

CAPE COD TIMES

EDUCATION

Vineyard students see fruits of labor

Gov. Baker signs law to designate October Farm-to-School Month

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BOSTON — Thanks in part to three years of work by Martha's Vineyard Public Charter School students, October will now be recognized as Massachusetts Farm-to-School Month.

A group of students from the island school helped write and lobbied for the bill to create the designation, as part of an interdisciplinary class of science and social studies, said Jonah Maidoff, a teacher at the island school.

"It was a great learning experience," charter school student Ryan Scherer said about getting to experience first-hand how the legislative process works.

Noli Taylor, president of Island Grown Schools, a nonprofit that presents garden-based learning programs, provided the students with examples of similar laws from other states on which to base the bill.

Students each took a section of the other laws, and tailored them to fit Massachusetts, Maidoff said.

"You had to read the bill about 5,000 times, over and over," charter school student Lucy Thompson said.

The students made a presentation on why farm-to-school should be recognized throughout the state bill before a legislative committee, Lucy said.

"It was totally nerve-wracking," she said.

The final bill was signed into law Wednesday by Gov. Charlie Baker. Farm-to-School month will recognize the "vital role agriculture plays in the culture, heritage and economy of the commonwealth, and to commend the farm-to-school programs which support improved nutrition and academic achievement," according to the law.

The law encourages the state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Department of Agricultural Resources, and the Department of Public Health to initiate a joint task force in collaboration with the Massachusetts Farm-to-School Project to think of ways to spread farm-to-school programs to more schools.

“This has been a wonderful opportunity to work with students from Martha's Vineyard and across the Commonwealth to recognize and promote the importance of locally grown food and farm to school programs,” the bill's sponsor, outgoing state Rep. Timothy Madden, D-Nantucket, said in a statement. “The students have been there every step of the way, from proposing the idea and testifying, to being part of the bill signing.”

The Baker administration is committed to supporting local agriculture and increasing access to fresh, healthy food in the state, according to a statement from his office.

Approximately 828 schools in the state with an estimated 422,072 students participate in farm-to-school programs, according to the 2015 U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm-to-School Census. In 2015, Massachusetts school districts invested \$10,262,200 in local food, according to the statement from Baker's office. Approximately 114 farms across the state provide food to school cafeterias, according to the statement.

Besides promoting the growing and eating of more local foods, student Isabella Morais hopes the new law shows other students that they can get stuff done in government.

“Students can be more active,” Isabella said. “They can go out and make a difference.”

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