QuickPoint! – Fresh Spinach for Indifferent Students: Oregon’s Costly Farm-to-School Program

By Helen Cook

When did you last hear a child profess his love for spinach?

Oregon’s Farm-to-School program awards grants to school districts across Oregon to give them the funds needed to purchase fresh foods from local farms and vendors. Advocates hope that by using the words “fresh” and “local,” K-12 students will nurture a healthier taste for fruits and veggies. This hope prompted legislators to budget almost $15 million for the program at the end of the 2019 session.

This is a significant increase from the program’s $200,000 budget in 2012, largely because legislators rephrased the bill to allow entities separate from Oregon school districts to accept grants. This technical rewording allows for summer meal programs, nonprofits, and even the local vendors selling food to the districts to accept grant money.

But frozen foods benefit students more than local produce does. Frozen fruits and veggies have equal or superior nutritional value and lower costs. This is important for school districts who prepare meals by the thousands.

Since the program’s main benefit is not Oregon’s students, I suggest the state reevaluate the expensive Farm-to-School program to be more cost-effective and call this current grant program what it is: a subsidy for local vendors.

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