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Park Junior High students 'sell' local foods

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By **JANE MICHAELS** jmichaels@pioneerlocal.com

If La Grange eighth-grader James Kowalski could be any vegetable, he'd choose to dress up in a carrot costume for passing out pamphlets to promote buying local foods.

"Definitely a carrot. I eat them every day," said James, who collaborated with classmates at Park Junior High in LaGrange Park on a campaign to educate consumers.

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Eighth-grade science students at Park Junior High School in LaGrange Park address questions about their ideas to promote locally grown foods during a visit Feb. 22 from local and regional planning officials. From left are village presidents Michael Garvey of Brookfield, James Discipio of LaGrange Park, Mayor Gerald Bennet of Palos Hills, Randy Blankenhorn, director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, and village presidents Michael Gorman of Riverside and Liz Asperger of La Grange.

energy to bring our food here."

The average fresh food item in students' homes traveled 1,500 miles from the field where it was grown, their research found. But buying locally grown produce cuts down on transportation costs, energy consumption and pollution. Instead, buying locally boosts the local economy with jobs and money spent in town, according to students' posters, PowerPoints and brochures.

Chase Davidson of La Grange was moved to write a song with his group featuring a rousing chorus, "We eat our crops and lick our chops. They taste so good, I think we should buy some local crops."

"I play piano and hear beats and notes," Chase explained. "It was really fun to write and work together."

Another group worked on a video. Seamus Henneberry of LaGrange Park said he was disappointed he wasn't in the finished product, after

Daniel Niedermeyer of La Grange also said he'd be willing to dress as a carrot while passing out brochures in La Grange's central business district, possibly this summer. But Matt Fisher of La Grange said he could see himself as a bunch of broccoli, or maybe a banana.

"Bananas are bright and happy, and it would make me look taller," Matt joked.

Students said they had fun working in teams on projects advocating the purchase of locally grown foods, after their research yielded surprising results.

"At home we wrote down where the food in our pantry came from. We didn't have any food from local places, except for apples from Michigan," said Kelly Riordan of La Grange. "Everything was from far away, and I didn't realize it. I was really surprised it took a lot of

he was willing to dress as a good fairy, enlightening shoppers about the benefits of buying locally grown foods.

"Instead of using a lot of fuel and buying from different markets in China and Japan, local foods would benefit the local community with money spent here," Seamus said. "I'm happy with the message we turned out."

Students also said they were pleased with the response from area village presidents and leaders from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which represents seven counties. Officials visited Feb. 22 to hear students' ideas and ask questions for the agency's Go To 2040 initiative.

"I never could have predicted their enthusiasm and energy," said Park science, technology, engineering and math teacher Sydney Schuler, who connected her students with the planning group. "It's like they ignited this fire."

One of the students' suggestions was to hold a regional day to promote locally grown foods.

"Imagine how a 14-year-old feels to have some mayors listening to him," Schuler said. "CMAP was grateful for the input, but the learning opportunity for these kids was great, too. There was a real reason to put out all that energy, they really felt like they were making a difference.

"And there was an emotional component, a huge emotional component in making the world a better place."

Erin Aleman, a senior planner and head of outreach for the planning agency, and Schuler developed a lesson plan for the unit, which will be shared with area middle schools across the region.

In addition to gleaning additional ideas for future communities, the project helped educate and involve Park students, Aleman said.

"Seeing young people embrace and understand how important their future is was very inspiring, and they can definitely take it to the community," Aleman said. "I was so impressed with the students. They're so smart."

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