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A Special Visit at Galt Head Start: USDA Leaders Connect with Kids Through Food, Learning, and Heart

**GALT, CA** — Yesterday was one of those days that truly remind you why this work matters.

The Sacramento Employment and Training Agency (SETA) welcomed **Patrick A. Penn**, Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNCS) at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), along with his team and State Of California partners from the Department of Social Services Family Engagement and Empowerment Division including to our Galt Head Start location. Also in attendance was Muzafar Makhdoomi, Ph.D. Regional Administrator for the USDA's who supports nutrition and food programs across the western United States.

Appointed in May 2025 by Secretary **Brooke Rollins**, Penn brings with him a powerful background as a former Kansas State Representative and a decorated Army officer, but what stood out most during his visit wasn't just his title, it was how he showed up. And here in Sacramento County known as the Farm-to-Fork Capital, this visit couldn't have been more meaningful.

The Galt Head Start site is something special. Just one block away, there's the Barbara Payne community garden where our kids don't just learn about vegetables they grow them. Tomatoes, fresh produce, and even an orchard. They get their hands in the soil, they learn patience, and they see firsthand where their food comes from. But the experience doesn't stop at harvesting.

The children have the opportunity to sell the tomatoes they grow to a local restaurant, and then enjoy a meal like a burger made with the very tomatoes they helped grow. It's a full-circle experience from planting, to selling, to eating what they grow. And it doesn't stop there.

They're doing yoga in the garden. They're learning about nutrition in ways that actually stick. It's not just a lesson, it's a lifestyle being introduced at such a young age. What made this visit unforgettable was how Under Secretary Penn connected with the kids.

He didn't just observe he engaged. He sat in their tiny chairs, shared a meal, and made it a point to acknowledge every single child in the room. Making each one feel seen and important. And just as important, he made sure to recognize the teachers. He spoke directly to how none of this work happens without them. In a simple but powerful moment, he encouraged the children to give their teachers a big thank you and it was one of those moments you don't forget.

This visit also reflects a broader national focus on strengthening food systems, improving nutrition, and ensuring food safety for families across the country. Through ongoing federal initiatives around food safety and nutrition, leaders like Under Secretary Penn are working to ensure that children not only have access to healthy meals but also understand the value of where that food comes from. What's happening at Galt Head Start is a real-life example of that vision in action. It's one thing to talk about food systems and nutrition policy but it's another to see children planting seeds, caring for a garden, learning healthy habits, and building that connection early on.

"Yesterday was a powerful reminder of why we do this work. Seeing our children fully engaged from growing food to understanding where it comes from was incredible. Having Under Secretary Penn and Regional Administrator Muzafar Makhdoomi take the time to truly connect with them made the experience even more meaningful and showed our kids that they matter." Said SETA's Children and Family Services (CFS) Deputy Director Karen Griffith.

"This visit reflects what's possible when community, education, and leadership come together. Our children are learning beyond the classroom building healthy habits, confidence, and real-world connections. We're grateful to our partners for recognizing and supporting this work." Said SETA's Executive Director Anita Maldonado, Ph.D.

Moments like this remind us that what we're building isn't just a program, it's a foundation for healthy, confident, and empowered children.

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### **About SETA**

The Sacramento Employment and Training Agency (SETA) serves Sacramento County by providing workforce development, education, and early childhood programs that support children and families every day.