

UPDATED: Fresh from the Garden Patch: Healthy food options for students in Richmond Public Schools Volunteers Needed

Step aside, square pizza and soggy tater tots! It's time for fresh snap peas, steamed zucchini, and juicy grapefruit to take the spotlight in Richmond Public Schools cafeterias.

FEBRUARY 4, 2016; 11:34 AM • BY [STEPHANIE GANZ](#)



UPDATE #2 — FEBRUARY 4, 2016; 11:28 AM

As more and more schools get their own Garden Patch, school officials are still scrambling to get volunteers to help with Fruit and Veggie Tasting Week the week of March 14th through 18th. Some schools don't have any volunteers at all and others only one or two. In order for the program to succeed and get healthier foods into our kids a few more folks need to step up.

Details and links to sign up are below.

— \$ \$ \$ —

UPDATE #1 — DECEMBER 16, 2015; 2:16 PM

School Garden Patches are opening up all over the city, and the program would love your help making those lunches go smoothly. Those lunch launches.

WHO SHOULD VOLUNTEER

- 1 People who like the concept of not being unhealthy
- 2 People who believe that children are our future
- 3 People who like hearing kids say “More broccoli, please!”
- 4 People who look good in aprons

WHAT IT REQUIRES FROM YOU

A little training (specific dates and times TBA until after the holidays, but expect them to be in January). Then just your presence during 10:30 – 1:30 lunch periods through the spring semester at various schools, helping kids grow up to be strong, healthy adults. If you’re up for it, that seems like a pretty cool way to spend your time.

HOW TO SIGN UP

For Fruit and Veggie Tastings, [please sign up here](#)

For Salad Bar launch help, [please sign up here](#)

— \$ \$ \$ —

ORIGINAL — SEPTEMBER 28, 2015

A school bell rings. The once empty, quiet cafeteria begins to fill with kids and noise—laughing, yelling, excited chatting, lunch trays slapping down onto those big tables with the seats attached.

Amazingly, in under an hour, a handful of school nutrition staff will feed hundreds of kids their midday meal before they go shuffling back to class for the rest of the day. Then comes the clean-up. And repeat, five days a week for an entire school year, sometimes longer. It’s a testament to efficiency and an essential part of the day for every student in public school.

Garden Patch Schools

- Bellevue Elementary

- Binford Middle
- Blackwell Elementary
- Broad Rock Elementary
- G.W. Carver Elementary
- John B. Cary Elementary
- Chimborazo Elementary
- Fairfield Court Elementary
- Ginter Park Elementary
- Linwood Holton Elementary
- M.J. Jones Elementary
- George Mason Elementary
- Oak Grove Elementary
- Overby-Sheppard Elementary
- G.H. Reid Elementary
- Richmond Community High
- Southampton Elementary
- Swansboro Elementary
- Westover Hills Elementary
- Woodville Elementary

Starting this October, [Greater Richmond Fit4Kids](#) and community partners will begin introducing Richmond City Public School students to a new option in the cafeteria—“Garden Patch” salad bars, a part of the Eat Fresh RPS initiative designed to encourage students to make healthy food choices. The idea is pretty simple: Kids spend about half of their time and can eat almost half of their meals at school, and when they’re given healthy options, they surprise us all by taking them! Sometimes!

“The initiative is designed to help students increase their fruit and vegetable choices and provide them access to fresh food in a city that has been designated as one of the three most severe food deserts in Virginia,” says [Smarter Lunchrooms](#) consultant Trista Grigsby. “And considering that students can eat breakfast, lunch, and, in some schools, dinner or after-school snack and summer meals, the food choices that students make at school are a significant percentage of what they eat for 13 years of schooling.”

Grigsby has spent the last decade working to get more nutritious food in public schools. She served as the Director of Nutrition Services for the Rappahannock County school district for three years; and before that, she was the Farm-to-Table Program Director and a Farm-to-Table sustainable agriculture teacher in the district.

Thanks to a \$100,000 grant from [The Community Foundation’s](#)

Impact 100; Greater Richmond Fit4Kids, The Virginia Health Department, VCU Healthy Lifestyles Center, Smarter Lunchrooms and Richmond City Public School's School Nutrition Services are able to collaborate in order to get these Garden Patches in 20 elementary schools in the Richmond City Public School district, serving approximately 12,000 students and impacting over 2,000,000 meals per year!

“Students and staff can have a choice of up to two ‘spoodles’ of fruit and three ‘spoodles’ of vegetables on their plates.” Grigsby explains. “A ‘spoodle,’ by the way, is a precise 1/4 cup, or 2 oz., measuring tool so that each kitchen is in compliance with the National School Lunch regulations and can accurately track consumption.”

So, what will students find on Garden Patch salad bars? “A wide range of fruits and vegetables for kids, from strawberries and apples and pineapples, and a wide range seasonal produce,” says Greater Richmond Fit4Kids Coalition Coordinator Bethany Brady Spalding. “Any food in season tastes better, and that’s what we want to do—to give kids the courage to try these items and come back for more.” They won’t find macaroni salad, bacon bits, and the like on these salad bars. The focus here is on fresh fruits and vegetables only.

PEER PRESSURE

The idea of having salad bars in public schools isn’t new, and yet, it’s pretty innovative for Richmond Public Schools. It takes dedication and money and time to dramatically change how larger institutions like school systems feed people. And it’s no wonder,—the Richmond City Public Schools’ School Nutrition Services department provides meals for approximately 24,000 students; and with much of the administration’s attention being claimed by academics, school meals can be low on the priority totem pole.

“Schools can be skeptical about new initiatives,” says Spalding. “People were concerned that kids wouldn’t eat fruits and vegetables. Why would a kid stop and get broccoli or fresh pineapple?” But in pilot programs, Spalding says, “students surprised the skeptics. Not only was it embraced, but it was widely embraced.”

According to Spalding, when a salad bar pilot program was introduced to the fifth grade class at Fox Elementary, the rest of the school was quickly clamoring to join in, and participation in the school food program overall saw a noticeable increase. “Once the salad bar started, they did a good job communicating, and more

students started buying school lunch to enjoy all these choices. It was a surprising success from the start. We're hoping this will show it can be done."

Fit4Kids CEO Mary Dunne says starting young is important. "I was kind of nervous," she admits. "What if they don't eat it? But the kids, 90% of them tried it and had a positive reaction, especially because it's elementary school kids." Dunne says that, in talking to colleagues with similar programs across the country, she found one key is to start in the elementary schools and then introduce in the high schools and middle schools.



"It's so we can encourage children to make healthier food choices throughout their lives," echoes Grigsby. "The food choices they make by the time they're in middle school develop into lifestyle choices, so the earlier we can introduce fruits and vegetables in a fun, exciting way in school lunches, the better."

The Eat Fresh RPS initiative does more than just plop a salad bar in the middle of a cafeteria. Grigsby explains that, "The Smarter Lunchrooms component of the grant intended to train all cafeteria managers in Richmond Public Schools on free or very inexpensive ways to promote the most nutritious items on the menu and provide one-on-one technical assistance to each of them as they set goals and work to meet those goals."

Grigsby will continue working directly with staff members, teaching

them suggestive selling techniques (the same tricks that make us buy a candy bar at the end of our trips to the supermarket, despite having successfully avoided an entire row of candy bars just minutes before) to promote healthy target items. Instead of an impulse buy like a bag of chips, for example, cafeteria staff may offer an apple or orange at check-out.

“It’s a personal choice of which Smarter Lunchroom strategies each manager chooses to implement. We just hope that all will do something, and that the small changes will guide students’ selection patterns,” says Grigsby. “For example, researchers at Cornell University’s Department of Behavioral Economics found that just placing a salad bar in a very accessible location in a lunch line can lead to a 300% increase in consumption.”

Grigsby hopes that teachers and other staff will use the Garden Patches too, adding “It’s a great deal for them—where else can you go and get fresh food at that price off a salad bar? Nowhere!”

FAMILY MATTERS

School meals represent a huge component in teaching kids how to make healthy choices, but there’s still the home environment to address. Bethany Spalding warns, “We can give all this great food to the kids at school and start to change their habits and preferences, but parents have to be part of that story and process.”

Spalding has seen success with programs like the one at Woodville Elementary, which offers “workshops for parents on healthy eating, getting parents familiar with what’s served at school, with visits to the school gardens to see what kids are growing and harvesting and eating.” Similarly, Fit4Kids’ Food Explorers Program, an after-school program designed to help students become smarter consumers, addresses eating habits at home and in restaurants and gives students the tools to make better decisions.

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At Creighton Court and Hillside Court, a Produce Prescription program actively encourages and inspires families to include more fresh fruits and vegetables at home. Families can come to the health clinic to get a prescription for fresh produce, which they can fill at nearby “Farmacies,” produce dispensaries managed by [Shalom Farms](#). Spalding adds that the prescription produce program includes “workshops designed to show easy, culturally sensitive, and appropriate ways to prepare and enjoy these items with their family at home.”

CALL FOR VOLS

School nutrition staff are creating such a large volume of meals, Bethany Spalding explains, it’s important to remember that they often face budget, time, and equipment limitations. “The public has been negative about school food for so long, but not familiar with their constraints.”

In the spring, Fit4Kids will partner with chefs to further educate Nutrition Services staff in how to best prepare fresh produce on a large scale. For National Nutrition Month next March, chefs from Whole Foods, FeedMore, and even the Governor’s Mansion will provide additional training for school nutrition staff, and schools will host Taste Tests featuring locally-sourced produce. Spalding says they’ve had interest in participation from local hotel and restaurant chefs: “We’ve had a great response. Chefs in the community are generous and care about our children.”

Fit4Kids CEO Mary Dunne says they’re looking for volunteers from the community for the Garden Patch launches. Each school will have a Garden Patch monitor during the first week to help kids learn how to use the salad bar appropriately, including “what to touch, what not to touch, how many servings of vegetables and fruit, and how to use it in a clean way.”

Trista Grigsby explains, “Volunteers will be helping students as they’re in line with learning a new system, which, believe me, is not easy when you have up to 900 students coming through for lunch shift.” For more information on volunteering, contact Kayla-Brooke Dransfield at kayla@grfit4kids.org or by phone at 571.264.4626.