

GMO Awareness Day

Recently, I saw a press release from Minneapolis Public Schools, sharing that five metro school districts (Hopkins, Minneapolis, Orono, Shakopee, and Westonka) held a “GMO Awareness Day” and are aiming to reduce GMOs in school food.

GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms) have prompted much debate in several arenas, from agriculture to politics, at various levels. I applaud these school districts for broaching a topic with so many different facets; however, I am disappointed that these school districts seem to intentionally advocate anti-GMO propaganda.

According to the press release, Laura Metzger, Director of Food and Nutrition Services at Westonka Public Schools, said, “We want to start conversations about the foods we serve and how our decision-making works. Our students will grow up to make their own decisions about the foods they eat, so this is an opportunity for education.” I whole-heartedly agree that starting conversations about food and informing students about the decision-making process are educational opportunities. That’s why, as a farmer, I joined CommonGround (www.FindOurCommonGround.com) a group of volunteer farm women who want to engage in conversations about food and agriculture with consumers.

To me, productive conversations happen when we learn about and gain an understanding of another person’s perspective. That’s why I am disappointed that these school districts chose to supply students and their families with only one side of information about food choices. The press release listed the website for the Organic Consumer Association (OCA) and went on to state, “Though there’s been little research on the human health impacts of GMO consumption, animal feeding studies have linked GMOs to cancer, allergies, infertility, and more.” Bertrand Weber, Director of Culinary and Nutrition Services at the Minneapolis Public Schools, stated, “Reducing GMOs is another way we can support kids' long-term health.”

Had the press release listed a biotechnology website (such as www.biofortified.org) as well as the OCA website, and been more accurate about the research that has been done on health impacts (for both humans and animals) the GMO Awareness Day could have been seen as a genuine effort to educate.

Unfortunately, it appears the GMO Awareness Day aimed to perpetuate misinformation and fears regarding GMOs, rather than giving students the opportunity to learn about all sides of the GMO topic and form their own opinions.

I am a farmer in southwest Minnesota, and you may be wondering why I care about the activities at metro schools. I care because one day, these students will be leaders at companies like Cargill, General Mills, Land O'Lakes, Best Buy, 3M, Target, SuperValu, and Medtronic. One day, these students will be doctors, lawyers, teachers, and policy-makers. One day, these students will be

working at the state or federal government level. I care about what these students learn because they will be making decisions that will affect others. That's why the information presented to these students is important to me; it is vital that the information be factual and without bias so that students can do their own research and form their own opinions

As a farmer, I have no problem with organic or biotechnological production methods. I do have a problem with false information and fear-mongering. As a consumer, I have no problem with choosing organic or GMO foods for my family. I do have a problem with deceptive marketing and labels. As a parent, I have no problem with schools having educational days about broad topics. I do have a problem with schools presenting fears and misinformation as facts.

I would be interested to learn what the students and parents felt about this type of educational activity, and I encourage all institutions of learning to consider all sides of a highly-debated topic. I also encourage schools to invite farmers into your classrooms so we can learn from each other. I sincerely hope that future activities will be more inclusive and provide resources for all sides of the selected topic.

Respectfully,

Kristie Swenson

Kristie Swenson and her husband raise corn and soybeans in southwestern Minnesota. They have two children.