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Will the Local Farms-Healthy Kids Bill Make Kids Healthier?

State lawmakers recently passed a bill to re-do school lunches. We look at the pros and cons.

By Bob Geballe



Come this month, Washington public school students could find themselves faced with a new set of three R's—rhubarb, raw carrots and russet potatoes—all grown locally and, along with other fresh local produce, whisked into the state's school lunch programs, courtesy of the Local Farms—Healthy Kids bill. The legislation plowed a virtually unanimous furrow through the Washington Legislature last spring, passing with a 95-to-1 vote. It aims to remake the state's daily preparation of 80,000 school lunches, as well as assist small farmers in supplying that market and give food-stamp users better and easier access to healthy local products.

The bill does a number of things for public schools. It makes it easier for school districts to buy from local farms by no longer requiring that they use "lowest cost" purchasing; it provides funding to supply local fruits and snacks for kids at some low-income schools; and it creates and funds two Agriculture Department positions to help schools and farms iron out supply, processing and purchasing issues. And the bill's timing couldn't be better. This year has been marked by rapidly rising fuel costs, burgeoning interest in consuming local products and an ongoing

effort to eliminate unhealthy food and snacks at public schools.

The legislation, a product of two years of work by the Environmental Priorities Coalition (a group of environmentally oriented lobbies), offers a beautiful, bucolic vision: schools serving high-quality, pesticide-free, farm-fresh produce, delivered by the neighborhood farmer. (Contrast that with school lunchrooms serving pre-processed and packaged food, shipped hundreds or thousands of miles.) The state legislature ate it up; the sponsors were ecstatic.

"We collaborated with folks from public health, anti-poverty groups, school advocates, children's advocates, environmentalists and local farmers," says Mo McBroom, policy director for the Washington Environmental Council, who developed much of the bill. And, she adds, the potential is enormous. "There is \$300 million in food purchases for state schools every year. If we [the Local Farms—Healthy Kids lobby] can get even a small portion of this, we can have a big impact [on local farms and on students' diets]."

As any gardener will tell you, however, planting a seed and harvesting a crop are two very separate, and sometimes well-separated, events. The truth is that it will take time, more money and a continued political push to really change what school kids across the state eat. And Seattle's public school children may be the last to benefit. "I think," cautions McBroom, "it's going to be hard to articulate how it's going to change food in Seattle Public Schools." Anita Finch, director of nutrition services for the district comments, "What does this mean for Seattle Public Schools? We'll see."

The challenges are complex for any school district. Nutrition directors have to balance their budgets, which are minimal at best, and that makes purchasing inexpensive government commodity foods almost a necessity. They are dealing with allocations of a dollar or a bit more per student per day, so the higher cost of organic, local food can be tricky. Additional hurdles: Schools need a consistent supply, and most districts have very limited facilities for processing raw food. And the school year ends just as the region's farms are beginning to reap their bounty.

Paul Flock, child nutrition supervisor for the Olympia School District, knows the tightrope well. Since 2002, he has been working with local farmers to gradually build the amount of locally grown, organically farmed food available to children in the district. School kids in the Olympia district now eat blueberries, winter squash, onions and potatoes from local farms. Flock has his eye on eggs next. "We could take 54,000 eggs per year," he says. But even with his focused dedication, interested farmers and district support, Flock has only managed to move about 8 percent of the district's food budget into local farmers' hands. "It's growing year by year, but not as quickly as I'd like to see."

The challenges Flock faces in creating about 4,500 student lunches daily are only magnified in a district the size of Seattle's. Finch's staff prepares well more than 19,000 lunches a day. "We've attempted to work with several different farms," she says, "but my need is so great, most local farms can't provide me." Finch has managed to get locally grown apples onto the menu, but so far, she is stymied beyond that. Of course, Finch is playing against stacked odds. Her budget allocates about \$1 per meal per day. That doesn't leave much room for exploration. "The best thing about the legislation is you don't have to take the lowest bid anymore," Finch says. "But can we adjust our purchasing to actually afford local? We don't know—the district will have to make a decision."

To pay for local produce, the Seattle school board would have to boost the per-student allotment for lunch. With perennially tight budgets and off-the-hook gas and diesel costs, that seems pretty unlikely. "You've got wonderful people doing the very best they can, but they're given little or no money," says Abbi Little, whose Everett based company, Abbi's Northwest, connects farmers with buyer like schools. "It's really sad [but because the money is so poor] most producers don't want to deal with schools."

Ironically, the situation is made worse by local farmers' markets. Their increasing popularity gives small farmers access to well-heeled (at least

compared to school districts) customers. A Sunday shopper at the Ballard Farmers' Market who is willing to pay \$2 a pound for fingerling potatoes is a much more attractive shopper than a school district nutrition director who needs potatoes at 25 cents a pound. Small farms make the obvious choice.

But even if more money was available, the problem then becomes one of coordination. The Seattle School District, with only 22 out of its 97 schools taking delivery of raw goods and one central kitchen preparing the bulk of the food, can't easily deal with individual small farms. Bulk buying and delivery are necessities.

For example, Andrew Stout of Full Circle Farm in Carnation has worked out a successful arrangement with Spiritridge Elementary School in Bellevue. "It was prompted by a group of parents," he says. "We sell salad mix and carrots to them." But when he tried to work with Seattle Public Schools, there were significant challenges. "The hurdle is supply," he says. "Can we get enough? Can it be affordable for the school district? Can we get it to them at the right time?"

"The problem with local agriculture supplying schools is that we're going up against a very sophisticated system of large food suppliers," says Clayton Burrows, who has created a Bellingham-based nonprofit farmers' co-op, Growing Washington, to try to assist small farms in cracking the larger market. According to Burrows, the co-op weds today's technological know-how with the elbow grease and green thumbery of small farms. "If small farms band together, that might crack open the door," he says. Growing Washington manages five small farms and is working with local farmers, school districts, students and parents "to create and expand successful and self-sufficient Farm to Cafeteria projects..." according to the organization's Web site.

Burrows says the organization will help farmers share resources such as storage, shipping, bookkeeping and even processing of raw produce, and will make it easier for small farms to offer reliable and lower-cost food to large organizations like school districts. As a test case, Growing Washington is exploring an arrangement with the Auburn School District to provide potatoes for the entire district. "It's not a radical concept for Washington farmers to feed Washington residents," Burrows says.

To make it work, though, he says, the burden is more on the farmers than the school district. "Anita [Finch] goes to meetings and says, 'I have this much money.' Can local farmers meet it?" Burrows pauses. "The worst thing possible is if you get funding and legislative momentum, and nothing happens." And as eager as he is to show that farm-to-school problems can be solved, he is cautious. "No one is looking at school districts as: This is how you make money."

Many farmers, though, believe the legislation creates new possibilities. "Finding a willingness in the schools is the number-one thing, and that's what the legislation has changed," says Full Circle's Stout. "And we can work together—that's what Clayton and Growing Washington are doing. It's not that it's impossible, but it's not immediate."

"We know there are big problems still," acknowledges McBroom. "This is a first step—we raised public awareness and changed legislators' perceptions. The next step is to ensure we maintain and increase the funding. How do we make it easier for schools? That takes dollars. And parent involvement will really make it happen."

And finally, it may take something else—an added sprinkle of rationality into our anything-anywhere-anytime food culture. The combined impacts of the legislation, fuel costs and environmental necessity may mean that students, like the rest of us, may have to learn to eat what's in season. "What they should have here is a more seasonal menu," says Stout. "What's going to turn it around," Little says, "is the cost of fuel. We can't afford to bring [produce] up from California."

Can we imagine a Northwest-based school lunch menu that offers things like coleslaw, kohlrabi, squash, Jerusalem artichokes and perhaps even Brussels sprouts? Is it possible to gradually move kids away from the fast-food, fetched-from-afar diet and raise a generation of little locavores? Little muses, "If we can convince kids to eat kale, collard greens...." Stout says, "No one is talking about 100 percent local food. But when you're close to zero, 10 percent or 20 percent is awfully good."

Photo by Dan Page