

**CONTACT:**

Mike Miller
Brown Miller Communications
(800) 710-9333 | mike@brownmillerpr.com

Chris Smith
Center for Ecoliteracy
(415) 517-2844 | chris@ecoliteracy.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Freshly Prepared Today: 517,000 School Meals Made with California-Grown Food

**Thirteen new school districts join a network of 71 districts in
California Thursdays ‘Collective Action Day’
highlighting fresh, healthy school meals**

BERKELEY, CALIF., January 26, 2017 ... Students across the state look forward to [California Thursdays](#) because they have a lunch that is freshly made with ingredients sourced close to home and—more importantly to them—delicious. Today, as part of a statewide Collective Action Day, students at over 2,900 public schools will enjoy fresh, healthy lunches prepared by the more than 11,600 dedicated food service staff who work in school districts in the California Thursdays Network.

California Thursdays is a collaboration between the nonprofit Center for Ecoliteracy and a network of school districts committed to improving school food by serving freshly prepared meals made from California-grown ingredients. That means fewer “heat-n-serve” dishes made with highly processed ingredients from mysterious origins.

Why is it a big deal? California public schools serve nearly 1 billion meals each year, and now the [California Thursdays Network](#) represents 34 percent of the state total. When schools come together like this, it generates multiple wins: improved student health and academic achievement, economic benefits for California farmers and local food producers, and lower environmental impact. Plus, food service staffers take immense pride in serving freshly prepared meals made with kid-tested recipes.

A Growing Model for the State and the Nation

The California Thursdays program is predicated on the simple logic that all California children will benefit from eating fresh, California-grown food. The program’s organizer, the [Center for Ecoliteracy](#), recognizes that freshly cooked meals made with local ingredients are more likely to appeal to students, taste better, and deliver major benefits. This theory was proven in the first year of the program, when districts reported a 13 percent increase in school lunch participation on days featuring kid-approved California Thursdays meals.

“Whenever food service staff prepare fresh locally grown food with these recipes, children devour it,” says **Zenobia Barlow, executive director of the Center for Ecoliteracy**. “That alone is a victory. Properly nourished children are healthy and ready to learn.”

Building on student and staff support, California Thursdays has grown at a rapid clip. What started as a pilot program with 15 school districts in October 2014 has expanded to 42, then 58, and now 71 districts in 28 counties statewide. Collectively, the California Thursdays Network represents 2,923 schools, an enrollment of 1.85 million and thousands of staff who serve over 309 million meals a year.

“California Thursdays is a great first step in celebrating all that California agriculture has to offer,” says **California Department of Food and Agriculture Secretary Karen Ross**. “It brings awareness to the fresh, wholesome and seasonally appropriate bounty of our great state. If we feed our children good healthy food, if we connect them back to the places, the people and the practices that it came from, I think we're going to have great decision makers in our future.”

Other school systems around the country are also inspired: “Minnesota Thursdays” launched in Minneapolis, “New York Thursdays” started in New York City Public Schools, and the Nebraska Department of Education is planning to adopt the program for their state.

Rewarding Local Tastes and Local Innovations

California Thursdays is not a one-size-fits-all program. Each district tailors their menu options to their students’ preferences, their school site capacities, and the availability of fresh ingredients. From “Green Bellies Booyah Burrito with Salsa Fres-CA” at Hemet Unified in Riverside County to “Parmesan Chicken Pasta Bowl with Kale and Roasted Butternut Squash” at Monterey Peninsula Unified, and from “Chicken Masala with flatbread and Roast Greek-style Potatoes” at Cajon Valley Unified in San Diego County to the “California Taco Bar” at Del Norte County Unified, school districts are displaying the delicious diversity the Golden State is famous for.

“We have a peer-to-peer network that allows talented food service directors to share recommendations for recipes and vendors, as well as solutions to the challenges they encounter,” says **Jennifer Gerrard, California Thursdays program director** and a former food service director herself. “The level of commitment and innovation is truly inspiring. It’s part of what makes our state and this program so special.”

New districts in the California Thursdays Network include: Bakersfield City, Banning Unified, Centralia Elementary, Coast Unified, Escondido Union High, Fort Bragg Unified, Grossmont Union High, North Monterey County, Oxnard Elementary, Pasadena Unified, Rio, San Luis Coastal Unified, and Woodlake Unified School Districts.

For more information about the California Thursdays program and to see the interactive state map of the Network, visit www.CaliforniaFoodForCaliforniaKids.org/california-thursdays.

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EDITORS: A full online pressroom that includes contact information for every participating school district, additional quotes, fact sheets, and photographs is available at: www.californiathursdayspr.org.