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SCHOOL FOOD AUTHORITY NURTURES HEALTHY HABITS FOR FARM TO SCHOOL MONTH

ST. THOMAS, USVI – The Virgin Islands Department of Education School Food Authority is celebrating Farm to School month in October by nurturing healthy habits through its School Lunch Program. In partnership with Ridge to Reef Farm Hub, based on St. Croix, the School Food Authority exposed students to new ways to incorporate fresh, local produce into their daily meals.

Ridge to Reef Farm Hub representative, Dr. Nate Olive said local farmers that power the Farm to School initiative are on track to deliver a record-breaking 365 cases of produce items to school kitchens in October, including lettuce, cucumbers, carambola fruit, seasoning peppers, basil, Spanish thyme, sage, garlic, chives, cilantro, and oregano.

“The Ridge to Reef Farm Hub has been delivering produce to the public schools for almost five years and it has become our number one production priority,” Dr. Olive said.

He went on to say that despite some challenges, the partnership has been rewarding.

“By no means is it easy, but it is so rewarding and we are investing in its success [through] our delivery network,” he explained. “In addition to our own organic cropping, we handle the administrative logistics, delivery, and menu-match planning in tandem with the Department of Education for other contributing farms. We aggregate from other small farms to hit the volume level needed for thousands of student consumers in each meal.”

St. Thomas-St. John School Food Program Supervisor Bertilia Pacquette said students are being exposed to the fresh produce in innovative ways, such as smoothies, salad bars, herb displays, and breads. Pacquette also noted that students are responding favorably to the healthier food options.

“So far [students] are enjoying [the smoothies],” she said. “We are testing different options, such as watermelon, cucumber, carrots, spinach, and kale.”

“The herb display will help students be able to recognize the different herbs and show them how to incorporate them in different dishes,” she added. “Once lunch is over, the herb display will be incorporated into future meals.”

Students at the Ivanna Eudora Kean High School expressed their approval as they reflected on the fresher food options available in the cafeteria.

Twelfth grade student Rowan Mitchell, an emerging football talent who is also new to the Virgin Islands, shared his thoughts after sampling the fresh banana bread.

“It’s as good, if not better, than ones I’ve had in the states,” he said. “This is my second helping of food. I cook a lot and I use some of the herbs that they have on display when I’m cooking, but I usually stick to things that are familiar to me.”

D’Aundre Pantiere offered a candid review after finishing his meal.

“The food was off the chain,” he said. “Keep bringing these options back and everyone will be in here for school lunch. I feel good and I feel energized. I can’t fall asleep in class when these greens from the earth are here giving me all this energy.”

Vanessa Jn Baptiste appreciated the selection of food items and offered suggestions for expansion.

“The salad tastes very good,” she began, adding, “I’d like them to offer the salad bar more often. I’d like to see a fruit bar, as well.”

Eudora Kean Principal Stefan Jürgen discussed the long-term benefit of incorporating healthier food options for students.

“It’s going to be a good thing because most of our students lead a very sedentary life,” he said, adding, “they’re not as active as they used to be now that the games are indoors. So, anything that we can do to get them to create more healthy habits will go a long way.”

Farmers hope to have a lasting impact on the health of students by encouraging “better nutrition from fresh, whole foods,” according to Dr. Olive.

“Commissioner McCollum and her staff set out to greatly enhance the program with advance menu planning, a wider variety of crops, and gradual incorporation of our fresh produce into the school kitchens. This was crucial for the program,” Dr. Olive said. “Farm to school is not just about farming; it’s about the schools and students.”

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