

Islands miss out by not linking health, culture and education!

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Marshall Islands public elementary school students don't have a lunch program, show consistently poor academic achievement, suffer serious nutrition deficiencies from eating large quantities of "junk food" in urban centers, and frequently miss classes, often because they leave campus in search of food. Marshall Islands Standard Achievement Test results released earlier this month show little improvement in ongoing low academic achievement, a long-standing problem for the public schools. Test results for last school year show, for example, "proficiency" levels ranging from a high of only 34 percent to a low of 19 percent in academic subjects in the third grade.

When the US government halted funding for school lunches three years ago, the Marshall Islands government largely eliminated the feeding program, although some funding for school lunches was included in the budget for the new fiscal year that started October 1 — and some local vendors have filled the gap by offering discount price plates and snacks on or next to local school campuses.

Meanwhile, Assumption and Coop schools, Marshall Islands High School and several elementary schools in the Marshall Islands have over the past several years engaged their students in school gardens that provide produce for the feeding program operated by the private schools, while providing vegetables for the students of the public schools. The correlation between the lack of a school lunch program in most public schools and academic under-achievement should be obvious. Less obvious is the lost opportunity for student learning about nutrition, island foods and food culture for lack of a feeding program linked to school gardens and school curriculum. Marshall Islands schools are missing a golden opportunity for integrating learning, nutrition, and cultural values into their ongoing programs.

A visit last month to the Sanya Elementary School in the Sugunami section of Tokyo offered serious food for thought on the matter. Sanya is showcasing a many-layered program of nutrition education and action that engages students in grades one through six in planting, managing and harvesting vegetables in the school garden, teaches them to cook using this produce, and



Marshall Islands students are missing opportunities available to their counterparts in many Japanese schools, especially in their access to healthy food. Below, a school garden in Japan. Photos: Hilary Hosia, Giff Johnson. Last week's feature on culture connections between Japan and the RMI used photos by Floyd K. Takeuchi/Waka Photos.



'A healthy body contributes to sound academic development ... our school is above the city's academic average. Also, fewer children have a frustrated attitude. Surveys show the children enjoy farming and the participation contributes to students' life in a positive way.'

has them studying the nutritional value of the foods they are eating. The school also engages many parents in the nutrition and cooking program.

Perhaps most important, the eating habits of the students are being shifted to a more traditional Japanese diet, known as "washoku" — which is to say, healthier fare. They are enthusiastic about the result, as a meal of fish, rice, miso soup, and mixed vegetables with Sanya fifth graders demonstrated Thursday.

As fifth grade students served food to their fellow students, one student rose to explain today's meal and its nutritional value. Next, another student stood to lead everyone in expressing appreciation for the meal and everyone involved in its preparation, using the Japanese expression, "itadakimasu." As soon as the

thanks were delivered, everyone dived into the meal. At its conclusion, another student led the group in a closing thank you, "go-chisou sama." Barely a grain of rice remained on the plates of the 25 or so students in the classroom as the lunch concluded.

"The gardening helps with emotional stability and well-being of the students," said Principal Kazuyoshi Yamagishi. "Most important for the students is through gardening, they learn to appreciate life."

The school combines a variety of physical activity, gardening, learning about nutrition, and teaching dental hygiene. The school lunch program cost is shared by parents, who pay a monthly fee for their children's meals, and the government, which pays the salaries of the school's kitchen staff.

"A healthy body contributes to sound academic development," said Yamagishi.

While the school is not at the top of Tokyo elementary schools academically, "our school is above the city's academic average," said Yamagishi. At least as important, from Yamagishi's standpoint, is that as a result of participating in gardening, food preparation, and learning Japanese food customs, "fewer children have a frustrated attitude. Surveys show the children enjoy farming and the participation contributes to students' life in a positive way."

The school is now mid-way through a one-year pilot project supported by the Ministry of Education to demonstrate the potential for this unique food education learning program.

The integrated program doesn't stop at the school gates, or limit itself to students learning to cook. Every year in the spring, fifth graders travel for an overnight visit to a village near Mount Fuji, where they plant rice in a sizeable plot. Later in the year, they return for the harvest that generates 400 kilograms (880 pounds) of rice that is used for meals during a special "harvest week" the school celebrates late in the year, bringing parents and community volunteers together for meals and activities with the students.

Sixth graders are taught the custom of washoku including the arrangement of bowls, plates and chopsticks in the traditional style of their elders. As the students gain experience in the gardens and kitchen, they begin to differentiate between imported and local foods, said Yamagishi. "The students pay attention to domestically grown foods and prefer them," he said. "I hope (through this program) the students will

learn to love their country's own food."

The permutations of this food education program at Sanya Elementary are limited only by the imagination of the teachers and students. It also offers a teaching program relevant to the Marshall Islands and other Pacific islands, particularly in the urban centers where child nutrition has deteriorated as people shift from a diet of locally grown and caught food to store-bought processed foods. An epidemic of diabetes and other non-communicable diseases is now sweeping through the islands, causing a high level of sickness impacting the workforce and placing a huge financial burden on already cash-strapped hospitals. This school-based food education program is an innovative way of getting students and parents learning about nutrition and engaged in improving their health.

Sanya Elementary offers a model that could be exported as part of Japan's technical assistance to its island allies or through a sister school approach. The Japan International Cooperation Agency already supplies dozens of math and science volunteer teachers to schools around the Pacific, in addition to its export of volunteers in medicine and other areas of expertise. Exporting the Sanya Elementary model of food education would be a brilliant extension of cooperation between Japan and the Pacific, offering the opportunity for a culturally appropriate and sustainable intervention that portends improvements in health, academic performance and appreciation and understanding of customs that have governed life for generations but ones that are being lost to urbanized youngsters.