

Food program takes root in Ipswich schools

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Mid June. The 2015 school year's waning days. A line of students in the high school cafeteria wait for a glass of the smoothies grinding and spinning in several blenders that Leslie McCormack, chef at Five Corners Deli, oversees.

The smoothies seem to pass the vital student taste test.

"It's not bad," said Daniel Stedman, Class of 2019. "Not too bad. It's better than a smoothie in a bottle."

"It's really good. I like the flax seed," said Kate O'Kelly, Class of 2018.

McCormack bills the smoothie as a quick, nutritious breakfast for students rushed to get to school every morning — prep time: five minutes.

The pinkish mixture includes plain Greek yogurt, three kinds of berries — strawberries, blackberries, blueberries, milk, banana, orange juice, ice, flax seed and spinach.

Essentially, the smoothie covers most of the major food groups — protein, fruits, vegetables in a form kids will actually consume.

That, of course, is the idea.

Ipswich Sustainable Education sponsored the June breakfast demonstration as part of the volunteer group's overall effort to bring local foods to school menus, nutrition awareness to students and parents and incorporate sustainable food into the schools' curriculum from elementary grades right on up through high school.

The group has another, similar, program scheduled for the Winthrop School in late October or November focusing on easy, inexpensive, nutritious dinners that use locally grown food.

“It’s aimed at the whole family,” said Amy Borgman, a sustainable ed member. “We want to get parents to come with their kids and show, with a few healthful ingredients, you can make a nutritious and affordable dinner.”

A quick, unscientific poll of faculty and students at the smoothie demonstration shows such education might be needed in the schools and the community. Students and faculty estimated only about 50 percent of students come to the high school or middle school having eaten breakfast. Many students quizzed while standing in line for a smoothie listed a Pop-Tart as “breakfast.”

“Healthy eating helps me feel better,” said Adam Fyrer, Class of 2017, who plays hockey and runs track. “I have more energy throughout the day.”

That’s the kind of message Ipswich Sustainable Education hopes to spread through a community-wide effort.

The Ipswich Y has already contributed around \$15,000 from its Leprechaun Road Race to fund a part-time food service director for this year.

Two Winthrop teachers, Katie Norris and Gretchen Marinopoulos, attended a sustainable food program at Shelburne Farms, Vt., on a Payne Grant from the Little Neck investment trust. The pair is working on ways to bring gardens at the school system’s three school locations into the classroom.

Their classes harvested their school gardens this week.

“With common-core guidelines, we’re becoming more multidisciplinary,” said Winthrop Principal Sheila McAdams. “We’re reworking the curriculum and becoming more project based, more conceptual and inquiry-based on the student’s part.”

Classroom teachers can now ask students a question like, “What does it mean to create a sustainable world?”

Taking a tomato from the backyard, discussing how much energy that uses vs. buying a tomato in the grocery store. Asking how much ground it takes to feed people. “Kids need to know where food comes from. Are you eating in a way to make your body sustainable?” said McAdams.

A draft report for the School Committee by Simca Horwitz, of Massachusetts Farm to School, encourages expanding the role of sustainable food sources and nutrition throughout the school curriculum.

Ipswich Sustainable Education has also made a curriculum guide, Ready, Set, Grow, available to the schools.

“It breaks down the intimidation that teachers may feel in using the school gardens,” said Borgman. “We have the gardens at the schools and now we want people to really use them.”

If the schools move forward with Ipswich Sustainable Education’s efforts, it won’t be alone. In 2014, Horwitz’ report, notes 75 percent of reporting schools throughout the commonwealth have “some form of farm-to-school activity.”

The programs generally focus on three points: Food procurement, school gardens and education.

The draft report makes a series of recommendations ranging from locally purchased food for cafeteria menus to adopting a “seasonal menu cycle” in the cafeterias to creating a resource guide for incorporating school gardens and locally grown food into the curriculum and creating a farm-to-school task force to supervise efforts to expand the sustainable food effort throughout the schools and the community.

The draft also encourages more community chef programs like the smoothie program McCormack oversaw and the one Ipswich Sustainable Education has planned for this fall at the Winthrop School.

Borgman sees the school effort as part of a larger cultural shift to return breakfast nooks, lunch boxes and dinner tables back to local, farm-grown foods.

“Quick and easy. Generations have been suckered into this,” said Borgman. “Diabetes and obesity are through the roof. It doesn’t take a lot of money to eat healthfully and it doesn’t take a lot time to cook healthfully.”