

# Farm-to-school movement reaches the Commonwealth

By Jane Dornbusch | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 20, 2015

WORCESTER — Ten years ago, getting locally grown and raised foods into school cafeterias seemed like a far-off fantasy, attainable only in places like Berkeley, Calif., or other cities close to the growing regions. Today, according to a USDA farm-to-school census, more than 75 percent of schools in the Commonwealth report participating in an activity related to sourcing, serving, growing, or learning about local food.



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

**A stir-fried tofu and tomato dish.**

Last week, 375 interested parties met to applaud those gains — and discuss the challenges that still remain — at the 2015 Massachusetts Farm to Cafeteria Conference, held at the College of the Holy Cross here. The tenor of the sold-out gathering was both celebratory (“Look how far we’ve come!”) and hortatory (“Look how far we still have to go”).

The conference theme was “pollinate,” and that aim was achieved, said Simca Horwitz, of the Massachusetts Farm to School Project, the organization behind the event. “One of the exciting pieces is how well-represented the

diversity of stakeholders were,” said Horwitz. “Farmers, food service people, educators, policy makers, and parents were all in a room together. That was the theme of the conference: to cross-pollinate.”

If the variety of attendees was impressive, so, too, was the breadth of topics covered. The farm-to-school movement is an increasingly big tent that includes a variety of approaches to improving school food and nutrition, not all of it farm-based. There were sessions on seafood and food safety, on school gardens and mushroom cultivation. The rubric of farm-to-school ties it all together, says Horwitz: “One of the things that’s exciting about the farm-to-school movement is it touches on so many areas: public health, agricultural policy, the environment. Farm-to-school is one of the umbrellas under which most of those concerns come together.”

At the conference opening, Melissa Honeywood, food service director for Cambridge Public Schools, entertained the crowd with a PowerPoint slide show and song she’d created about school food, set to the tune of the 2010 earworm “Forget You.” (Sample lyric: “If food service was richer / It’d be a whole different picture.”)



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**At College of the Holy Cross, Ian Lavallee and Melissa Honeywood of Cambridge Public Schools made a stir-fried tofu and tomato dish.**

Later, Honeywood led a popular session on “culturally relevant recipes.” Before a rapt audience that seemingly included many of her fellow public-school food-service directors, Honeywood described introducing a handful of recipes that reflect the diversity of the students she serves. She passed out samples of her cafeteria’s Chinese stir-fried tofu and tomatoes, proudly noting that the tofu was sourced locally from Jamaica Plain’s 21st Century Foods and exhorting those in attendance to serve the soybean-based product, a “really cheap protein,” in their school cafeterias.

“It’s the easiest protein you’ll ever have to butcher,” Honeywood noted. “No bones.”

“How have the sales of your international items gone?” asked one audience member.

“Well, we’re not expecting it to beat pizza,” said Honeywood. “But it’s been on a par with other dishes we serve.”

The sessions were not limited to elementary and high schools; colleges and universities have also been engaged in the farm-to-school movement.

Representatives from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Boston University described their schools’ efforts to incorporate more local foods into their cafeterias, along with making sustainability and nutrition a stronger focus.

UMass Amherst received a grant a year ago to make one of its dining halls “a model for healthy, sustainable, local, tasty foods,” said the university’s Joanna Benoit. UMass is able to leverage its status and scale as a huge “self-op” — that is, its food service is run by the school, not an outside vendor — to engage with local farmers and make great strides. Though BU is not in a position to buy directly from farmers, said sustainability coordinator Sabrina Pashtan, there have been “wins,” including sourcing hamburger from Maine Family Farms and dairy products from Cabot Creamery.

Nancy Wiseman and Kevin Gibbons from UMass Dartmouth presented a cooking demonstration titled “Soup and Salad on Steroids,” showing how the school has tried to highlight some lesser-known produce items in an effort to improve student nutrition. College students, said Wiseman, “will eat bacon and Oreos all day if you let them, but we try to encourage good habits.”



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**Kevin Gibbons of UMass Dartmouth in a cooking demo.**

At a session on policy, many expressed frustration at the Bay State’s lack of progress in putting farm-to-school legislation in place. And often, one heard stories about good intentions stalled or thwarted by real-world considerations. In a lunchtime conversation, Acton-Boxborough High School cafeteria manager Heidi Conley described a successful school garden presided over by an engaged teacher. When that teacher retired, though, the program was hard to sustain, she said.

But conference-goers also left with a renewed sense of purpose and commitment, as indicated by the feedback Horwitz received. “There’s a real desire [among attendees] to take some of the ideas that were presented,” she said “and bring them into their own communities. This conference is really about growing and strengthening the movement.”



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**Apple and fennel salad.**

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