

Are schools teaching ‘anti-GMO propaganda?’

The decision of the Sausalito Marin City, California, school district to incorporate a program of serving only non-GMO, organic meals to its schoolchildren is part of a widespread effort among anti-GMO groups to “educate” children on the alleged hazards (regardless of no scientific proof so far) of eating food that was grown using genetic engineering.

Judy Shils, head of The Conscious Kitchen, the organization that is handling school meals for the school district just north of San Francisco, told writer [Kavin Senapathy](#) that the program is designed to “teach parents and kids ‘a lot of the really good words’” and that instead of focusing on reducing fat, salt and sugars, the program’s anti-GMO focus is “part and parcel of the same thing...” “In my mind if you’re serving non-processed food that has pesticides on it, then we are not doing justice to these kids.”

Of course, organic and non-GMO food also use pesticides, perhaps even more than GMO crops, because the pesticides allowed for organic foods are generally not as effective and need to be used in larger volumes. And they’re not remotely “safe.”

Anti-science lessons

In addition, the program includes lessons about how organic and non-GMO is “better,” including claims that “GMOs (genetically modified organisms) have yet to be deemed safe for humans or the environment, yet they are ubiquitous in today’s food,” and that “organic food puts human health first.” No mention is made of the fact that scientific studies have found no nutritional difference between organic food and food made with transgenics.

And finally, while organic food is more expensive just about anywhere, the cost of the organic lunches at the two schools in the Sausalito Marin City district are about equivalent to what school lunches cost elsewhere (about \$2.00), although one site saw a price increase from \$3.75 to \$4.25. This is however, due to donations from parents and from the chefs who prepare the food.

Meanwhile, in less than a year, The Conscious Kitchen claims that it has “transformed school culture in the dining hall and beyond,” with:

- Increased leadership qualities exhibited by students
- Improved academic performance
- Decrease in disciplinary cases
- Diminished tardiness
- Increase in attendance
- Respectful students, improved manners and open communication

Of course, these behaviors could be brought about by many other factors than eschewing GMOs.

But Shils, who [described herself](#) as “the biggest non-GMO there is,” should know all about the anti-GMO rhetoric that has passed itself off as science-based information for decades. She’s not only the head of The Conscious Kitchen, she’s also founder of the Conscious Kitchen’s parent organization, Turning Green, which presses for legislative and regulatory changes affecting cosmetics, consumer products and non-GMO food. Shils also serves on the board of the non-GMO Project.

Sponsored by “big org”

Turning Green and the Conscious Kitchen have a number of corporate and non-profit sponsors that are known for their opposition to genetic engineering. These include Amy’s, Acure, Suja, Whole Foods, Annie’s, Good Earth Organic, Numi Organic tea, Chipotle, Dr. Bronner’s, Center for Food Safety, Environmental Working Group, Friends of the Earth, GMO Inside, and the non-GMO Project.

But these two intertwined groups are just part a growing number of organizations dedicated to creating lesson plans and “educating” children on avoiding transgenics and other genetically modified foods:

- At [BrainPop](#), lessons available for school children and teens include portion size, avoiding obesity and encouraging physical activity. There also is a plan on organic foods, including “the benefits and drawbacks to organic farming, as well as what its supporters claim about the health benefits of organic food.”
- [Learning to Give](#), another lesson plan-filled website offers instruction on “Why Eat Organic?” for high schoolers. The lessons “develop an awareness of organic/sustainable foods as an alternative, earth-friendly way to eat.”
- [Love to Know](#) has a lesson plan on organic food that includes sections on organic farming. While the lessons address some of the drawbacks of organic farming (lower yields, certification paperwork, higher prices and labor costs), it claims that conventional farming uses harmful pesticides while organic farming supposedly focuses on “biological pesticides” such as ladybugs, dragonflies, braconid wasps, and basil. Nothing is mentioned of *Bacillus thuringiensis*, pyrethrins/pyrethrums. Or copper sulfate. Or nicotine sulfate.
- The US Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) also provides lesson plans on genetically modified seeds, based on the documentary film “Food, Inc” which stars [anti-GMO activist Michael Pollan](#). These plans show evidence of more scientific input, including watching the documentary and answering questions on patenting seeds, but also conducting a virtual experiment involving transgenics and traditional breeding techniques, and reviewing information from the government’s Human Genome Project site.

Back in Marin County, The Conscious Kitchen/Turning Green’s Shils wants to expand her program, and offers lesson plans and meals that subscribe to her theory of healthy food, known as FLOSN (fresh, local, organic, seasonal and non-GMO).

It’s difficult to predict how much this will catch on, but in Taiwan, the island country’s legislature passed a law [banning any](#) gm-produced food in schools there. The decision raised prices for school meals, which concerned a number of cash-strapped districts (donations were not part of the legislation). “Soy is a major

ingredient in Taiwan's school lunches," said [Lin Shu-fen](#) of the Democratic Progressive Party, who advocated for the passage of the bill. "Genetically modified soy has been shown to contain toxic residue from pesticides."

No mention, however, of the pesticides found on conventional soybeans.

Organic farmers, as opposed to anti-GMO activists aren't quite as thrilled with the demonization of conventional and GM farming methods. Last year, when an organic-industry funded video featuring an elementary school musical was posted on YouTube, it met with hundreds of thousands of hits objections from GM supporters and huzzahs from anti-GMO groups.

It was also met with criticism from at last one organic farmer ([Rob Wallbridge](#)), who didn't find it at all constructive.

The line between indoctrination and education is verifiable truth. When they are scientifically inaccurate, do these programs cross the line?

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