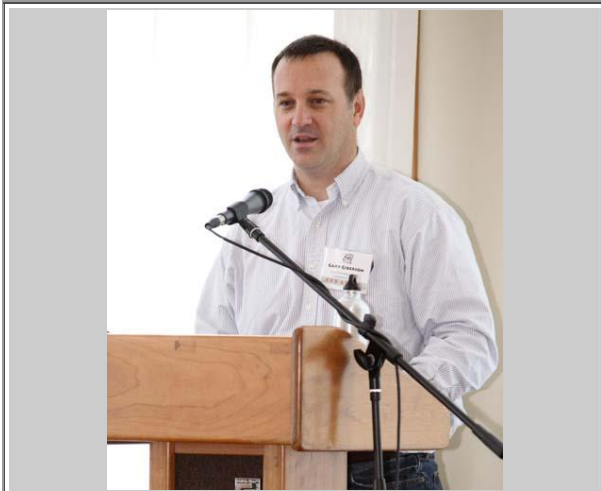


IN THE KITCHEN: Taking the lead on school nutrition

Friday, May 1, 2009 2:03 PM EDT

By Pat Tanner Special Writer



Gary Giberson, director of the Lawrenceville School's Dining Services, addressing the New Jersey Farm-to-School Network's inaugural conference. Mr. Giberson 'delineated six steps to sustainable dining halls and encouraged those who are in charge of school food-service programs to ask the right questions about the food they provide.' Paloma Torres/The Lawrenceville School

When the first-ever statewide conference on bringing local, healthy food into our New Jersey schools was held recently at The Lawrenceville School, it became apparent to me and the other 200 attendees that the Princeton area is at the forefront of the movement. Key organizers included Mikey Azzara, co-founder of the Lawrenceville Farmers' Market and former outreach officer for the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Jersey, Beth Feehan, co-founder of the West Windsor Farmers' Market, and Gary Giberson, executive chef of the Lawrenceville School and founder of Sustainable Fare, a food-service provider and consultancy.

Our schools were also well represented among the prestigious lineup of speakers, which included those involved on national and state levels, such as Josh Viertel, president of Slow

Food USA, and New Jersey Secretary of Agriculture Douglas H. Fisher.

Lawrenceville's Gary Giberson told the group about his efforts connecting farms and school cafeterias, for which he has received national recognition. He delineated six steps to sustainable dining halls and encouraged those who are in charge of school food-service programs to ask of the food they provide: Can it be purchased fresh? How far has it been transported? Is it processed? Does it have good nutritional value? How is it packaged? Does it taste good?

Mr. Giberson demonstrated the fruits of his labors in dramatic fashion by providing the day's lunch, many of the ingredients for which were locally sourced and comprised of dishes typically served to students at the Lawrenceville School. To say that attendees — including this one — were impressed would be an understatement. Among the offerings were a sandwich of roast turkey and New Jersey cranberry compote on pecan bread and another, on French bread, of tomatoes from the Rutgers EcoComplex in Burlington County, housemade mozzarella cheese, and pesto made from basil grown in the school's

organic garden. To accompany these, Mr. Giberson and his crew served the three outstanding whole grain salads.

At the outset Mikey Azzara explained the motivation behind the conference, which brought together a network of almost 30 groups from around the state, including parents, teachers, farmers, school food-service professionals, and nonprofit and governmental food-access advocates and agencies. “All of us who want to have a farm-to-school program or who have been running a successful program have not been communicating. This is a momentous day in New Jersey,” Mr. Azzara said. “We’re rebuilding the connection between New Jersey education and New Jersey farms.”

Two of the three speakers of a session on successful school- gardening programs represent local schools. Mary Capoferri of the Waldorf School of Princeton in Montgomery teaches gardening to pre- schoolers through eighth graders via the school’s two- acre biodynamic garden, which is almost 25 years old. She described how the gardening classes involve the entire school community and how in 2007 a solar-powered geodesic dome was built with the help of parents.

Dorothy Mullen spoke about her work as a founding member of the Princeton School Garden Co-op. She is also founder of The Suppers Programs, table-based support groups for people who want to lead healthier lives. Ms. Mullen talked about “getting to yes” on establishing gardens in public schools — a Herculean but attainable task that involves the school principal and/or administrator, teachers, a steering team or garden coordinator, parents, students, community volunteers, custodial and cafeteria staff, librarians, and school gardeners in neighboring towns. About the garden at the Riverside School, she proudly stated, “We now have no children left in the school who can remember NOT having a school garden!” (Princeton’s 50-page guide to establishing school gardens is at www.prsk12.nj.us/gardencoop.)