Enjoying a morning break from class, about 200 teenagers strolled through UC Santa Cruz's strawberry field, pausing occasionally to sample fruit.

Hosted by nonprofit Food, What?!, the annual Strawberry Blast brought Santa Cruz County students to UCSC's farm Tuesday.

Monica Falcon, a junior at Delta Charter High School in Aptos, first sampled organic smoothies, tacos and tarts. Delicious, she said.

Then with two friends, she won a trivia game about health and local farming, scoring a flat of strawberries.

Falcon said the field trip encouraged her to eat better.

"We've been talking about being healthy for a while and today just confirmed that," Monica said.

Strawberries offer a tasty hook to engage students, said Abby Bell, the nonprofit's farm and program manager. The event also offers public speaking and job training for the 10 high school interns who led activities, she said. Most of the program's 60 members are low-income students, she said.

"Our goal isn't to create farmers," Bell said. "Our goal is to create strong, healthy young people who feel confident in their skin."

Estephanie Ruiz, 17, began interning at the program in 2013 because she needed a job, she said. The Costanoa High School senior was paid $8 per hour to plant crops at Watsonville’s Live Earth Farm. Weeding is hard, she said.

"Appreciate what you have on your plate, because it takes a lot of work," said Estephanie, a Santa Cruz resident.

Now on staff, Estephanie makes $9.50 per hour to guide first-year interns.

Since interning, she said she has not only planted a home garden, but also gained public speaking skills. She delivered a speech at the fall benefit dinner for 200 guests, she said.

"It was really nerve-racking but I did it," said Estephanie. "That's when I started gaining more confidence."

Estephanie Robles, 18, an intern with nonprofit Watsonville Wetlands Watch, led an activity about
watershed pollution. The Pajaro Valley High School senior previously interned with Food, What?!., planting produce at Live Earth Farm, he said.

Robles said his parents were once field workers, and now package and deliver produce. He said they worked long, backbreaking hours.

"They wouldn't be able to stand up," Robles said.

He said his farming experience was less intense and more fun, and he learned teamwork.

"People should really take the opportunities given to them, like I did with the wetlands watch and Food, What?!," Robles said. "You should really get to know your community."

Keith Hodges, Harbor High School assistant principal, brought three students Tuesday and said he encourages several to intern each year.

At-risk students aren't often put in leadership roles, he said.

"They don't know what their power is," Hodges said.

"When we send kids here for job experience, they become empowered by the experience and gain a greater sense of ownership, of can-do," he said.