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School Cafeterias make efforts to buy from local farms

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By [Sheila Regan](#), [TC Daily Planet](#)

A few school districts in Minnesota have been recognized recently for their efforts in creating healthier, more locally grown meals for school lunches. In March, St. Paul Schools will complete its 18 month pilot program in finding new and innovative ways to create a more local, sustainable and healthy school lunch program. Meanwhile Mary Anderson, the Culinary Director of Wayzata Public Schools, received the [Silver Leadership Award](#) from the National Foodservice Achievement Management Excellence (FAME) Award program on January 10.

In 2008, Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) joined a national partnership funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation called Food Options for Children in Urban Schools ([FOCUS](#)). Along with Denver Schools, SPPS was chosen as a pilot district for a [learning lab](#) whose aim is to analyze food supply and demand, change food purchasing practices in order to have healthier, more local, more sustainable school lunches..

Jean Ronnei, Director of the Nutrition and Commercial Services at SPPS, said the pilot program was "an opportunity for us to be a learning lab as part of school food program." Funding for the eighteen month program, which will end in March, has allowed the schools to work with partners, including the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy ([IATP](#)), researchers from [Michigan State](#), and local farmers to try out ways to develop healthier, more sustainable menu.

"What's fascinating is that once you have a foothold," Ronnei said, "all of a sudden, you have lots more opportunities." This fall, SPPS used 110,000 pounds of Minnesota grown produce, making up 56% of the cafeteria menu. They are also currently working with a Minnesota company that grows flax seed for bread, and are in the process of adding local Buffalo and wild rice to the menu.

Ronnei said that SPPS is also trying to get Hmong grown vegetables on the menu. The challenge is that many Hmong farms aren't large enough to accommodate the needs of the entire district, so they are looking at ways that food from various Hmong farms could be consolidated.

In November United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan toured St. Paul Schools culinary program, to get a first-hand look at the district's culinary plan. Merrigan also met with Wayzata School Culinary Director Mary Anderson and other nutrition pioneers across the state. Innovative programs in the state, according to an IATP press release, include Winona schools serving bison from a nearby ranch, Rosemount schools serving locally grown sweet corn, Northfield schools serving local watermelon and sheep's milk

cheese, Sartell-St. Stephen schools serving local apples, and Pine River-Backus Elementary School serving local honey.

Earlier this month, Wayzata Public Schools' Mary Anderson received the FAME for demonstrating outstanding leadership, dedication, fiscal achievement and innovation in menuing and merchandising. According to a press release by [IATP](#), the Wayzata schools' farm to school initiative features fresh fruits and vegetables from Minnesota including sweet corn, beets, parsnips and squash, as well as local cheese, grains and other items. Anderson, who serves as president of the Minnesota School Nutrition Association ([MSNA](#)) has worked with IATP in expanding farm to school initiatives statewide by helping schools with staff training, procurement, student education and communications support.

Anderson said that locally grown food comprised about 10 percent of the food for her district this year. She said that she has been working to incorporate local foods into her business model. "You need to plan for it," she said, adding that sometimes local food costs more, but in some cases it is the less expensive option.

Anderson also works to educate students about agriculture. She grew up in a farming community, but she said now there is a whole generation of young people who don't understand where their food comes from. "They don't know that chickens have bones," she said.

MSNA is working with IATP to improve school nutrition programs statewide, but there is still work to be done. Minneapolis Public Schools do have a list of locally grown food in their [menu](#), but at least one parent is not happy with the state of the nutrition program.

Lee Zukor, who runs the [Simple Good and Tasty Website](#), has a son who attends Whittier Elementary in Minneapolis. "Schools are getting food that is not fit for fast food restaurants," Zukor said. He went with his son to school one day to check out the menu, and was not pleased with what he saw. "I really couldn't believe what they were serving," Zukor said. "The food is all plastic wrapped... The food isn't prepped as real food would be prepped. And it's the worse possible quality ingredients." Part of the problem, Zukor said, is that there is such a small budget for food items. "It's something like 2 and a half bucks per meal," he said. "We're not willing to increase our tax base, and then we're grateful for the absolute crappiest food we can feed our kids."

Rosemary Dederichs, Director of the Foodservice Department of Minneapolis Public Schools, said the district has "always tried to use local vendors", but that they are limited by regulations that require the district to buy from the lowest bidder.

Minneapolis Public Schools, like St. Paul, purchases products from [Cre8ted](#), Dederichs said, which is a local food processor. Unlike some districts, such as Hopkins, which bought food directly from Riverbend Farms in Delano and Homestead Orchards in Maple Plain, Minneapolis and St. Paul Schools must use a processor because they are not equipped to cut food items.

Still, Dederichs said that Minneapolis has been adding more fruits and vegetables. The schools have taken French fries off the menu, and added fresh salads with carrots, peppers, and red

onions. However, Dederichs said another challenge is that many fruits and vegetables are not in season during Minnesota's winter months.