

December 10, 2009

Re: Commentary for the Charleston Daily Mail

British chef Jamie Oliver and his “Food Revolution” came to our state to film a reality show about reconnecting people with the food they eat. His focus on increasing fresh foods served in school lunches has sparked debate and has been referenced in both a recent article and commentary.

But the conversation started long before Oliver’s plane touched down at Tri-State Airport. Over the past few years, 9,000 schools in 43 states – including West Virginia -- have figured out how to bring fresh, local produce to their students. In Jefferson County in the Eastern Panhandle, and around the country, schools have found that serving fresh local food is possible, it can be affordable, and it is healthier for our children and youth.

Adding emphasis on local food does not mean with doing away with bananas and oranges and other foods not grown here. Nor does it mean throwing out the budget and pricing lunches out of the reach of many parents. But it does mean sourcing and including local foods when it makes sense.

One of the arguments against serving local foods in our schools is that we can’t afford to do it. It has been suggested that we need an economic revolution as opposed to a food revolution. We suggest combining them, and jump-starting local economies through the production of food, which can then be sold to schools, hospitals, grocery stores and other institutions. Are there challenges to doing this? Of course, but there is no reason to believe it can’t be done.

Several case studies by USDA’s Economic Research Service have shown that schools can keep their budgets in the black while serving nutritious lunches that include local foods. Some have succeeded by working out arrangements with local farmers, others have raised revenues through increased student participation, and some are growing food on their campuses. Schools have also found that students eat an average of two additional servings of fruits and vegetables a day if offered fresh choices. These improved eating habits not only promote better health now, but are also shown to last a lifetime.

Some also say that local foods are impractical because our growing season is too short and doesn’t coincide with the school year very well. If Vermont, New Hampshire and Minnesota can figure out how to overcome these challenges, I’m sure we can, too. The bottom line is this: we can help our economy and our children by connecting farms to schools. We don’t need to do this for a television audience; we need to do this for us.

*Pam Curry is Executive Director of the Center for Economic Options, a statewide nonprofit that is working collaboratively to build sustainable local food systems.*