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FEATURED

From farm to school: Program links growers with local lunchrooms

By Paul Leighton Staff Writer

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JAIME CAMPOS/Staff photoNew Entry Sustainable Farming Project manager Brendan Murtha talks about the benefits of providing opportunities for students in front of state Sen. Joan Lovely, left, and Rep. Paul Tucker.

Jaime Campos



BEVERLY — When students at Essex North Shore Agricultural & Technical School dug into their salads the other day, they noticed a new ingredient — fried eggplant.

"The kids loved it," said Grace Clarke, the school's food services manager.

The eggplant was one of a variety of vegetables the school purchased from the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, located at Moraine Farm in Beverly. Clarke said Essex North Shore is now buying about half of its produce from the farm, providing the school with a steady supply of healthy fresh food while supporting the local economy.

"It's a win-win situation," she said.

Advocates for "farm to school" programs are hoping more schools start buying produce from local farms. On Tuesday, a group called Massachusetts Farm to School organized a tour of New Entry's farm to highlight its relationships with local school districts.

The New Entry Sustainable Farming Project is a nonprofit program of the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Last year it signed a 10-year lease with the Trustees of Reservations to occupy 15 acres of farmland at historic Moraine Farm, located off Route 97 in Beverly.

New Entry hosts 11 incubator farms at Moraine Farm, providing support and instruction to new farmers and helping them distribute their products. So far two school districts, Essex North Shore and the Salem Public Schools, are buying produce from New Entry.

New Entry project director Jennifer Hashley said it can be difficult to make arrangements with school districts whose food service operations are run by outside management companies that have long-term contracts with their own vendors.

"You have to find schools who are cooking from scratch," Hashley said.

Salem is one of those school districts. Deborah Jeffers, the director of food services for the Salem Public Schools, said Salem runs its own operation and has the flexibility to purchase food from different vendors. She said Salem buys about 14% of its produce from New Entry, even though buying locally can be more costly.

"It's been terrific," Jeffers said. "It's better for the kids and for the local economy."

Massachusetts Farm to School says that 131 school districts in the state have taken the Harvest of the Month pledge, agreeing to serve a different Massachusetts-grown food each month.

State Sen. Joan Lovely and state Rep. Paul Tucker, both of Salem, attended Tuesday's event and praised the work of New Entry and the farm-to-school arrangements.

"It's amazing what's going on here," Tucker said. "People may be driving by on (Route 97) and not realize it. People need to know what's going on here."

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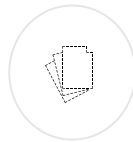


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