

## **Massachusetts Farm to School Project aids healthy eating in Tewksbury schools**

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Farm-to-table has been a growing trend in the restaurant industry for several years, but perhaps less well-known is the **Massachusetts Farm to School Project**.

That's not the case in Tewksbury.

DebraLee Mugford, director of food and nutrition services for Tewksbury Public Schools, is passionate about providing nutrition education and healthy meals to Tewksbury students.

"We've had farm-to-school in the district for at least the past five or six years. We worked with Massachusetts Farm to School Project to get into the program," she said. "It's absolutely phenomenal."

In addition to feeding students healthy meals, Mugford said Tewksbury schools teach them about the food so they can understand the benefits of eating fresh fruit and vegetables.

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### **NUTRITION**

**INFORMATION** Parents can find information they need regarding nutrition, healthy meals, pay for their student's meals or apply for free or reduced lunches. Breakfast is now available at the Dewing and Heath Brook schools.

### **ON THE WEB [schoolnutritionandfitness.com](http://schoolnutritionandfitness.com)**

**APP** Students and parents can also download The School Nutrition & Fitness mobile "Web Menu" app for Android or iPhone.

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Simca Horwitz, the project's program director for eastern Massachusetts, stated Massachusetts Farm to School was founded in 2004 as a grassroots initiative to increase access to healthy, locally grown food in schools and other institutions across the state.

"We facilitate sustainable purchasing relationships between local institutions and local farms, promote local food and agriculture education for students and support networking of farm to institution practitioners," she stated.

In 2004, just 10 school districts said they'd prefer to use locally grown food. Today, according to Horwitz, more than 150 public schools, colleges and universities and hospitals take part in the project's Harvest of the Month program. During the same time period, the number of participating farms grew from 10 to more than 100.

Mugford said she's seeing a change in elementary school children because of the emphasis in healthy eating. She attributes the change to younger children being more apt to try something new.

"Kids are getting introduced to new foods, especially in school systems, such as kale, quinoa, whole grains," she said.

In addition to new foods, schools also take part in Harvest of the Month, which highlights a fruit or vegetable each month during the school year that which Horwitz stated were selected for three reasons: grown widely in Massachusetts, generally cost-competitive and helping schools meet strict nutrition guidelines such as a requirement to serve orange vegetables like butternut or carrots.

"We encourage schools to think of the Harvest of the Month crops as the local sourcing baseline or framework and then to incorporate as much additional locally grown food as possible. Just because pears are featured in October doesn't mean they can't also serve them in September if they're available," stated Horwitz.

Younger students are engaged with baseball-like cards, with a photo of the fruit or vegetable on front and information on the back, such as how they're grown and the nutritional value they offer.

Mugford said she uses the cards to develop younger students' interest in trying new things and hopefully develop their palates.

### **Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act**

In 2010, the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act was signed into law, and it has funded child nutrition and free lunch programs in schools. Mugford said the act is currently awaiting reauthorization in Congress.

While she supports the intent of the bill, which provides the funding for school districts to use local farms and gardens to provide fresh fruits and vegetables, she said one downside is the requirement to serve 100 percent whole grains, including pasta and pizza. Mugford said it has been difficult to find a whole-grain pasta that students like. The district uses Barilla, which she said is expensive.

In addition, student meals, whether they're full- or reduced-price, or free, are required to include a fruit or vegetable.

Mugford admits there is some waste because once a meal is given to a student, leftovers -- even produce that hasn't been touched -- have to go into the trash.

Of the state's farm-to-school project, Mugford calls it a wonderful initiative. The district works with Brooksby Farm in Peabody.

"Not just because you're eating healthy, but because the kids are learning. The support from the program is outstanding," she said.

Horwitz called participation a win-win situation.

"Farmers access new markets and help grow the next generation of local food consumers, and students have greater access to healthier, delicious foods and learn about where their food comes from," she stated. "Participating in farm-to-school can create excitement amongst students and families about the school meal program, helping increase participation and making the lunch program more viable."

On occasion, the farm may not have what the district needs, but Mugford said food directors in participating districts work together to get the produce they're looking for. She said the district also uses the DOD (Department of Defense) Farm Fresh Program to buy produce that is local to New England.

“We buy local, but sometimes we’re forced to look as far as Maine,” Mugford said.

For example, Mugford said 60 percent of the milk used in the district comes from Vermont, and 10 percent each comes from Massachusetts and New York. She said one vendor, Garelick Farms, boasts “30 hours from cow to carton.”

### **Healthy tips**

Each month, Mugford said children in kindergarten through eighth grade are given information on creating a healthy plate to take home. These include fruits and vegetables, whole grains and protein, and how to stay healthy through activities such as exercise or even doing chores, such as cutting the grass.

She said the farm-to-school project also provides posters to encourage children to eat more fruits and vegetables.

“We do whatever we can to get these kids to eat healthy,” she said.