



# Teach (and Feed) Your Children Well

Trista Scheuerlein

Making connections between  
local farmers and school cafeterias.

**LOCAL FOODS AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS DON'T HAVE TO BE STRANGERS.** In the Rappahannock County Public Schools, where I direct the Farm-to-Table Program, students are exposed to four seasonal and local food tastings per year. Mothers, interns from local farms, and other volunteers hand out small samples to all the 944 students in the two-school district. The offerings—which have included arugula and potato soup, Swiss chard quiche, roasted butternut squash soup, roasted root vegetables, and asparagus crepes—are met with enthusiasm by the students with daring taste buds and with trepidation from those comforted by the chicken nugget and the corn dog.

## Educating Taste Buds

As they sample local and seasonal foods in their cafeteria, students and teachers alike grab recipe cards and information about local farms where they can buy the produce they've sampled. The arugula potato soup was prepared at a local restaurant, the Epicurious Cow in Amissville. But the other dishes were prepared in the schools' other certified kitchen: the culinary arts classroom, where chef Mary Arthur teaches knife skills, table service, and commercial-style cooking to approximately 80 students in a given year.

According to Arthur, using local foods “exposes them to different ingredients. Like last year, when we had the rainbow chard from the horticulture class—we were utilizing it not just for the tastings. We were also using it a lot in our other classroom cooking. Using local foods gets uncommon vegetables into students' hands and mouths. Any time you can expose them to something new, that's really fabulous.”

For the Taste of Rappahannock, a local fundraiser for Headwaters—the foundation that started the Farm-to-Table Program and other innovative programs for the local schools—Arthur's students prepared lamb from Touchstone Farm. When Arthur told her students where the lamb was from, one student in particular was excited to find out that he was cooking his neighbor's product. “Using local foods gives my students a better sense of community and a better sense of what's out there locally,” says Arthur. “And when we have students that end up in horticulture classes, it's nice for them to have that tie-in.”

Students in the horticulture classes, which are funded in part by the Farm-to-Table Program, grow food that is used in the school cafeterias, in the culinary arts classes, and for local fundraisers. The rest of the produce goes to the Rappahannock County Senior Nutrition Center, where low-income senior citizens have access to nutritious lunches and foods to take home. Last year over 500 pounds of student-grown produce was donated to the senior center.

Feeling confident that we are working toward the integration of local and seasonal foods in Rappahannock County schools and in our community, I wanted to investigate what others are doing in the Piedmont and surrounding areas to connect schools with local food. I was happy to learn that Harrisonburg City Schools and Prince William County Schools are already working to provide their students with locally sourced products and that other schools have local food ideas stewing.

## Lunchtime Learning

Although public schools entered into the growing movement toward supporting local economies and offering fresher food in their cafeterias only recently, many university dining halls nationwide have been serving local food for some time. Washington and Lee University in Abingdon is an inspiring example. This year Washington and Lee's dining services aims to have 8 percent of their total food purchases sourced locally. Next year's goal is 25 percent.

Over the mountains from Rappahannock, Andrea Early serves as Harrisonburg City Schools' school nutrition program director. As part of the Healthy Communities Coalition in Harrisonburg, she has a personal interest in the local food movement, and she was part of a committee that established the Buy Fresh, Buy Local campaign for the Shenandoah Valley.

Early held a local food event last year at all seven of the city's elementary and middle schools, serving local free-range organic chicken and gravy, wheat rolls, mashed potatoes, and a salad with lettuce and tomatoes that were purchased from nearby farms. “We wanted to see what we could do within our budget constraints,” Early explains. As a result of the connections she made for that event, Early now has a steady supply of local hydroponic lettuce.



## “Using local foods gets uncommon vegetables into students’ hands and mouths.”

— chef Mary Arthur

The free-range organic Virginia chicken and gravy was purchased from a local Mennonite group. Early drove to her local farmers market and purchased wheat to make homemade rolls. She served mashed potatoes with the skins on because peeling the locally grown potatoes would increase labor costs. “The potatoes themselves were only a couple of cents more” than what they would usually spend on dehydrated mashed potatoes in a box, “but there was a lot of added labor,” Early explains. Because budget constraints limit food preparation hours, many school cafeterias opt for heat-and-serve foods.

Early admits her costs were too high to make this meal possible every day. “Food costs for a main entrée in a school lunch should be around 50 to 60 cents. This was more like \$1.95—about three or four times more expensive. Can we do it?” she asks. “If not as the whole lunch, we can at least do it in pieces.”

For instance, that experiment led her to work with Dayton farmer Marlan Showalter. Harrisonburg schools are now regular customers for his lettuce. Showalter was able to increase his production to accommodate the schools’ demand for 25 cases of lettuce per week. His prices are comparable to prices for non-local lettuce, and because his product is grown hydroponically, he produces year-round, even through the winter when schools have a more difficult time finding local products.

### From the Farm to the Cafeteria

“We’re riding the wave,” Showalter says of the demand for local food. “I’m willing to work overtime to get my system in place so we can sell to the schools. After all, local is the new organic. It’s

important for kids to make those connections with the farmers and to realize that chicken doesn’t come in a nugget.”

To make this work for everyone, Showalter and Early have arranged to have Showalter deliver his lettuce to just one school. Then the school maintenance crew delivers the produce to other schools on its regular rounds. Early stresses the importance of meeting her district’s purchasing guidelines. Harrisonburg City Schools have what is called a “sole source award” with Charlottesville’s Standard Produce. “I explained to Standard that I was looking for local products. I had to get the OK in writing from them before directly buying from these local producers,” Early explains. “If you ask a produce distributor for local food, they will try to bring it in for you. We’re in it together.”

Chris Shipman of Standard Produce says that buying and distributing local foods is nothing new for his company. “We’ve been doing this for 50 years,” he laughs. Standard purchases local apples, peaches, nectarines, tomatoes, cantaloupe, watermelon, and cabbage. That list narrows to local apples only in the winter due to the low supply of other produce. Shipman estimates that Standard distributes to 10 to 12 schools, and that number is increasing. He explains that as a distributor, Standard does not necessarily ask the farmer to meet the lowest bid price just because the customer is a school. “We try to sell it to schools for as much as we can get for the farmers. Sometimes it’s a little more than the average product. Sometimes it’s a little less. But then the farmers don’t have to outsource to others. We can ship the foods more cheaply locally and pass the savings on to the schools. It’s a win-win.”

## Hurdles to Overcome

Prince William County Public School District, however, is required to buy from the producer with the lowest bid price when ordering for school cafeterias. This means that if the district is purchasing, say, whole apples, it may be forced to purchase apples from China instead of apples grown in the next county if the price is right. This is not a ploy to keep local foods out of schools and institutions. It's a simple matter of economics: school budgets are tight, especially in the food services department. Prince William County—with approximately 47,000 students in 86 schools—must provide lunches for an average of \$1.00 a day per student. The Rappahannock County School District is also required to accept the lowest bid price.

“We can't overextend what we can do,” says Katrine Rose, Prince William County's administrative coordinator for nutrition. Rose understands why local food in school cafeterias is important. “It's the whole carbon footprint. It's better for the environment. It's better for the community. It just makes sense.” Despite the large size of her district, Rose is able to use tortilla chips from Manassas Park and pre-sliced apples from Winchester. The “Grab Apples” from Fruit Hill Slices in Winchester come individually packaged. Studies show that children are more inclined to eat apples if they are sliced rather than whole.



*Students participating in Rappahannock High School's Farm-to-Table Program learn about growing and preparing food—from seeds to salad bars.*

Rose is optimistic that she will be able to use more local products in the future and says her distributor is willing to bid for local products on behalf of the school systems. “If we find a local place that makes tomato sauce, we can ask our distributor to bid on that product. If it is the lowest bid price, we can buy it,” she explains.

Granted, getting local food in Rappahannock's two schools is less complicated than pulling that off in an 86-school district. Yet all the programs I came across had this in common: they acknowledged the need to start small and work toward gradually integrating more seasonal and local foods. Consider,

for instance, that cafeteria staff often are not trained to prepare foods from scratch. Dicing vegetables, shredding chicken, and mashing potatoes takes time—and money. However, some locavores claim that more students will be inclined to purchase school lunches, thus generating more income, if meals incorporate fresh ingredients. The increased cost of buying food from local producers instead of from agribusiness corporations could actually result in better profits for school cafeterias in the long run, especially if those efforts are accompanied by an in-school marketing campaign and nutritional education.

## Don't Fear the Hairnet

The most difficult part of setting up Rappahannock's Farm-to-Table Program was learning all the Department of Health and Department of Agriculture standards with which we needed to comply in order to stock our school salad bars with student-grown vegetables and to have volunteers pass out samples during school lunch periods. Food safety is very important, especially for high-risk populations such as small children and elderly people.

I voluntarily took a food-safety course from ServSafe and learned guidelines for practices such as maintaining and monitoring safe holding temperatures for hot and cold foods. I make sure all our volunteers are wearing either hats or hairnets. And we must be sure the weight, the description, and the school's address is on the produce grown for the salad bars by horticulture students on-site and at the one-acre off-site garden. All food entering a school cafeteria must bear an address of origin, even if the school garden and the school cafeteria are under the same roof. These small details, though they may seem insignificant or petty, are in place to ensure that food is traceable and safe for students' consumption.

## Legislation in Support of Local Foods

Tegan Hagy, the mid-Atlantic regional coordinator for the National Farm-to-School Network, was kind enough to decipher how legislation can either make it easier or more difficult to source local food.



## “We wanted to see what we could do within our budget constraints.”

— Andrea Early, Harrisonburg City Schools’ nutrition program director

Since 2002, the federal farm bill has encouraged schools to buy local while not being clear about how they should do so. There was confusion over the semantics and legalities of a school’s being able to say that it preferred to use local foods. As a result, some districts believed that they were allowed to purchase locally, while others thought that it was clearly forbidden.

The new farm bill passed in 2008 cleared up this confusion. It stated in its so-called geographic preference amendment that the “Secretary [of Agriculture] shall allow schools to use a geographic preference for the procurement of unprocessed agricultural products, both locally grown and locally raised.” The bill also says that schools are encouraged to purchase unprocessed agricultural products “to the maximum extent practicable and appropriate.” Hagy explains this further, saying, “As the farm bill is an agricultural bill, it encourages unprocessed agricultural products. And by encouraging local foods in schools, it will support the creation of a whole new marketplace for local farmers and allow schools access to a greater variety of fresh, healthy foods.”

The 2008 bill also included other language supportive of farm-to-school programs, such as the renewal of grant funding for community food projects. Many farm-to-school initiatives across the nation were developed with this funding. Hagy mentions that in other states in the past, this funding has been used to purchase more fresh and local products, to pay for a state-sponsored farm-to-school coordinator, and to develop recipes that increase nutritional value while keeping lunch prices low. Virginia has no such funding program at present.

Lawmakers here in the commonwealth recently passed a resolution to declare that they support schools’ purchasing Virginia products. “Basically, the resolution recognizes that farm-to-school is a positive program for Virginia’s children and farmers and that policymakers want to see it happen here,” Hagy says. To that end, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services developed a website that brings together the Department of Agriculture with the Department of Education. Both the schools interested in purchasing local foods and the local farms and processors that want to sell to schools can register and list themselves on this site. All food service directors in the commonwealth have received messages about the site.

Other states have gone further by allocating funds for farm-to-school development, product, and organization. For example, in California, a bill passed in 2005 gives schools 10 cents per child toward the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables and encourages schools to use this to buy produce grown in-state.

“The key with developing a program is everyone finding a way to work together and to change a little bit,” says Hagy.



EMILY HART

### What You Can Do

Here is my advice for those who want to advocate for more local foods in their local public schools:

- ✓ *Don’t attack your lunch lady. Remember that the food service personnel are doing the best they can with a shoestring budget and minimal training.*
- ✓ *Gather together a cadre of like-minded parents, teachers, and students with whom you can approach your school administrators and your director of food services. Be prepared to provide them with examples of successful programs and a list of resources.*
- ✓ *Start small. Offer a local foods sampling or a local foods day in one school. When administrators see that it can be done on a small scale, they will be more willing to support it on a larger scale.*
- ✓ *Research Department of Health and Department of Agriculture regulations and be sure you will be able to comply with them. Don’t fear the hairnet or the rubber gloves.*
- ✓ *Consider becoming ServSafe certified. The lesson on bacteria and viruses is absolutely fascinating and will scare you into using sanitary practices.*
- ✓ *Tailor your program to your region’s available products.*
- ✓ *If your school system has a home economics or culinary arts program, try working with the department’s staff. Those students need knife skills, and you need diced vegetables!*
- ✓ *Develop a positive relationship with your school district’s food distributors. They are often willing to work with local producers when both supply and demand exist.*



MARLAN SHOWALTER

James Madison University student Leigh Osborn interns at Marlan Showalter's farm, Portwood Gardens, which grows lettuce hydroponically for Harrisonburg City Schools.

“That means the farmers, the cafeteria, the parents, the administration, and the children all have to be involved for the success of the program.”

The Virginia Cooperative Extension Service is also involved in developing a more vibrant local food system. In addition to helping sponsor the Buy Fresh, Buy Local campaign in the northern Piedmont, Cooperative Extension agents are hosting food system meetings in various regions in Virginia. Matt Benson, community viability specialist for the Virginia Cooperative Extension in Warrenton, is currently working on a series of meetings that are open to anyone who is interested in bringing more local foods to school cafeterias and institutions.

### Serving Up One Small Success at a Time

Research shows that children have established their eating habits by age 12. So the sooner they discover that school food can be both delicious and good for you, the better.

Sitting in the hallway at meet-the-teacher night last year, a parent came up to my Farm-to-Table display and asked, “Are you the one who sends home those recipe cards of seasonal and local foods?”

I was afraid to acknowledge that I was, in case this made me guilty of something horrible. “Yes,” I replied. “Why? Was there a problem?”

“Well, my daughter came home with a recipe card for roasted root vegetables, and the next time we went to the grocery store she made me buy beets and parsnips! My child has never eaten a beet or a parsnip in her whole life!” the mother exclaimed.

I smiled and thanked her for letting me know that what we tell our students actually does make a difference.

*Trista Scheuerlein writes Flavor's Tales from the Field column (page 15). She can be reached at farm2table@hotmail.com.*

## Resources and Inspiration

The Center for Ecoliteracy's Rethinking School Lunch Guide  
[www.ecoliteracy.org/programs/rsl-guide.html](http://www.ecoliteracy.org/programs/rsl-guide.html)

Food Is Elementary: A Hands-On Curriculum for Young Students  
[www.foodstudies.org/curriculum/lessonsummaries.htm](http://www.foodstudies.org/curriculum/lessonsummaries.htm)

Edible Schoolyard  
[www.edibleschoolyard.org](http://www.edibleschoolyard.org)

The Headwaters/Rappahannock County Public School's Farm-to-Table Program  
[www.headwatersfdn.org/farm2table/index.html](http://www.headwatersfdn.org/farm2table/index.html)

The National Farm to School Network  
[www.farmentoschool.org](http://www.farmentoschool.org)

The Renegade Lunch Lady  
[www.chefann.com/blog](http://www.chefann.com/blog)

Virginia Cooperative Extension Service  
[www.ext.vt.edu](http://www.ext.vt.edu)

Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Farm-to-School:  
[www.vdacs.virginia.gov/marketing/farm.shtml](http://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/marketing/farm.shtml)

Two Angry Moms  
[www.angrymoms.org](http://www.angrymoms.org)

