

Food program sparks student interest in eating local
written by Newspark Team | November 15, 2013



Last week, students across Virginia celebrated the 5th annual Farm to School Week, which highlights the locally-sourced food our school cafeterias serve.

To engage the students, the Charlottesville-based Local Food Hub offered a tasting of local apple varieties at Walker Upper-Elementary School.

“What you probably don’t know is that a lot of the foods in this cafeteria come from Central Virginia,” Kristen Suokko, the Local Food Hub’s Executive Director, told a lunchroom full of students.

In Charlottesville and Albemarle, the Local Food Hub is making it easier for schools to offer local produce, and even locally-raised meat, on the menu year round.

City schools spokeswoman Beth Cheuk spent some time sampling apples with the Walker students.

“I don’t know if the kids understand just how much of the food in their lunch is from local sources,” Cheuk said. “It’s not just today. They have these foods every day.”

Since 2009, the Local Food Hub has served as the middle-man between farmers, who would like a

reliable way to sell their provisions, and institutions like the schools, who would like to buy local on a larger scale.

Emily Manley, the Marketing Director at the Local Food Hub, described the logistical challenges for schools to get local produce to the students.

By locating the food, buying it, and helping to fit it into the schools' budget, the depth of their school partnerships is growing.

"For schools, sourcing local food can be challenging with coordination, pricing, and a maze of food safety and nutrition requirements," Manley said. "The idea of a school nutrition director trying to source enough local tomatoes from enough local farms, and coordinate delivery is way out of the realm of possibility."

"In 2009, it was a bushel here, a sack of potatoes there, and now it has really grown into an organized program," Manley added. "Months in advance we are helping the schools plan their menus, look at recipes, and see where we can sub in local foods."

At Walker, the lesson that our local farms help us eat healthy, and help our local economy, resonated.

Quinton Pfister, a 6th grade student, was satisfied with his tasting of the Old Virginia Winesap apples from Saunders Brothers Orchard in Nelson County.

"Sometimes my family gets fruit that is from Florida or Georgia," Pfister said. "It's cool that these apples are from right here in Virginia."

Mary Burruss, who works in Nutrition Services at Walker, said the program helps students become more adventurous eaters, and opens their palettes to foods they would normally pass on, like bright orange winter squash.

"They are willing to try something new," Burruss said, "and they are surprising themselves with how much they like it."

The Local Food Hub also offered apple and cider tastings at Hollymead Elementary School in Albemarle County during the Farm to School Week celebration.