

## AT THE WEDGE

### At the Wedge:

- ▶ [Current Issue](#)
- ▶ [Archives](#)
- ▶ [Advertising Rates and Publication schedule](#)
- ▶ [Current Issue RSS](#)
- ▶ [Sign up for Newsletter & Action Alerts](#)
- ▶ [Wedge Worldwide - our online store](#)

## Natural Food Education in a Changing World

### Elementary Program Nears 15-Year Mark

*Uli Koester, Executive Director, Midwest Food Connection*

A friend recently asked me about my 15 years as an elementary educator in natural foods, and if the students' reception of what I teach has changed over time. I thought about how my own youthful enthusiasm has given way to reliance upon the tried and true and, on good days, dedicated leadership. Our organization has had to adjust to farms moving further away from the cities, larger immigrant populations and the commercialization of organic foods.

But have kids changed? Do they respond differently now to lessons on nutrition, sustainable agriculture and natural foods? That answer lies in the changing world the children are growing up in. Three trends affect my teaching: cultural diversity and isolation; a high degree of health expertise among only a few, in contrast to my third issue; a general lack of experience with unprocessed food.

### Growing Cultural Isolation

Education writer Jonathan Kozol, points out that we have two public education systems - one for well-to-do and one for poorer districts. This may be an oversimplification, but anyone visiting a cross-section of elementary schools in the Twin Cities area will see that his theory holds true. As Minnesota has grown more diverse, so has the dichotomy in schooling.

This pose challenges for children as they learn about food. Cultural isolation accompanies the split in schooling, so that most children have little knowledge of what other people eat. This is not a problem for those few with strong family traditions of cooking, careful shopping and even gardening. However, there are more children, from all cultures, who have limited choices. They are stuck in their eating habits and can not see out.

I observe this every day. An 11-year old asked me recently where she could buy fruit. Most children do not know what tortillas are made of. Some children think all good food comes with sugar, ketchup or hot sauce.

### Greater Awareness of Health Issues

While many kids are growing up in a food culture of few choices and flavors, it is also evident that health awareness is increasing in a number of homes. The sponsors of the Midwest Food Connection (the natural food co-ops) have many of these families as shoppers.

I teach more children now whose parents are quite deliberate about food choices. These kids absorb my curriculum at an advanced level, have great knowledge about whole grains and fruits and will tell me what is not allowed in their kitchen.

A number of these families have become key supporters of the Midwest Food Connection. Earlier this year, the mother of a Whittier School student posted a complimentary page on her blog about our Sweets and Sugars lesson. At Lake Harriet School, parents have written grants on two occasions to fund our program for their kids.

### Food = Packaging

Many children have trouble identifying food right from the earth, but are experts in

what it looks like after industry has packaged it. This has been true for years, but it has reached new extremes. How do most children see a carrot - the quintessential and most beloved vegetable? As little orange tasteless sticks in a bag. To make matters worse, most kids do not even recognize carrot flavor - Ranch dressing is de rigueur! When I take a random assortment of vegetables into even a 4th grade classroom, the children can only identify about half of them. Yet kale and leeks are in every produce department - they aren't a secret.

When I teach vegetable lessons, I cut and serve fresh carrots. Thankfully, the co-ops sell them with green tops, which clearly shows the plant origins. Kids can also eat a nice slice of apple, cut right to the core rather than nibbling around the outside of a huge, flavorless specimen (before discarding it). I am relentless in teaching about grains, lest children graduate from high school thinking that oatmeal comes from wheat.

### **Let Them Enjoy**

The good news is that kids are curious and eager. They want to like food and easily make connections between food, their culture and their bodies. A fresh salad of lettuce, carrots and grated apple, prepared by their own hands, is as invigorating and inspiring today as ever. A friendly invitation to healthful eating can supersede the entrapments of a changing world. We should all keep extending that invitation to our children.

The Wedge, together with five other Twin Cities co-ops, supplies major funding to the Midwest Food Connection. In this past school year, teachers from the organization have visited 50 schools, including these nearby the Wedge: Barton Open, Kenwood, Whittier, City of Lakes Waldorf, Hale, Marcy Open and Emerson Spanish Immersion.

We are open Monday - Friday, 9:00 a.m. - 10:00 p.m. and Saturday & Sunday, 9:00 a.m. - 9:00 p.m. | [Contact Us](#) | Phone: 612-871-3993

Wedge Community Co-op | 2105 Lyndale Avenue South | Minneapolis MN, 55405 | [Get directions](#) to the Wedge | [Privacy Policy](#)

©2006 Wedge Community Co-op, All rights reserved.