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just from the kids, parents and teachers, but from the community as well. How can you argue against supporting local farmers and getting fresh, organic foods to kids?"

In Eugene, the time seems ripe for change. With more than 45 nearby farms, a growers' co-op, twice-weekly farmers' markets and an active green-minded community, the district has plenty of resources to work with. Instructional gardens at a few local schools have gotten students' hands into the soil, and a network of active parents and local businesses could supply the volunteer power necessary to power a farm-to-school program.

Soils in the fertile Willamette Valley can handle more food production. According to a study by the Lane County Food Coalition, the county's farmland is capable of supplying the entire county's grain, vegetable and fruit needs. All local farmers need is a bigger market for their produce. A farm-to-school initiative could provide that boost, and the economic benefits of added jobs would ripple through the region.

Environmentally, too, supporting local farmers makes sense. Higher local food demand protects wildlife habitat and creates local food security, especially as oil resources dwindle and food transported from faraway places becomes more expensive.

Marché restaurant at the 5th Street Public Market serves mainly local, organic foods, and owner Stephanie Kimmel would love to see Eugene's schools do the same.

"There's always something wonderful in Oregon that's at its peak," she says. "It's about cycles — not wanting tomatoes in January, but dancing with joy when you eat the first one in July and eating them through October. Change makes life interesting."

Kimmel feels that it's essential for schools to start teaching kids about food: where and how it's grown, as well as what it does inside our bodies. "If we don't do that, we'll have a whole generation of kids who don't know where food comes from," she says. "The self-sufficient way of life is disappearing. Our local farmers are our last connection to the soil."

But what about picky eater syndrome — kids who won't touch greens? Kimmel says that school gardens, food-focused curricula and tasty organic meals can help kids break down stereotypes around food. Kimmel envisions local growers giving educational tours of their farms, students getting their hands dirty in school gardens and chefs giving cooking lessons in classrooms. "The right teacher can get kids excited," she says. "Presentation is so important."

Local grower Annette Pershern, who owns and manages River Bend Farm in Pleasant Hill, is all for it. "I think we local farmers would be glad to help out and work with community schools," she says. "I really feel that education is important, because soon another generation is going to take over, and they need to know where their food comes from."

Pershern hands the phone over to her youngest daughter, Meghan, who will start the school year as freshman at Pleasant Hill High School. Meghan paints a garish image of the junior high school cafeteria, where cool kids eating junk food reign supreme.

"They had donuts, hamburgers, burritos, hot pockets and cheeseburgers," she tells me. "Kids pushed just to get front of the line. The more popular kids choose the fatty foods, the pop and candy and stuff."

But Meghan generally opts for her mom's packed lunches. "The cafeteria food is filling, but only for a little while," she says. "The food that my mom gives me, a sandwich and an apple, is good for the whole day."

Her mother takes back the phone to share one final thought. "The bottom line is, unless we as parents educate our kids to eat vegetables and make healthier choices, they'll be overweight. Every child is different, but we need to provide choices — the tastiest choices that we can as far as fruits and vegetables are concerned. And they'll start eating it."

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RESOURCES

- National Farm to School Program: www.farmtoschool.org
- National Farm to College Program: www.farmtocollege.org
- Community Food Security Coalition: www.foodsecurity.org
- Rethinking School Lunch program: www.rethinkingschoollunch.org
- The Edible Schoolyard: www.edibleschoolyard.org
- The School Lunch Initiative: www.schoollunchinitiative.org
- Citizens for Healthy Options in Children's Education (CHOICE): www.choiceusa.net
- Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine's school lunch campaign: www.HealthySchoolLunches.org

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