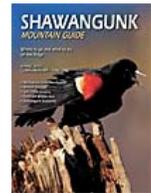


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Eat The Veggies!

New Report Looks At School Meals, Regs & Locavore Contributions

By Chris Rowley

REGIONAL – Cost-sharing and collaboration in local services is the concept du jour, so no surprise that the CRREO social research outfit at SUNY New Paltz now renamed The Benjamin Center (CRREO standing for Center for Research, Regional Engagement and Outreach) has focused the fifth briefing in its series "A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County" on food services, namely "The Potential for Sharing among Ulster County School Districts."

CRREO was renamed the Benjamin Center in honor of its founder and guiding light, longstanding SUNY professor, former Ulster County legislative chairman, author of the county's Charter form of government and former SUNY New Paltz dean Gerald Benjamin.

The food services brief — authored by Robin Jacobowitz, director of education projects at CRREO, SNP student Micaela Kayser, and Ruth Quin, one time VP of the New Paltz school district — points out that food service is a small budget item, just 2 percent of the \$519,155,596 spent on public education in Ulster last year. But that still comes to about \$10 million, and half of that comes from property taxes, so cost savings are still important.

The research suggests that efficiencies might be achieved by handling some food service functions on a regional basis, rather than school district by school district.

There are paradoxes in the foodscape occupied by schoolchildren. In Ulster County in 2010, almost 20 percent of youth experienced "food insecurity" — basically living in a family that was never sure to have regular meals, or even somewhere to eat them. Indeed, 38 percent of Ulster County students were eligible for free or reduced price meals at lunch and breakfast. For this population, school meals are really important. On the other hand, 37 percent of Ulster County Students, in grades, 1, 3, 5 and 7, were judged obese or overweight in the same year.

Kingston and Ellenville led the county in the "free and reduced" category, with more than 50 percent of students in each district participating in the program. Only New Paltz and Wallkill fell below 30 percent, however, showing a wide ranging distribution of need throughout the county.

The briefing makes several sensible points, one of which is well known to every parent: kids won't eat what they don't like. Government cares, too, since they pay half the bill.

The federal government got into this business back in the 1930s as a way of using surplus food from farms. Today the USDA is still involved, and total federal outlays on school meals in 2014 ran to more than \$11 billion.

Concern about food is a national obsession, with junk food, empty calories and half-gallon size soda-pops circling like some combo of zombies, white sharks and vampires while a minority of people try to be good and eat their veggies, search out organics and eat local. Government tries to respond to this, as it did in 2010 with the Healthy, Hunger-free Kids Act which set standards for all food served during the school day from whatever source, and required that said foods be of acceptable grains, and that fruit and vegetables be served with every lunch. There are also new federal grant programs that focus on organic foods, farm-to-school initiatives, nutrition education and ways of preventing obesity.

Sometimes the lessons learned at the cutting edge are worth thinking about, too. Food service directors have noticed that by cutting up fruit into smaller, less intimidating portions they can move it, and cut down wastage.

But, as the briefing notes, most Ulster County school food service managers felt that the HRFK Act made life more difficult and expensive for them. They have reduced portions, removed extra French fries and sweet snacks, and found that kids simply hurl fruit and veggies into the dumpsters. Meanwhile the money they formerly made from the extra items that kids actually like accounted for a large portion of food service revenue. Many reported diminishing participation in school meals and increased cost of healthful food, leading to fears for their programs' viability.

The report's conclusion? It's very hard to change people's eating habits and a great many people live without ever touching anything at all from the fruit and vegetable kingdom.

County food service directors meet often to talk about their problems and exchange recipes. They source food in a number of ways; some of them include a mind-bendingly complicated bidding process, and others actually allow for sourcing from local farms and production centers. But they also reported that the biggest challenge to self-sustaining programs was compliance with new regulations.

One way to cost containment is to join together, perhaps under the BOCES umbrella. This can aid with inventory tracking, auditing and monitoring compliance with those regulations. The briefing suggests that districts may centralize things like record keeping, and



perhaps even sharing a Point Of Sale system, or using the same one county wide, to help coordinate inventory and stocking as well as auditing and reporting.

The bright note in all this is that the Ulster County food service directors in our schools would like to see more local food hubs, and more integration of local food production with what schools offer.

This information is welcomed by those, like Deborah DeWan of the Rondout Valley Growers Association, who are working to promote our local agriculture. She notes that the 2014 Farm Bill, which Congressman Chris Gibson was involved in, inspired pilot programs like one in the city of Rochester to locally source food that can be sold to school districts. While something like this would not necessarily conform to "farm to table," it could go, via aggregation, into distribution systems that would be large enough to not only provide the food, but also to see it processed (as in washed) to conform to state and federal regulations.

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