

# Back to basics

By Joleen Oshiro

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 Sheraton Waikiki chef Darren Demaya [BUY THIS PHOTO](#)  
 helps students Erika Kakazu, left, Cody Gushikawa and Douglas Yanagihara finish a dish during the Grow Hawaii Challenge.

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Children faced with challenge have existed since the beginning of time. But fundamental health issues plaguing today's youth are unprecedented: Obesity and diabetes, once rare in children, are epidemic.

While a variety of factors come into play, diets of processed food and sedentary lifestyles are two of the largest contributors to the phenomenon. These have not only affected children's physical well-being, but

their knowledge and awareness of fresh food, their connection to the natural world - and, by default, the health of the planet.

How do we move forward? For some schools the answer lies in going back to basics: planting a garden.

"A school garden connects students with food and the land. It teaches them to make better nutritional choices," said Nancy Redfeather, a coordinator with Hawaii Island School Garden Network, which lends support to 56 Big Island schools. "Garden programs reconnect students with nature; they provide physical activity. Students become stewards of the aina, and they learn life skills."

At Waimea Middle Public Conversion Charter School, a garden started in 2005 seems to be a win on all fronts. Mala'ai: The Culinary Garden of Waimea Middle School has become so popular it has been integrated into core curriculum. More than 75 percent of parents say their children's attitudes about food have changed since working at Mala'ai, and almost 85 percent of students say they have tried new food because of it.

"The garden is relevant to hard-core learning," said Patti Cook, school director of community development. "Frankly, many students enter our sixth grade well behind in reading and math. We asked ourselves, How do we create a learning environment that would get students excited and want to be here? Seeing something jump out of the ground that they planted is exciting. Fungi - fungus, bacteria and insects - are exciting. Suddenly, the reading, science and math that they're studying in the classroom becomes relevant."

Redfeather and Cook were at the Sheraton Waikiki

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Resort last month to discuss garden programs at the Grow Hawaii Challenge for students, administrators and cafeteria managers of 12 Oahu private schools and one Waianae charter school. Participants were joined by the likes of chefs Roy Yamaguchi, Alan Wong and Colin Hazama and top Sheraton chefs, who led workshops for adults and cooking events for students.

The event was organized by the Sheraton and the Hawaii Association of Independent Schools, which has partnered with the state Education and Agriculture departments and the Ulupono Initiative for the three-year Grow Hawaii project.

Grow Hawaii aims to educate students about the urgency for growing food locally and promotes hands-on learning. It also hopes to spark thought toward social systems that support a sustainable lifestyle.

At Saint Louis School the science department plans to run a twofold sustainability project: the Grow Hawaii program for sixth-graders and aquaponics for grades seven and eight. They are also exploring the possibility of a greenhouse to ensure the continuation of the curriculum, according to department chairman Lulu Lulu.

"We're trying to provide a living model," he said.

Teachers are hopeful students will be able to experience the garden-to-table concept firsthand, going into the cafeteria to help prepare the food they grew.

At the challenge, Yamaguchi headed up a pizza-making workshop for students. He said that while events like this one introduce good ideas, lasting change to Hawaii's food system will take generations to bring to fruition.

"It's a work in progress; it's not going to come overnight. Most of these kids will be out of the system when things start changing," he said. "But it's important for them to learn now what it is to eat healthy, to learn about the land and eating local. We'll see it trickle down, if not when they're in school, then when they're parents. They'll have to decide what their nutritional values are."

Dexter Kishida, school food coordinator for AINA in Schools, a Kokua Hawaii Foundation program, says implementing changes to the schools system are possible now if they are done incrementally. The Grow Hawaii Challenge, for instance, was targeted primarily to private schools because they are not subject to a

huge food service department, as are public schools.

"It's not as hard a ship to steer," Kishida said.

"If we start with 13 or 14 schools that start including 10 percent of local fruits and vegetables in their food budget - that's about 50 cents a student - it's a realistic demand the agriculture industry can meet. It's a slow kick-start."

As for students, Kishida sees value in cultivating more than just academic learning. He wants to nurture a sense of personal investment.

"This is a holistic approach. It's not just about food-to-plate. It's about heart connection, because spending months to grow a tomato is something we have no experience with (in traditional education). ... This is hands-on experience."

Many of Kishida's aspirations have already been actualized at Mala'ai.

"This garden wouldn't exist without community support - from farmers, serious home gardeners, chefs and retirees," said Cook. "One of our charter goals for educating students includes family engagement and community involvement."

Mala'ai in turn serves the community: Its bounty is offered at free markets, and there are free home-gardening workshops.

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