



# **New on the Menu**

**Districtwide changes to school food  
start in the kitchen at Portland's Abernethy Elementary**

**A report by  
Abernethy Elementary, Portland Public Schools Nutrition Services,  
Injury Free Coalition for Kids, and Ecotrust**

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“When I stand and I look at Portland, I see an extraordinary community that really wants to see this succeed. Because the conversation isn’t just about Abernethy. In one year, this project has encouraged so much creativity and hope for what can be done.”

—Linda Colwell



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Imagine a school lunch line filled with fresh, local, and seasonal fruits and vegetables. Imagine the hallway smelling of fresh baked bread. Imagine your child pulling carrots out of the soil and eating them for lunch that day in the school cafeteria. Imagine an integrated curriculum that brings these experiences into the school's art and music programs, as well as math, science, and social studies classes.

That, and more, happened at Abernethy Elementary in Southeast Portland during the 2005-06 school year. This report summarizes a year of cooking meals on-site at Abernethy. It also describes what happened beyond the cafeteria, for the cooking at Abernethy was supported by a broader, integrated approach to student wellness.

There are many heroines in this story. Linda Colwell, the district's Farm to School Coordinator and Chef at Abernethy Elementary, would say the project succeeded because of the leadership at Portland Public Schools (PPS) Nutrition Services. And those leaders, particularly Shannon Stember and Kristy Obbink, would tell you the project was carried by Linda. They are all right.

In addition, Abernethy Principal Tammy Barron proved to be an extraordinary force of positive energy and enthusiasm. Her vision was supported by a tremendous cast of school-based personnel, including James Fowler, Beret Halverson, Jill Kuehler, and Deanne Stanley.

Ecotrust played a role as well, coordinating a comprehensive quantitative and qualitative analysis so that the project at Abernethy could inform larger, ongoing conversations within the district about school food. The research team included Jill Kuehler, Karrie Thomas, and Sarah Kruse. We were joined in our efforts by the Injury Free Coalition for Kids at OHSU / Doernbecher Children's Hospital.

As detailed within this report, our analysis suggests that the project at Abernethy was a success on many levels. Perhaps one of our most significant findings is that even when faced with new choices and unfamiliar menu items, the kids responded enthusiastically. In fact, the lunchroom at Abernethy became a place of school pride.

As we prepared this report, some noted that we

were analyzing a round hole with square-peg questions. In other words, although everything had changed at Abernethy, nothing about the larger cultural system had changed.

Indeed, Abernethy has been an incubator for ideas. It was a starting place to challenge

conceptual barriers and build trust. As a result of lessons learned at Abernethy in the 2005-06 school year, the larger system by which we feed our public school children in Portland is in fact changing, with select elements of the Abernethy experiment already being exported districtwide.

And we're just getting started. PPS Nutrition Services will continue to test its capacity through the kitchen at Abernethy. Ecotrust, in partnership with Abernethy Elementary, PPS Nutrition Services, and the Injury Free Coalition for Kids will continue to analyze the program at Abernethy. We'll continue to support PPS in its efforts to ensure expansion of project elements throughout the district.

In this report, we're pleased to share with you the first year's findings of what promises to be a very dynamic journey.

Sincerely,



Deborah Kane, Vice President,  
Food & Farms, Ecotrust





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## A Whole School System Approach

For me,” says Kristy Obbink, “this all started last year when I received a flyer titled *Rethinking School Lunch*. At that point, I had just become Director of Nutrition Services for Portland Public Schools—after twenty-five years as the assistant director—and I was trying madly to figure out what kind of system I could put in place to bring fresh food back into schools.”

Kristy’s challenge is similar to that faced by school districts nationwide. Responding to rising obesity rates among school children, the USDA has revised standards for the fat, sugar, and sodium content of school lunches, and a federal wellness policy requires that schools set goals for nutritional education and physical activity.

In several respects, Portland Public Schools Nutrition Services is already ahead of the curve on these issues. The district introduced salad bars into schools in 1995 and has never allowed vending machines in

its elementary schools. Yet Kristy’s ambitions—and those of many in the city—extend far beyond recent federal guidelines.

Within the Portland community, our hopes and dreams for our children are sky high. Many groups around the city are providing young people with a working relationship to the land—through school gardens and field trips to local farms. Others seek to prioritize funding for schools. Still others are working to ensure that kids have playgrounds and safe routes to school.

“We really want to create a school food system that reflects our community’s values.”

—Kristy Obbink,  
Director of Nutrition Services,  
Portland Public Schools

Perhaps the goal that unites these efforts is integration – knitting all these values into the educational experience. Research around the country attests to the benefits of education that is integrated within an environmental context, such as a school garden. And as Alice Waters, founder of the Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley, California, says, “The most neglected schoolroom is the lunchroom.”

For Linda Colwell, the path to Abernethy began as a mother with two children in Portland schools and as a classically trained chef working with the Portland Chapter of the Chefs Collaborative. In 1999, the organization developed a curriculum that introduced flatbreads from around the world, which chefs taught in fourteen Portland schools. Then at Edwards Elementary, where Linda’s children were in school, she worked with Principal Mary Patterson to secure funding for a school garden – the Garden of Wonders.

Named in a schoolwide competition by fifth-grader Hannah Hill, the Garden of Wonders gave Linda the opportunity to experiment with garden-based learning. The Portland Schools Foundation funded the garden and its curriculum development as a supplemental approach to meeting district education requirements.

Although produce from the Garden of Wonders was never served in the Edwards cafeteria, Linda worked to connect the school with local food through other projects. In 2005, she launched a weeklong Chefs in Residence program. Area chefs spent the lunch hour at the school, working side by side with the students to prepare lunch from farm-fresh ingredients. At the end of the hour, the children’s parents stopped by for a family-style lunch celebrated with tablecloths, silverware, and flowers. Though kids and parents loved the program, the meals proved to be bittersweet. Only weeks before, Portland Public Schools had announced that, due to budget constraints, it would be closing three elementary schools: Smith, Edwards, and Richmond.

With Edwards closing its doors and her son moving on to middle school, Linda began to reconsider. “What if, I thought, instead of having one school be the focus, we made the whole district the focus – because to achieve long-term outcomes, change really has to come from within the system.”

She decided to contact Portland Public Schools Nutrition Services, and there she found a welcome reception. Kristy hired Linda to set up a scratch kitchen pilot project at Abernethy Elementary. That decision gave Linda the opportunity to oversee the district’s first integrated program – the garden, the classroom, and the lunchroom all supporting each other.”



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# The Abernethy Experience

With 170 students from Edwards and Richmond Elementary Schools converging on Abernethy, Principal Tammy Barron might have had her hands full. Yet when Kristy and Linda proposed that Abernethy also open an upgraded kitchen on site, she welcomed the opportunity. “I just thought, why not,” Tammy recalls. “With the Edwards closure, it was a time when both communities, instead of focusing on what they’d had, could look toward building something new together.”

The Garden of Wonders transferred over from Edwards, and then the real work of building something new began. Tammy dedicated a classroom to the Garden of Wonders, and Linda assembled a team to integrate the work of the garden, classroom, and kitchen. She hired Americorps volunteer Beret Halverson to be in charge of the garden. Jill Kuehler, a Portland State University graduate student, was brought on board by the Injury Free Coalition for Kids as the school’s Community Wellness Coordinator. She put her thesis work on garden-based education into practice in the Garden of Wonders classroom.

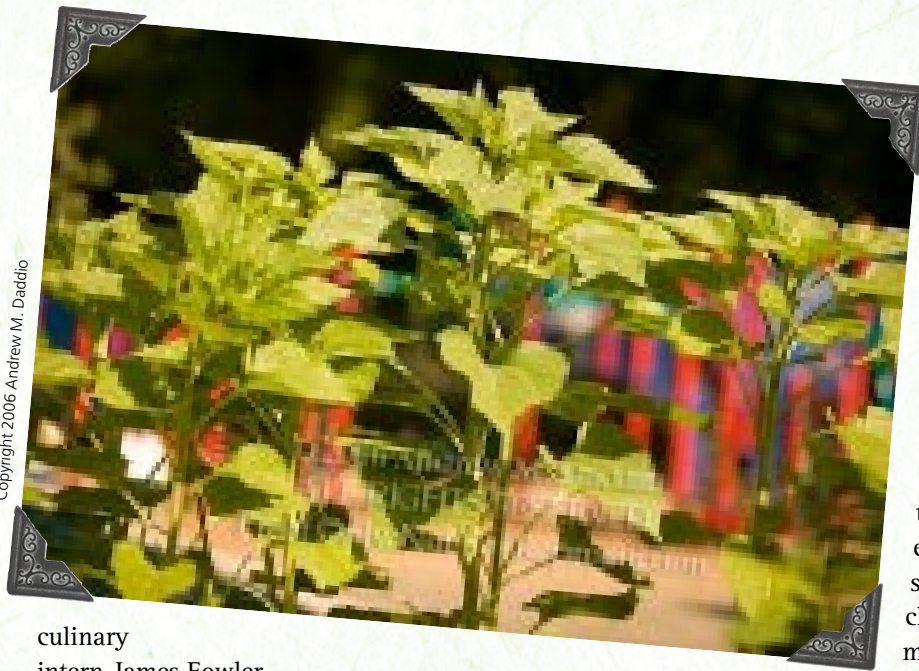
Because the kitchens at most elementary schools are limited to a sink, heating ovens, and refrigeration, Abernethy had to be reequipped. Kristy and Linda rescued an idle six-burner commercial range and a secondhand thirty-quart mixer. Then, Linda and

“We’re not just making Carmen Miranda fruit hats in art class. We’re intentional about integrating wellness and health and nutrition and garden education and safe physical activity.”

—Tammy Barron, Principal,  
Abernethy Elementary



photo by Chris Milliman



culinary intern James Fowler developed new menus to match USDA requirements as well as kids' tastes.

By October, the kitchen is in full swing. Prize menu offerings include chicken tikka masala and Moroccan chicken with raisins and couscous, along with perpetual favorites such as peanut butter and jelly, macaroni and cheese, and pizza – all prepared on site. The need for extra hands around the kitchen is partially filled with the help of parent volunteers. As part of a districtwide service learning program, fourth- and fifth-graders take turns helping cafeteria lead Deanne Stanley serve lunch and wash dishes.

On any given school day, around eleven-thirty A.M., ten kids per minute elbow their way into the lunch line. They're served a hot meal of their choice, prepared by Linda and James, and decide on a drink. They pay with a meal card, so students don't know who is paying full price, and who is receiving payment assistance. Holding their trays, they step into the cafeteria, which by sight and sound is also the school gymnasium – made over each day with long tables that slide out from the wall. A salad bar cart beckons from the center of the room. It colorfully displays today's radishes from the garden along with fresh salad mix, tomatoes, carrots, canned peaches, other prepared fruits and vegetables, and dressings. Children serve themselves from the cart, find a seat at a table, squeeze in, and eat. Ten minutes later, the bell rings for recess.

Upstairs in the Garden of Wonders classroom, James and Beret connect garden-based activities with lesson plans that meet district curriculum requirements in math, science, nutrition, and social studies. They teach about a new vegetable each week, timed to correspond with harvest or seasonality, and prepare a feature dish with the students. Children learn how the vegetables are tended and eaten, as well as their cultural significance. On one wall of the classroom, the students have made a "Where in Oregon Does Your Food Grow?" map, with

markers and descriptions for farms like Baggenstons Farms in Sherwood and Sun Gold Farm in Forest Grove. In the fall, the students plant chard and the following spring it's incorporated into Linda's popular chicken chard pesto with pasta.

Still, that chard is the exception. Most of the produce and meats come from Food Services of America (FSA) and Duck Delivery. These two major distributors on the Portland Public Schools bid contract are both based in Oregon. FSA Representative Kathleen Isom estimates that about 20 percent of the produce they sell comes from Oregon and Washington vendors. However, those numbers aren't currently tracked or readily available. Linda also supplements the big deliveries with donations of pizza dough from Hot Lips Pizza and sandwich bread from Grand Central Bakery.

The end of the year finds Linda joyful: "Beyond any of our other goals for the project, there's just the feeling that we're making the food a thing of pride and the school cafeteria a place where children want to be." ❧

# Analysis of the Kitchen

In the movement toward healthier food,” says Registered Dietitian Nancy Becker, “Portland’s elementary schools are already far ahead—because unlike many other districts in Oregon, they don’t have vending machines.” Nancy’s experience with nutrition research dates back to a 1979–85 OHSU study of eating habits among two hundred Portland families. The work confirmed for her that behavioral habits, especially consumption habits, are extremely difficult to unlearn, particularly for children. “For my own kids,” Nancy says, “school lunch was their opportunity to eat what they saw on TV. The point is that schools don’t exist within a cultural vacuum. Lasting change is slow change.”

“It’s the kindergarteners we’re aiming for—so that by the time they get to third grade, they’ll be used to healthy food.”

—Nancy Becker,  
Portland/Multnomah Food Policy  
Council

Researchers frequently grapple with the challenge of isolating and understanding the effects of one change within a complex system. At Abernethy, that difficulty was magnified, with many changes introduced simultaneously. Still, all the participants agreed that evaluation would be crucial. As Abernethy’s kitchen became the learning laboratory where new procurement strategies, cooking techniques, menus, and project ideas could be tested, a formal evaluation would help Portland Public Schools Nutrition Services to consider broader initiatives for improving the school food environment.

Would offering home-style meals increase students’ consumption of fruits and vegetables? Could local farm produce be used cost-effectively in the scratch model? Would the meals made at Abernethy meet USDA nutrition requirements? These were the types of questions that project organizers hoped the project evaluation would help answer.

In the fall of 2005, Portland-based nonprofit Ecotrust came on board to coordinate the analysis. The first step was to recruit an Advisory Committee of community citizens, partners, and school representatives. Together, the committee developed a research agenda to



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photo Chris Milliman

examine key aspects of kitchen operations: financial viability, nutrition, participation rates among students, and student and community perceptions of the food.

Seeking to provide feedback that would be most valuable to Nutrition Services, the team focused on the kitchen and did not specifically extend the analysis to the garden or classroom. Much of the analysis relied on data already generated by the district, including those for participation rates, income and expenses, and nutritional information. Other data were gathered via interviews, focus groups, and surveys. In some cases, the team compared data from Abernethy to those of an anonymous control school within the district that served the standard school lunch fare.

Throughout the summer of 2006, the research team compiled and evaluated the data—seeking the hard numbers that would provide

a solid rationale for people’s overwhelming good faith in the project. Still Nancy Becker insisted, “This project was a success the day it started—simply because it exists. ☺



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# Lessons Learned

Here is a summary of the findings described in the technical report, titled “The Abernethy Scratch Kitchen Model Baseline Assessment.”

## Profit and Loss

Across most food sector operations, the cost equation is the same: food is cheap and labor is expensive. Abernethy is no exception. Although the cost of goods per meal proved to be cheaper at Abernethy than at the control school—94 cents versus 99 cents—labor costs, largely the start-up expenses one would expect in a pilot project, were much higher. To construct an equitable comparison, food donations

“Last year [my kids] brought their own lunch, even though it would have been free at school. This year they eat school lunch and they love it—so do I! Thanks for this amazing program!”

—Abernethy parent

and volunteer labor, for which Nutrition Services did not actually pay, were estimated at market value and included in all calculations. Labor costs bumped the total expense per meal to \$3.52 for Abernethy versus \$1.67 for the control school. The result is that the total cost of the Abernethy kitchen project—as represented by expenses over revenues—was about \$59,000. When district-level administration costs are included, that figure jumps to \$95,000. For comparison, the control school saw a loss of \$22,000.

It is important to note that Nutrition Services operates its own budget, separate from the general fund that supports classrooms. Operating revenues thus come solely from the sale of lunches and federal reimbursements. The cost structure is expected to change significantly in year two; with the kitchen now running smoothly, staffing will be at a level similar to that of other schools in the district.

## Nutrition

Portland Public Schools Nutrition Services tracks the nutritional content of all meals. Quantifying nutritional content is particularly important because schools that don’t meet USDA requirements—including a minimum of one-third

the recommended daily allowance of both protein and calories—will not be reimbursed for meals. Analysis shows that there is no significant difference in the nutritional content of the entrees served at Abernethy and those served elsewhere in the district. In some instances, such as the lack of USDA recognition for tofu as a protein, the guidelines



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limited Linda's ability to create alternative menus.

### Participation

The most fundamental question posed by the Abernethy project was simply: Would the students eat the food? It turns out that, compared to the previous year's weighted average of participation rates from Abernethy, Edwards, and Richmond, participation at Abernethy rose by 3 percent.



photo by Chris Milliman

Eighty-two percent of the students ate lunch in the Abernethy cafeteria at least occasionally last year. Participation increased among both full paying students and those qualifying for reduced price meals. Meanwhile, over the same period, participation rates for elementary schools throughout the district as a whole remained unchanged and those for the control school declined slightly. Importantly, newly introduced dishes such as chili and beef stew held their own against perennial favorites such as macaroni and cheese – and gained in popularity as the year went along. Teachers were significantly more likely to eat lunch in the cafeteria as well, setting important examples as role models.

overwhelming – although not unanimous – approval. Among the students, 44 percent of those interviewed stated that they preferred the lunches this year over last year. Other benefits of the program turned out to be more difficult to quantify. When asked why she liked the school lunch this year, one third-grader replied simply, “They treat us like adults.” ☞

Results from the Abernethy salad bar are also notable. Servings rose from an average of 1.24 servings of fruits and vegetables taken per lunch purchase during the first three months of the school year to 2.26 servings during the final three months. Comparative salad bar data for the control school are not available at this time.

### Preferences

Research on preferences utilized surveys as well as individual and focus group interviews to gauge reactions among students, teachers, and parents. The program received



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# Back for Seconds

With a sharp coolness in the air, another school year begins. At Abernethy, the scratch kitchen will continue to operate through the 2006–07 school year. Linda Colwell has moved on, and culinary intern James Fowler now leads the kitchen effort.

With the experience and findings of the 2005–06 school year forming a baseline, Kristy Obbink and her staff at Nutrition Services spent the summer of 2006 tweaking operations and making adjustments. “The intent has always been to institutionalize the work being done at Abernethy as

quickly as possible,” says Linda Colwell. “Everything we learned, did, and purchased last year is now in the computer system. With all the enthusiasm among Kristy’s staff, this project now has a life of its own.”

This year, Linda will be working with the district to help bring elements of the Abernethy model to other schools. “The lessons we have learned at Abernethy are providing us with the tools and information to serve fresh, local food to all kids in all schools,” says Kristy. “Starting next year, we will open up our doors to anything grown in a school garden. We will try to be more

“The seeds have been sown; now we just need to provide fertile ground for them to flourish.”

—Dilafruz Williams,  
School Board Member, Portland  
Public Schools

flexible with sourcing to achieve local procurement goals. And we will feature a Harvest of the Month program – in which fresh, seasonal produce from school gardens and local community farms will be served in every school cafeteria.”

Nutrition Services plans to make Harvest of the Month lessons and activities available to teachers who are interested in connecting garden-based education, nutrition, and healthy eating back to the cafeteria. Cafeteria menus will feature the Harvest of the Month and provide students with a story about the farmer who grew their food. The materials will be based on a classroom activity developed for the Garden of Wonders classroom.



photo by Chris Milliman

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Local purchasing, which was not part of the 2005–06 analysis, will be one of Nutrition Services’ primary goals for the coming year. Spending \$6 million on food each year and serving 20,000 students each day, Portland Public Schools wields tremendous leverage. Researchers will look at the impact of local purchasing as part of their continuing analysis.

The swing toward local purchasing is already gaining momentum. Third-generation watermelon farmer Sam Pollock recently entered into a partnership with Portland Public Schools by agreeing to donate 44,000 Oregon-grown watermelons between September and November. Other eastern Oregon farmers plan to donate onions and potatoes through their Farmers Ending Hunger program.

Other networks that could help strengthen ties between Oregon producers and public schools are already in place. One example is the Farmer-Chef Connection, organized by Ecotrust and the Portland Chapter of the Chefs Collaborative. Moving forward, Ecotrust and partners, such as the Oregon Department of Agriculture, are exploring ways to bring Oregon-based food processors and manufacturers into the conversation as well. And to increase demand for these types of services, Ecotrust’s Farm to School Manager Julie Parrish is beginning discussions with other school districts in the region about forming purchasing collectives. Cooperative

buying among Oregon school districts would multiply the impact of their purchasing decisions, and hopefully entice new business partnerships.

The original partners critical to the start-up of the Abernethy project are applauding its success by committing to its future. The Abernethy PTA has agreed to ongoing funding for the Americorps position at the school. The Injury Free Coalition for Kids has committed its full support for year two of the project. Around the district, Growing Gardens will help

support the Harvest of the Month program activities through its Youth Grow garden clubs. Other garden education programs – such as Zenger Farm and Portland State University garden programs – will join hands with the new Harvest of the Month program activities as well.

Back in the Abernethy kitchen, James is excitedly planning menus. “We have so much to do,” he says. “Imagine a place with healthy citizenry, delicious and diverse food options, a thriving local economy, and a sound self-identity. Let us work together to make it happen here.” ☪

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# Last Words

**Thanks to all who gave so generously of their ideas and good will over the course of this project. Here is a sampling of the voices that linger in our thoughts as we look toward the future.**

**Nancy Becker** | Registered Dietician, Portland/Multnomah Food Policy Council

“Oregon and Alaska are the only two states that do not supplement the National School Lunch Program with their own money. The Abernethy project provides the incentives for additional assistance. The state could broker a relationship between farmers and school lunch programs by developing lower-priced vegetable commodity programs—these are the real, long-term policy implications of the farm-to-school movement.”

**Caitlin Blethen** | Youth Grow Manager, Growing Gardens

“One eleven year-old in our Youth Grow program said she likes just-picked kale blossoms “better than ice cream!” Reinforcing connections between garden, farm, kitchen, cafeteria, and lunch tray creates the elements needed to grow the next generation of vegetable eaters and gardeners.”

**Steve Cohen** | Food Policy and Programs, City of Portland Office of Sustainable Development

“You can’t look at this project in a vacuum. Our challenge is to get kids in school to eat a balanced, nutritional, good-tasting lunch that supports local food, honors the people that make it, and has a connection to garden education programs—so that students know how it got to their plate. That’s huge.”

**Phil Engle** | Program Coordinator, Injury Free Coalition for Kids

“Childhood obesity is a serious public health threat that will require an ecological approach addressing various influences and interactions—at the interpersonal, environmental, community, and policy levels. The work taking place at Abernethy demonstrates how, through collaborative partnerships, schools can be effective in promoting children’s health.”

**Eileen Flinn** | Project Coordinator, Portland Public Schools Wellness Initiative

“When people hear the word wellness, they think of food. But wellness is also physical activity, arts, music, safety. By connecting the dots, the Abernethy project has the power to influence district policy-making. I think it already has to some extent.”

**Kathleen Isom** | National Account Executive—Bid Sales, Food Services of America (FSA)

“FSA is also interested in determining the source of origin of its products so that we can share that information when asked. We’re here to support our own backyards and our local producers.”

**Jill Kuehler** | Community Wellness Coordinator, Abernethy Elementary

“We need to produce easy-to-duplicate and easy-to-distribute materials that clearly explain the steps to starting a school garden. We need to work with curriculum developers to

produce ready-made garden-based education lesson plans and activities as well as create up-to-date lists of local farms that sponsor schools on farm tours. Having all this accessible and in hand will ease teachers’ transition to wellness education.”

**Michelle Markesteyn Ratcliffe** | School Garden Consultant

“The program at Abernethy is positively changing the school food environment and plays a significant role in setting the future direction for the state of Oregon.”

**Julie Parrish** | Farm to School Manager, Ecotrust

“Oregon schools have more than \$60 million dollars annually to spend on food for their Nutrition Services programs. Wouldn’t it be amazing if 50 percent or more were being spent within the state or Northwest region? We should embrace the willingness of the agricultural and food business communities to partner with schools in this endeavor.”

**Dilafroz Williams** | School Board Member, Portland Public Schools

“Wouldn’t it be great if there was a way to have local kitchens in our low-income schools? Wouldn’t it be great if food from the school gardens could go into those kitchens? Wouldn’t it be great if we could also feed schools from projects like Learning Gardens, or Zenger Farm, or Jean’s Farm, or community gardens?”

**David Wynde** | School Board Member, Portland Public Schools

“I’m really excited to see ways in which this project can be replicable for a broader array of school communities. If you build a scratch kitchen model that is self-funded, and a garden and classroom that achieve educational goals, but that is only accomplished through grant contributions and massive amounts of volunteer time—even if it works for Abernethy—what about the sixty other elementary schools across the district, some of whom don’t have that same access to volunteer and grant dollars? If we have to choose between moving two steps forward in sixty schools, or ten steps forward in three, then I’ll choose the former.”



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## Project Partners

This project is a joint effort of Abernethy Elementary, Portland Public Schools Nutrition Services, the Injury Free Coalition for Kids, and Ecotrust.

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Linda Colwell | Chef and Farm to School Coordinator, PPS  
Phil Engle | Program Coordinator, Injury Free Coalition for Kids  
Deborah Kane | Vice President Food & Farms, Ecotrust  
Kristy Obbink | Director, PPS Nutrition Services

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Slow Food Portland  
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## For More Information

This report as well as links to our project partners, the full 2005–06 technical analysis of the Abernethy kitchen, and other background materials will be available online at: [www.ecotrust.org/farmtoschool](http://www.ecotrust.org/farmtoschool).



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