

Farm-to-School program brings nutrition to schools and gets students involved



Third and fourth-grade students harvesting onions last year at Berry Creek Farm. (Photos by Katherine Sims)

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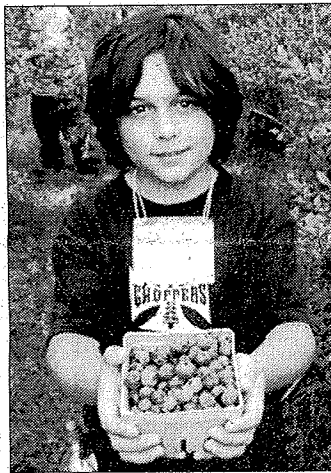
Last March the Green Mountain Farm-to-School program, a new non-profit organization and branch of the National Farm-to-School effort, started its own pilot programs in a few schools in the Northeast Kingdom. It is now working to bring nutrition and a sense of community to the children of Vermont.

The Farm-to-School program originally started as pilot programs in California and Florida more than 10 years ago and has now expanded its efforts into a nationwide network.

"We have two main initiatives," Katherine Sims, the Green Mountain Farm-to-School director, said in an interview, "One is our Sprouts, School, Garden, and Cooking Program, and that is a year-round after school program where we are gardening with kids and they are growing food, and all that food goes to the school cafeteria. They are also learning how to cook and prepare healthy foods and make healthy choices."

The Green Mountain Farm-to-School program (GMFTS) started its journey in Vermont as a single school garden program, and has now made its way into the cafeterias of several local schools.

"Currently, we are working with



Phoenix Malanga of the Jay-Westfield Elementary School picks blueberries on a farm field trip to Blueberry Ridge in North Troy last fall. The blueberries were frozen by the students and used in the school lunch program.

seven schools: Lowell, Jay-Westfield, Troy, Holland, Coventry, the junior high, and the Albany school," Sims said.

The program will give children the

chance to engage in many activities outside of the classroom and help to build relationships between the local community's farms and schools. GMFTS will also incorporate communal activities such as Harvest Festivals, and Spring Field Days.

"We also have our Farm to School network in which we help to coordinate activities that connect schools and farms, helping to get local food in the cafeteria, taste-testing local food products, getting kids out on farm field trips, as well as doing in-class nutrition and agriculture workshops," Sims said.

Sims believes that the GMFTS program presents a unique opportunity to not only teach the children of Vermont how to engage in activities within their own communities and learn about nutrition, but to also help maintain Vermont's agricultural setting.

"I think that, especially up here in the Northeast Kingdom, we are still a really rural, agricultural area," Sims said, "and this is an opportunity to preserve that working landscape."

It would appear that both the local farms of the Northeast Kingdom and the children of the participating areas will benefit from the program. One of the GMFTS's goals for this year is to see that 1,200 students will reap these benefits that the program has to offer.

Childhood nutrition and support for local farms seem to be the underlying theme of the Green Mountain Farm-to-School effort and with the number of participating schools growing each year, the overall health of school-age children involved in the program may well continue to rise.

"Since we are feeding so many kids every day we have this great opportunity to provide them with fresh local foods and support our farms at the same time, so everybody wins in this situation," Sims said, "This is definitely a growing movement all across the United States, but what I think is really unique about what we are doing up here in the Northeast Kingdom is that we are working to connect, and kind of network, a lot of schools together so that they can be more affective purchasers of local foods, and learn to work together."



Jay/Westfield Students prepare local winter squash for their fall Harvest Festival community dinner.

VOL. NO. 73 NO. 40

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2009

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