

Getting their hands dirty: Program connects New Bedford students to local farms, provides 3 million meals per year

By Kerri Tallman

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NEW BEDFORD -- The city is teaming up with local farmers to provide three million meals per year for students as a part of New Bedford's Farm to School program.

Local legislators, farmers and educators gathered at Alfred J. Gomes Elementary on Wednesday to discuss the expansion of the program. Simca Horwitz is the co-director of the Massachusetts Farm to School program, a statewide organization that supports schools to increase local food sourcing. In junction with the Marion Institute, the program has helped connect classroom and community through the sourcing of local food. According to Horwitz, numerous schools in the New Bedford area have taken advantage of the program.

"Teaming up with Simca and the program has been a great start," said Robert Shaheen, director of food service for NBPS.

Shaheen is hoping to improve school cafeterias in the next year through renovations and sourcing local produce. He said the district applied for and received three awards from the Food Security Infrastructure Grant Program which gave \$1.4 million to support the New Bedford High School cafeteria and kitchen renovations. This \$3 million project will be complete by June 2021 and have the look and feel of a college cafeteria. The district also received \$485,000 from a USDA Federal Grant to provide fresh fruit and vegetables to all 18 New Bedford Public Elementary Schools during the 2020-2021 school year. A new central kitchen culinary center is in the works, hoping to provide meals to all non-cooking school sites up to 5,000 meals per day by next fall.

"We hope students have better choices, more nutritious meals," he said.

Over at the Marion Institute, Grow Education program manager Adam Davenport has been busy bringing the garden to Gomes Elementary. Twelve garden beds are ready to be planted by students from six elementary schools, including Alfred J. Gomes, Jacobs, Carlos Pacheco, Hayden Mcfadden, Ellen R. Hathaway and Rodman. They were built six years ago and were used to bring people together through agriculture in the first three to four years. He just harvested sunchokes, a species of sunflower that can be used as a root vegetable. Davenport plans for students to become involved in this community action and conversation by hosting a garlic planting workshop for third-graders next month.

“It’s an experiential opportunity for city students to come out, play and get their hands dirty,” he said. “It’s a way to connect classroom and community.”

Both Davenport and Food Corps service members Mikaela Thiboutot and Keri Cusson-DeFusco emphasized converting picky eaters into children who love to learn about the food they eat and grow. The service members act as a liaison face to face with students, connecting them to their food and introduce them to new food that they’ve grown themselves. Thiboutot said they’ve had parents contact them, amazed at how their child suddenly loved raw radishes and vegetables they’ve never tried before. Davenport said he is looking to rebuild the gardens to have 3-foot-tall beds, filled with compost and soil, made out of Trex decking to sustain longer periods of time before having to rebuild.

According to the USDA, one out of 10 U.S. households were food insecure prior to COVID-19. With the pandemic is a major factor, that statistic has increased by 50% to one in every five households.

“We need to address immediate food insecurity,” Horwitz said. “The pandemic has illuminated how vital these programs are. It really does take a village.”

Sourcing local foods not only benefits students’ health but also brings in diversity and new jobs. Davenport said the Grow Education program holds workshops with community partners to incorporate diverse culture into meals. Rep. Paul A. Schmid is thrilled at the idea of these local meals providing more jobs for the community.

“For me, it’s just a dream come true to see 3 million meals a year in its school system open to buying locally,” Schmid said. “That’s going to make a tremendous difference to local farmers and local food processors. It’s all about getting local healthy food into our schools and doing it in an economic development way.”

According to Schmid, who is also House co-chair of Massachusetts Food System Caucus, a local slaughterhouse in Westport is currently at capacity for jobs but plans to expand by 50% next year. He emphasized that these jobs pay well and cannot be outsourced to other countries such as Mexico or China.

As a farmer himself, he even got his hands dirty while dressed in his suit. “It’s just great to have your hands in the soil in New Bedford,” he said.