

Give Rochester students food for thought

ROC 12:33 a.m. EST February 25, 2014



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As if there weren't enough challenges facing students in Rochester city schools, add childhood obesity to the list. With research showing that the healthier a child is, the more ready he or she is to learn, both new and ongoing efforts to improve students' well-being must be encouraged and, where appropriate, enhanced.

Among the more recent initiatives, the Greater Rochester Health Foundation is using a \$2 million grant to [improve the eating habits](http://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/2014/02/20/programs-city-schools-connect-kids-healthy-choices/5653339/) of kids in five city schools. In fact, the program, which

introduces students to healthy food options, encourages them not just to eat smart during the school day, but to advocate for healthier choices at home.

That's important, given studies that show families with lower incomes — which most city students hail from — have less access to healthy options. In fact, North East Area Development executive director George Moses and fellow organizers last summer opened the Freedom Market — a corner store in the city's Beechwood neighborhood — to address just that problem. The grocery provides residents in the city's northeast quadrant with much-needed fresh produce and other healthy options.

Foodlink, too, supplies healthy foods, including at [farm stands throughout the city](http://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/lifestyle/2013/07/11/foodlink-farmstands-are-opening/2509917/) and, last summer, via a “mobile farm stand” — a truck that visited more than two dozen sites.

Such initiatives dovetail nicely with a national anti-childhood-obesity campaign that marked its fourth anniversary last week: Michelle Obama's “[Let's Move](http://www.letsmove.gov/)” effort. The first lady, who has made childhood wellness a personal issue, has been part cheerleader, part role model in extolling the virtues of regular exercise and healthy eating.

It's not always an easy sell. Several states dropped new, healthier school lunch standards after students snubbed the meals and districts lost money. The problem, as in too many low-income homes: preferences for less-healthy — and often less-pricey — fare too often win out.

That's where the [Greater Rochester Health Foundation](http://www.thegrhf.org/) program, which includes creative efforts like introducing students to a new fruit or vegetable each month, can make strides. In addition, “recess experts” lead kids in mid-day exercise while safe routes for biking and walking to school are being identified.

With 40 percent of Rochester kids overweight or obese — and overweight children much more likely to remain obese as adults — unhealthy eating and exercise habits must be upended early. Lessons being provided in city schools must be reinforced at home.