

Metro schools getting healthy food boost

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John Savoie and Heather Lewis show some of the healthy food now being served at MacNaughton High School. PHOTO RON WARD/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

A push for fresh, local and healthy food in Metro Moncton schools is aimed at making students and staff more aware of what they're eating and where it's coming from.

The inspiration behind the healthier foods pilot project comes from the success of a neighbouring school district.

For the past year, more than 20 cafeterias in Francophone South have been administered by Réseau des cafétérias communautaires, a non-profit organization created by the school district and Really Local Harvest, a co-operative of about 30 farms in southeastern New Brunswick.

“We have the opportunity to give students one meal a day,” said Aubrey Kirkpatrick, director of administration and finance at Anglophone East School District.

“We have the opportunity to really educate and make our students and staff aware of the tremendous benefits of choosing healthy food and how it impacts positively on learning and well-being in general so they can take that message home and out when they order in restaurants.”

In the spring Kirkpatrick met with representatives from its food service provider, Chartwells, to create a similar program, creating healthier menus that are built with locally produced and sourced food.

This isn't an overhaul of the system or the services at the 26 cafeterias in the school district managed by Chartwells – in fact, much of this is already happening, thanks in part to Policy 711.

The government's Policy 711, created in 2005 and revised in 2008, bans the sale of foods with minimum nutritional values in school, as well as through school fundraisers. The policy also requires foods with maximum nutritional value will be available at a price close to cost as possible and be promoted.

This means items that are “perceived unhealthy,” such as garlic fingers and muffin, were already under recipe restrictions to fit standards of portion size and nutritional value (fat, carbohydrate, fibre, salt levels etc.)

And even before this the district was making changes, already “attuned to what our community and our parents are saying about healthy food,” Kirkpatrick said.

But this new push includes new initiatives.

Chartwells has hired a district culinary manager who's touring high schools, demonstrating how to make meals with local products. Last month it was ratatouille; this month it's a hot carving station. The feedback – both educational and taste-wise – has been positive.

Menus now include more salads and wraps and less “perceived unhealthy” food, limiting the number of times a week something like pizza is available for purchase.

The district and food service provider are also trying to incorporate more local food – whether local means from Metro Moncton, southeastern New Brunswick, throughout the province or as close as the school's own garden.

This plays into the long-term goals of the program, having students engage with the food creation through their culinary tech programs.

Bernice MacNaughton High School is one of the schools participating in the pilot program.

Teacher Heather Lewis said that last year, members of the Parent School Support Committee weren't happy with the offerings in the school cafeteria.

"Last year there was a lot of fried food, pizza, poutine, french fries, burgers, and the healthy options that they had were very limited and expensive in comparison," she said.

"This year we've seen a lot of healthy options – there's always a soup option and more homemade meals," she said.

Because of this more students have not only been eating at the cafeteria this year, she said, but are also liking what they're eating.

She hopes introducing healthier options will mean healthier kids, as good food is one part in the school's holistic efforts to address issues like mental health, attendance and tired and distracted students.

"We believe that if we systematically at least offer good food choices ... that they will just be able to feel better and in turn concentration better and in turn want to do to better," she said, adding the same goes for the school's breakfast program.

The school has gone beyond what the district and their cafeteria operator can offer, bringing in a national organization into the mix.

Farm to School started in British Columbia and only this past year was it brought to New Brunswick. Bernice MacNaughton was one of eight schools in the province that earned a \$10,000 grant to help introduce more local food to its students.

In January, with the support of the district and cafeteria operator, the school will be bringing in a salad bar twice a week, with between 40 to 50 per cent of the food locally sourced through a partnership with a local farmers co-op.

The district doesn't get funding for cafeterias, but they have a rebate system with Chartwells – the district gets a portion of revenue sales to buy and repair cafeteria equipment, which isn't cheap.

That's created an account with a "healthy balance," Kirkpatrick said.

This year, that half the revenue from the rebate system will go directly to the schools it came from, encouraging more students to buy food from their cafeterias.

Schools can purchase what they want with the money they'll get, which could amount to around \$8,000 for a large high school when it's first administered next spring.

A new online service that allows parents to order their children's food online will help with this too, as not only will students be contributing to the revenue, but parents will know they aren't sending

their kids to school with \$10 – just to buy a meal of cookies.

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