



Laker Schools making strides with Farm to School initiative

Elkton-Pigeon-Bay Port Laker students are reaping bushels of benefits with the Farm to School initiative, which is in its second year. Students are being introduced to a variety of fresh produce and tasty new dishes that have never been on the school menu before.

Cinamon Marker, the Laker Farm to School Program coordinator, creates lunch specials that are made with fresh ingredients in the school cafeterias. Students enjoy these dishes twice a week at both schools.

Marker wants students to have more of a choice of healthy foods at lunchtime.

“I’ve always been passionate about cooking,” Marker said. “I’m a big fan of the farm to table concept.”

Marker was hired as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm to School planning grant that Lakers received last school year. This \$43,688 grant, written by Laker Elementary Principal Kathy Dickens, will help the district come up with a plan to implement a farm-to-school initiative. Marker was

hired on a part-time basis to create a network of organizations and individuals and work with them to provide local produce. She also searches for and develops recipes for lunch specials and desserts.

One of the most popular lunch specials was a non-processed version of Lunchables. Students received a plate of whole-grain crackers, ham, turkey, a variety of cheeses, fruit and veggies (such as carrots and sugar snap peas).

Marker has a background in culinary education and is experienced at food preparation. She's worked for caterers and at various venues, such as the Palace of Auburn Hills. She also assisted nutritionist Renee Stacer in the Cooking Matters program through MSU Extension. Two Cooking Matters classes have been offered so far at Laker Elementary.

Marker, with the help of students, also distributes a healthy snack of fresh produce about once a month as part of a \$7,500 Chef Ann grant. Individual-sized servings of in season fruits or vegetables are handed out to each classroom for students to try. Some of the snacks served so far include grapes, pears and cabbage.

Harvest of the Month is another program Marker is involved with, in partnership with the PE-NUT program that encourages physical activity and nutritious eating habits. The Harvest of the Month features a fruit or vegetable that is included in four to six recipes that are included on the salad bars at both schools. Some of the featured produce has included beets, sweet potatoes, apples and green beans.

Marker recently started working with the elementary student council to create healthy, sweet no-bake snacks to sell to the rest of the school. The goal is to raise enough money to buy more ingredients for future snack-making. The first snack the group made was Monster Cookie Balls (made with ingredients such as peanut butter, oatmeal, rice cereal and honey, among other items).

More culinary adventures are on the way for Laker students. Marker recently received a \$1,500 grant from the Huron County Community Foundation that will be used for cooking classes for secondary school students. She'd like the cooking class participants to work in teams to come up with a lunch entrée, and one of them will be chosen to appear on a future lunch menu.

Marker is excited about how the Farm to School activities help students learn more about where their food comes from and what it means to eat healthy. She also likes getting student input on what they like, because it gives them more ownership of what they consume at lunchtime.

"It's important to involve students in the process," she said.

Dickens applied for the implementation grant, the next step in the USDA Farm to School program. Implementation grants range from \$65,000 to \$100,000 and are for school districts to help further develop their farm to school initiatives. Receiving the planning grant should help the district's chances of getting the implementation grant, she said.

Lakers was one of only two school districts in Michigan to receive a planning grant in the 2015-16 school year. The other district was the City of Muskegon Public Schools.