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Healthy kids, happy farmers

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Kids in Mounds View Public Schools are munching on apples from Pine Tree Apple Orchard in White Bear Lake. And the carrot coins St. Paul students eat at lunch are grown on a farm in Andover.

More schools across Minnesota are connecting with local farmers to help serve more healthful meals. The program, called Farm to School, aims to teach kids where their food comes from, get them to eat more fruits and vegetables and support local producers.

"It's not only about assessing the food that's on the tray. It's about giving the students an opportunity to learn how their food is grown," said Joanne Berkenkamp, director of the local foods program at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy in Minneapolis.

About 100 school districts in Minnesota have signed up for Farm to School this year. That's up from just a handful about five years ago when the state got involved in the program, Berkenkamp said.

Most schools start by serving local apples, since they keep well and are affordable.

That's what Mounds View did last year from the start of the school year until January. Pine Tree Apple Orchard delivers the apples directly to the schools.

This year, the district added foods from Vic's Produce, which puts a big emphasis on local products, said Debbie Harrod, the district's nutrition-services coordinator. This fall's lunch menu features local green beans, red potatoes and corn on the cob.

The St. Paul school district has been involved in the program

for five years and now includes about 18 local-produce items in its school menus from September to January, said Dianne Wertz, project manager for nutrition services.

Locally grown cabbage is used in coleslaw, bok choy in chow mein. Homemade cranberry sauce is served during the holidays. Green beans, corn on the cob and broccoli are served as sides.

The biggest hit among students?

"The corn on the cob has been extremely popular," Wertz said. "They also love the cantaloupe and watermelon."

Minnesota's short growing season can make it difficult to offer local produce for long. But Berkenkamp notes that many other local items — wild rice, whole grains, and specialty meats and cheeses — are available year-round.

Wayzata Public Schools has a locally produced food featured on its menu every month. Students can eat beets roasted with sweet onions in January, bison burgers from Eichten's Cheese and Bison in Center City in February and real maple syrup from Hamel Maple Syrup Co. in March.

"There's more available than you think," Berkenkamp said.



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Partnering with local farms also helps schools meet their goals of offering more fresh fruits and veggies — and getting kids to eat them.

In



Wayzata, schools have run out of fresh green beans when they were on the menu, said Mary Anderson, supervisor of Culinary Express in the district.

"In my mind, if you can sell out of a vegetable, that's a good thing," Anderson said. "The more familiar the item, the easier it is for the kids to take it and eat it."

The Farm to School program also tries to serve as a learning experience for students. Schools post promotional material to let students know where their food is coming from. Teachers can team with the Farm to School program to arrange field trips to farms.

Bill Jacobson, whose family owns and runs Pine Tree Apple Orchard, has gone to a couple of Stillwater schools to offer cider samples and tell students about the apple operation.

"You have to get your story out there so they don't think that apples come from Cub Foods," said Nancy Jacobson, Bill Jacobson's sister and the orchard's sales manager.

Also, a new study from the University of Minnesota suggests that filling lunch trays with locally grown foods helps farmers.

Researchers examined the potential economic impact of farm-to-school programs, focusing on a five-county area of central Minnesota. The economic benefit to a region ranged from about \$20,000 if each school served one locally grown meal a month up to \$430,000 if schools bought large amounts from farmers. That could support two or three full-time farms.

Nancy Jacobson said Pine Tree got involved in the school-lunch business when one school lunch lady contacted them about buying apples. The kids liked them and the word just spread from there to other area schools, she said.

"It really just takes one person to make a change," Jacobson said.

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