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EDITORIAL

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Local foods help schools improve diet

With childhood obesity becoming a national epidemic, and with children spending at least six hours a day in class, it makes sense to make sure students are eating healthier at school.

First, there were efforts to get junk-food snacks, including candy bars and soda, out of the schools.

Then, school lunches — those bastions of mystery meat and hockey-puck hamburgers — came under scrutiny.

Last year, parents of children in Newport schools very visibly and vocally asked the school district to provide healthier lunches — and their efforts were rewarded.

Sodexo Inc., the company that provides lunches and breakfasts to the city's public schools, agreed to support the "Rhode Island Farm to School" program and serve homegrown Rhode Island produce, including apples, potatoes, broccoli, carrots and string beans. The company also agreed to work through a local produce company, Community Fruit, to expand the program whenever possible.

A similar thing is happening in Middletown and Portsmouth.

Chartwells, the company that provides meals for those school systems, has been using locally grown foods such as potatoes, tomatoes and apples in school districts it services around the state since 2006, and has expanded the program so it now is in all the schools it serves.

"When it comes down to it, it's the right thing to do," said Barbara A. Cohen, East Bay district manager for Chartwells. "Besides providing high-quality, fresh food for our meals, it helps out the Rhode Island economy as well, so everyone benefits."

Locally grown foods are fresher and put less stress on the environment because they don't have to travel as far, and support local farming and open space, said Karin Wetherill, healthy schools coordinator for Kids First, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the nutritional and physical well being of students throughout Rhode Island.

Chartwells and Kids First teamed up to serve Thanksgiving dinner-type lunches for students and their parents at schools in Middletown and Portsmouth last week to show how bountiful — and tasty — such meals can be.

“The more local foods in their meals, the better,” said Mitch Turner, whose children, Kieran and Skylar, attend Forest Avenue School in Middletown. “It’s a good example for them.”

We agree, and we are glad to see parents, school committees and officials and providers all making these efforts. Learning about where the food they eat comes from, as well as its nutritional value, is an important lesson for children that will serve them well into their adult lives.