

GOVERNOR LIKES CITY SCHOOLS' MENU

McAuliffe Seeks To Grow Local Options In Cafeteria

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By **KASSONDR A CLOOS**

HARRISONBURG — Putting aside partisan politics and the reason Gov. Terry McAuliffe visited her school on Monday, one young Smithland Elementary School student cut to the chase as soon as the governor introduced himself to her lunch table.

“Can you get me a fork?” she asked the first-year governor.

McAuliffe obliged, joking that he’s a “full-service” governor.

He and his wife, Dorothy, and Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry Todd Haymore visited Skyline Middle School — connected to Smithland — for lunch.

They were there to learn more about Harrisonburg City Public Schools’ success with using locally-grown food in its lunches.

Andrea Early, nutrition director for HCPS, is a “legend” in Virginia, Haymore said, and McAuliffe’s communications director, Jamie Radice, called her a national leader.

While many school divisions struggle to buy any food at all from local growers, HCPS spends about 10 percent of its annual food budget locally.

“We’ve got to come up with a plan so we can easily make it accessible for any school that wants to get the fresh-grown produce,” McAuliffe said. “But let’s be honest. I mean, Walmart is selling, you know, produce that has come maybe [from] places, farms that are days away. So, other folks are being able to do that. We ought to be able to do this.”

McAuliffe said he wants to make school divisions aware of federal grants to pay for local food and to



Gov. Terry McAuliffe listens to third-grader Blanca Perez Thomas at Smithland Elementary School during a visit to the school Monday. (Photos by Nikki Fox / DN-R)



Scott Kizner (left), superintendent of Harrisonburg City Public Schools, gives Gov. Terry McAuliffe a tour of Skyline Middle School.

encourage them to apply for the funding.

Buying local is good for the kids, the farms and the state, he said.

“When kids eat well, they learn well,” Dorothy McAuliffe said, explaining that the healthiest food is often what’s grown closest to home. “That’s what I care about, as a mom.”

The first lady has been campaigning to end food insecurity in Virginia, where she says there are 300,000 children at risk of going hungry.

She wants to find a way to bring better food to more families, which is one of the benefits of the Harrisonburg division’s local food initiative.

Haymore said he hopes to have a plan soon to help more schools follow in HCPS’ footsteps.

Some state laws or regulations might create red tape for divisions, and he wants to get those rolled back, he said.

“Even during tough budgetary times, there are things the state can do to help school systems get healthier choices for the students and have the ability to buy more locally grown produce and other products,” Haymore said.

Even though agriculture is one of the top industries in the state, Haymore said it’s sometimes easier or more profitable for farmers to sell their products elsewhere, including internationally.

Virginia needs to figure out how to change that, he said.

Early said it’s easy for Harrisonburg to get nearby produce and meat in its cafeterias because the division has just eight schools within a few miles of one another.

It’s not as easy for divisions with many smaller schools spread over a larger area, she said.

Rockingham County Public Schools, for example, uses little from local sources.

Still, Early said it’s important to procure local food, and every division has the ability to get some Virginia-grown items.

“This is wonderful for farmers,” she said. “If we’re going to spend our money, and we have the opportunity to spend it locally, I think it makes sense to do that. But ultimately, we are doing this because we want good nutrition for these kids.”

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