, who do not want to risk spending limited food dollars on foods their children may not eat. At the same time, Idaho faces high rates of food insecurity and childhood obesity, placing many children at increased risk for chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans emphasize the importance of eating a variety of fruits and vegetables daily to support healthy growth, disease prevention and long-term wellbeing. Yet Idaho youth consistently fall short of these recommendations. Because diets rich in fruits and vegetables are strongly associated with healthier weight status and reduced chronic disease risk, helping children become familiar with — and willing to try — these foods is essential for improving health outcomes statewide.

Our Response

University of Idaho Extension Eat Smart Idaho program in the northern district discovered four years ago that a highly effective way to increase fruit and vegetable consumption among youth from low-income



Shelly Johnson sets up for Healthy Harvest along with CDA food service director, Savannah Box with SFE and Chef Addison.

households is through lunch-time taste testing, called Healthy Harvest. Building on strong partnerships with the Post Falls and Coeur d'Alene school districts, the program has, for the fourth year, expanded its reach to an impressive eight school sites. Research shows that repeated exposure to a variety of fruits and vegetables increases children's willingness to try — and ultimately enjoy — new foods. During lunch, students engage in direct conversations about how each fruit or vegetable grows, its different varieties, what it pairs well with, and how it supports a healthy body. Colorful pop-up displays and descriptive signage further spark interest, and students are offered samples during lunch service, accompanied by nutrition education, engaging visuals and enticing flavor descriptions that encourage them to try the featured produce.

Program Outcomes

In 2025, the Healthy Harvest program reached the entire student body at Northwest Expedition Academy, Venture High School and all SummerPlus meal sites in the Coeur d'Alene School District, including Winton Elementary, Lakes Middle School and Northwest Expedition Academy. Summer meal sites in the Post Falls School District — Ponderosa Elementary, Seltice Elementary and Post Falls Middle School.

Summer sites received 10 different food exposures, while school-year sites enjoyed seven weekly produce exposures. Coeur d'Alene summer sites also benefited from Roving Chef, a partnership with CDA School District Nutrition Services that offered students hands-on ideas for preparing and enjoying the featured produce. Roving Chef was delivered five times during the summer.

Produce highlight	Food offered	Exposure: # of students offered produce option
Tomatoes	Fresh local salsa	790
Carrots	Rainbow carrots with greens, roasted carrots and 100% carrot juice	540
Peppers	Sweet mini peppers	540
Cauliflower	Purple and crackers	540
Watermelon and pineapple	Fresh	540
Cucumbers	Mini and cucumber feta salad	790
Apricots and mangoes	Dried	650

Berries	Tru Fru	650
Lemon/ cucumber and watermelon/ mint	Infused Water	650
Grapes	Cotton candy, red, green	650
Kiwi	Fresh	400
Bananas	Muffins	400
Corn	Canned min corn, corn muffins, roasted corn salsa with corn chips	400
Apples	Apple muffins and unfiltered 100% juice	250
Peaches	Fresh	400
Lemons and limes	Infused Water	400

From April through August 2025, more than 8,590 youth were offered fresh produce through the Healthy Harvest program. This repeated, low-pressure exposure plays a critical role in developing healthier eating habits. Research shows that children often need eight to 15 exposures to a new fruit or vegetable before they try it, and consistent, positive encounters help reduce food neophobia — the common hesitation or fear of trying unfamiliar foods. By offering produce week after week, paired with engaging visuals, conversations and taste-testing opportunities, Healthy Harvest helps students build familiarity, curiosity and confidence around new foods. Over time, this repeated exposure increases the likelihood that youth will not only taste but adopt a wider variety of fruits and vegetables, supporting long-term healthy eating behaviors.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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70-25-sjohnson-produce-exposure • 12/25