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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Nationwide and locally in Santa Maria students are getting exposed to healthier school meals**

An April 2015 research brief titled, “Improvements in School Lunches Result in Healthier Options for Millions of U.S. Children” published by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, found that elementary school lunches have been improving consistently since the 2006-07 school year. Consistent with these national findings, the University of California CalFresh Nutrition Education program (UC CalFresh) is partnering with the Santa Maria-Bonita School District (SMBSD) Food Service to nudge students toward healthier choices in the school cafeteria. During the months of March, April and May, students are getting the opportunity to try new vegetables like brussels sprouts, asparagus, and sweet bell pepper. After tasting new vegetables, students vote on whether they would like to see those vegetables again at their salad bar. So far, the results have been overwhelmingly positive with a majority of students in favor of putting brussels sprouts and asparagus on the salad bar.

SMBSD Food Service has been cooking from scratch and providing healthy and locally sourced school meals since 2007 when they received funding from the Orfalea Foundation for large-scale cooking equipment, kitchen remodeling and staff training through a culinary boot camp. SMBSD currently sources 80% of their produce locally for the 21,500 meals they serve to students and teachers every day. Today, menus include a variety of foods made on-site including sweet potato wedges and freshly made granola. Despite the efforts to provide fresh, healthier meal options, school lunches can get a bad reputation with students negatively reacting to unfamiliar foods. This leads to food waste and concerns that kids won’t try anything new.

So SMBSD Food Service and UC CalFresh decided to do something about it. Using Smarter Lunchroom Movement strategies, tested by the Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics, and materials from the Harvest of the Month program, UC CalFresh has partnered with five cafeterias in the SMBSD to conduct monthly tastings of vegetables that don’t usually get a lot of exposure. In April, students tried raw asparagus. Many had never tried asparagus and students had a lot of questions about how to eat it. “Which end do I eat this on?” asked one student from Bruce Elementary school.

Other Smarter Lunchroom Movement strategies currently being implemented by SMBSD Food Service and supported by UC CalFresh include increasing signage at the salad bar so students know what they are putting on their plates, and creating a more appealing environment in the lunchroom.

In May, students will be tasting raw bell peppers in assorted colors. The goal is to increase students' exposure to a variety of new fruits and vegetables so they are more likely to put these veggies on their plates and in their mouths.

Cafeteria Tasting schedule for May in SMBSD:

May 12<sup>th</sup> Robert Bruce Elementary 10:30-12:30

May 20<sup>th</sup> Rice and Bonita Elementary 10:30-12:30

May 22<sup>nd</sup> Adam Elementary 10:30-12:30

May 29<sup>th</sup> Taylor Elementary 10:30-12:30

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