

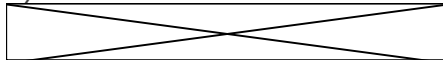
Jefferson County school cafeterias serve local food



Cecelia Mason

The Jefferson County Board of Education, located in Charles Town, has decided to use more locally-grown foods.

By Cecelia Mason



December 21, 2009 · For nearly a year now, Jefferson County schools have served locally-grown apples, peaches, blueberries and potatoes in the cafeterias and soon two schools will also serve locally-raised ground hamburger.

“The cooks really, really like the produce and they think it's better stuff that they're getting from Mr. Kilmer; it's better quality,” Ralph Dinghes, assistant superintendent for food service, said.

Third generation Berkeley County farmer Derek Kilmer coordinates the Farm to School Program offering his own produce and products from other area farmers to the local school system.

“We have a full menu of things we provide them with everything from bananas to oranges to cut vegetables,” Kilmer said.

“Local foods are seasonal. We start the season with everything from apples, peaches, nectarines; we had local plums at the beginning of the school year, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, pretty much anything in season we supply them with that was locally grown.”

During the winter months Kilmer serves as a wholesaler, supplying the school system needed produce from other states.

Because his business is small and local, he can deliver the food more often and in smaller quantities.

"We're willing to come down for five pounds of food or 50 cases, it doesn't matter, so they don't have to over order," Kilmer said.

"It's been told to us that they have a lot less waste because we're willing to come on a more regular basis as opposed to other larger operations that are only willing to come weekly."

Kilmer said the Farm to School program has benefited his business by providing an income during what's usually a slow the time of year. He's also created two new jobs to administer the program.

While the food Kilmer sells costs a little more than what the school system normally pays, Dinghes says it isn't a budget buster.

"It's a relatively small amount as to how our budget goes at this point," Dinghess said. "The local beef will be higher but in the limited quantities we buy beef, I don't think it's going to affect it that greatly."

Dinghes said buying locally helps the area economy and local farmers and provides better quality foods to the students.

"So it's a win-win situation," Dinghes said. "Always think win-win when you can."

Kilmer and Dinghes worked with Jefferson County Agriculture Development Officer, Kellie Bowles, who said local food is healthier. Bowles also sees the ability to provide food to the schools as a security issue.

"If we can continue to feed our schools and the kids in our schools even if something would happen in the larger agricultural sector where we couldn't get food to the school system our local farmers could supply the food," Bowles said.

British chef Jamie Oliver spent three months in Huntington this fall shooting a new reality television series on healthy eating after the city was named the unhealthiest in America.

When Oliver suggested schools should serve locally-produced food, some school officials balked at the idea, saying it would cost too much and the food might not meet government requirements.

Bowles said the Jefferson County Farm to School Program is similar to those in other states. And she disagrees with the critics who say programs like this won't work.

"If Vermont can do a farm to school program then surely West Virginia can," Bowles said. "Their growing season is shorter than ours."

Bowles said if local farmers know there's a market for their product at the schools and it encourages them to add value to their product and extend their season by putting up hoop and greenhouses to increase production.

"Then all of that strengthens our rural economy in West Virginia," Bowles said.

Kilmer said because of the Farm to School Program he has already expanded his business. This year he grew potatoes for the first time. He also plans to put up two greenhouses to extend his vegetable growing season.