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New Farm-to-School Food Program Debuts in Maine Schools

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Can the state serve as an example to other states looking to promote and provide more local food in schools?



Local food—it's what's on the menu.

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Maine apples, broccoli and eggs are just a few of the local ingredients many Maine students will find on their lunch menus this year. As students begin the 2022-2023 school year, the state is upgrading its school meal program, adding more local foods to lunch trays while providing meals for all students regardless of income.

In 2021, Maine and California became the first and—so far—only states to pass legislation requiring schools to provide meals to all students regardless of their income. Under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch based on their household’s income level. Waivers provided by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) allowed schools nationwide to offer free meals to all students during the COVID-19 pandemic, but those waivers expired at the end of the 2021-2022 school year.

“I’m a super big fan of meals at no charge to all of our students,” says Martha Poliquin, school nutrition director of Falmouth Public Schools. “What we saw last year with the extension of the waivers that allowed us to operate and provide meals at no charge to students was a huge increase in participation in our program, and that’s what we want. We want to feed kids.”

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Poliquin is also part of the leadership team of the new Maine Farm & Sea to School Institute. In its inaugural year, the Institute is working with select schools and districts to build and implement farm- and sea-to-school programming, bringing locally produced food into school cafeterias and including outdoor and experiential education opportunities into the curriculum.

“Now, students are becoming more exposed to not only fresh foods [but also] local fresh foods and vegetables,” says Poliquin, adding that she expects more families to take advantage of the no-charge meals for students due in part to the cost of food. “I think parents are going to see the incredible value in school meals, breakfast and lunch, because they are good foods, healthy foods, local foods, and any family can take advantage of having their children enjoy that.”

In mid-August, the Maine Farm & Sea to School Institute brought students, administration and teaching staff, farmers,

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gardeners and dining leads together for hands-on workshops and action planning to bring more local food to their school districts.

“We have a phenomenal nutrition director and she is very much invested in the local foods initiative. But we’ve struggled with how we can connect to farmers in an economic and sustainable way to be able to provide those locally sourced foods to our kids,” says Brittany Layman, a garden coordinator and the head nurse at the Hampden-based RSU 22, one of the schools selected to participate in the program. “We’re taking steps by hiring a chef, but we need to have ground rules and an action plan to make it work.”

Part of the institute’s approach involves helping a particular farm and/or farmer develop a purchasing relationship with a school. The institute works with both school staff and the farmer, training each on expectations and how to engage with each other. It’s one way the institute also supports local farmers, food producers and local economies.

“Even though farmers want to sell to schools and schools want to purchase from farmers, it’s sometimes very hard to get them to be able to because of the way the system is set up,” says Ryan Parker, impact and partnerships lead of Maine, FoodCorps, which is part of the Maine Farm & Sea to School

Institute Leadership. “So, we’re trying to work to change that and increase those opportunities. The institute is going to be a great start specifically for these schools. But this is also part of a much broader effort.”

The state of Maine also expanded the Local Foods Fund in 2021, which helps schools purchase locally grown, harvested and produced foods, including fruits, vegetables, meat, fish and dairy.

As more and more students are exposed to fresh, local foods, the Maine Farm & Sea to School Institute also hopes to educate students and families about where all the food comes from and include access to local food in the schools’ curriculum.

“We’ve had a school garden program for about a decade. We have a very well-established orchard. We have an apiary,” says Layman. “But [I’ve struggled to] make those true connections in the classroom and get our teachers to really invest in taking kids outside, knowing that they can do their English language arts outside and use the garden as a tool for that.”

Schools participating in the program will work with the Maine Farm & Sea to School Institute over the next year to implement local food programs. “I am super excited to watch other teams here in the state of Maine really

launch them into a sustainable farm-to-school program,” says Poliquin.

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