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BY GLORIA DE PAOLA
PHOTOS BY JOSHUA BEHAN

WHAT'S GROWING ON IN OUR SCHOOL LUNCHROOMS?

Rhode Island Farmers Are Feeding Students Healthier Foods



Gorton students try fresh Rhode Island-grown asparagus and salad.

Let's face it—kids are fussy about their food, and many won't eat vegetables simply "because they're good for you." Watching youngsters push peas and carrots around a plate in hopes they'll disappear can make time- and budget-pressed parents throw down their vegetable peelers and bring home chicken nuggets.

However, when schools reinforce the value of healthy eating by serving fresh, locally grown food in cafeterias, the result is a win-win situation for Rhode Island farmers and growing kids. All 36 public school districts now participate, to varying degrees, in the farm-to-school program, and Rhode Island's nutritional standards exceed federal guidelines for school lunches. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has

increased funding to purchase more fruits and vegetables (through the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program) for Rhode Island schools to \$1.8 million, an increase of \$500,000 over last year. It provides an even greater opportunity for locally grown foods to be purchased by Rhode Island schools in low-income areas.

For the past 11 years Kids First Rhode Island has played an important role in connecting local farmers with school lunch program managers. Kimberly Clark is a farm-to-school coordinator for the non-profit organization. She visits public schools throughout the state to wean students away from mac 'n' cheese lunches to healthier alternatives—that is, produce from Rhode Island farms.



A Rhode Island farmer trading card.

“Fruits and vegetables are the fountain of youth,” Kim told 90 seventh graders at Gorton Junior High School in Warwick. “Eat them and when you’re 30 years old you’ll look like you do today, only taller.”

But Kim has a tough row to hoe. The youngsters at Gorton learn about the importance of healthy food options in their classes but they still chose pepperoni pizza over the season’s first fresh asparagus from Jaswell’s Farm in Smithfield that appeared on their lunch counter one day last May.

“The moms of these kids were a fast-food generation,” explained a seventh grade teacher who is working hard to make sure the program succeeds. “Now they work and they need to prepare meals that are quick and easy.”

Gorton school PTO President Dianne Greenwood was not aware of the school’s efforts to provide healthier lunches. She admits that trying to get information home via students is difficult, but “if parents knew more about the program they’d probably be more enthusiastic.”

Kim, as well as the teachers and the kitchen staff have noticed a growing acceptance of the healthy food options that are offered. When they realize that fresh vegetables and whole-wheat pizza aren’t going away, the students begin to try them.

Fresh fruit is always popular and the fall school menu reflects the bounty of Rhode Island farms. White and sweet potatoes, butternut squash, corn, carrots, spinach, lettuce and tomatoes are incorporated into cafeteria menus, planned by Sodexo, Chartwells and Aramark, the three food service providers for Rhode Island’s public schools.

“They really eat better than ever,” says Janice Kilarik, who has been a chef at Gorton School for over 30 years. She reports that string beans are not very popular, but “we go through tons of fruit. The kids love

fresh watermelon and cantaloupes. I have to say that we’ve gotten lots of fresh vegetables from Rhode Island farms and the kids eat them.”

Students’ appetite for locally sourced food has grown significantly. In 2006 school cafeterias served 20,000 pounds of locally grown produce; in 2010, that figure climbed to 220,000 pounds.

As the general manager of Sodexo’s food service in Warwick, Marc Roy works with Kids First to get those fruits and vegetables on students’ cafeteria trays. Kids First arranges field trips for food service providers to 26 state-approved farms. In these face-to-face meetings the farmers learn what the companies can afford to buy and are able to prepare in their kitchens. The food managers find out when those zucchini, tomatoes and dark green vegetables will be available.

When the fresh produce is ripe it goes to a processor for washing and chopping, then a distributor. The food service managers place their orders and depending on the kitchen and storage facilities in each school within each district, the food is shipped to a central kitchen or directly to the school where it will be served.

There are lots of challenges along the way. Shipping and handling delicate produce so that it arrives in top condition (kids won’t eat bruised fruit) means that drivers have to be trained. Children usually don’t finish a whole apple but it costs more to pick and deliver the smaller “lunchbox sized” fruits. The kitchen staff may have to work harder to prep vegetables. Teachers have to explain that local broccoli often looks different from the California crop they see in supermarkets but it’s still delicious. Tight budgets and weather conditions are constant problems.

Through it all Kids First is the catalyst, nudging students to just try the broccoli florets and baby carrots, urging communication between farmers and food service providers and smoothing out the logistical



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problems that crop up. The agency notifies the food service companies about the status of the crop, suggests menu ideas and tips on getting youngsters to try unfamiliar foods.

Peer pressure, as every parent knows, works well with teenagers. If students see a friend eating a dark green vegetable, they're more likely to try it. "It's like dessert in a fancy restaurant," says Marc Roy of Sodexo. "When you see the dessert tray wheel by, you want one too."

On a fall trip to Morris Farm in Warwick, Gorton students met the resident cows, chased through a corn maze and received a pumpkin as a take-home gift with instructions on how to cook it. A seventh grade outing involved working in a community garden in Buttonwoods—an opportunity to show that vegetables are tastier when grown close to home.

Another lure to local food choices are Rhode Island Farmer trading cards that kids at all the schools love to collect. Twenty different cards show the farmers who provide the food they eat, with their "stats" on the back. "They like the cards with animals best," says Kim, who began handing them out two years ago whenever Rhode Island-grown food is served.

Gorton Junior High School is located in the Buttonwoods section of Warwick, a working class neighborhood where organic and locally sourced food is not a priority for most families. That's not the case at the Compass School, a charter school in South Kingstown, where nutrition is an integral part of the curriculum and the school culture. When teachers here talk about the importance of eating locally produced food, the ideas fall on fertile ground.

The Compass School brings in local growers like Ulrike Hence of Hillandale Farm in Westerly, who talked about hydroponic farming, sustainable agriculture and the difference between wholesale and retail costs. A political science project might involve a letter-writing campaign to improve the quality of hot lunches at the rural school.


Thirty students listened attentively when Kim Clark explained how eating produce from Rhode Island farms supports the local economy, uses less fuel and maintains a cleaner environment. And, she added, you'll meet the grower and you can find out how your food was raised. "You'll get to know your food better."

The students released some pent-up energy by shaking a jar of heavy cream from a Rhode Island dairy to make butter. At the end of the class Kim served apple pie smoothies and passed out instructions on how to make them.



"We have five kids in our house and every night we have fruits and vegetables," said one student. "I like pizza, but I like fruits and vegetables more." Now that's what Kids First wants to hear. eR

Gloria De Paola is a freelance writer from East Greenwich whose brown bag school lunches most often contained a vegetable omelet on whole-wheat bread, not usually a tradable commodity.



To learn more about farm-to-school programs in Rhode Island visit kidsfirstri.org.



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Pond to Plate



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