A door to a classroom opens and the students turn to see who walks in. A blue shirt that reads “I heart fruits & veggies” catches their eyes and they perk up, leaning over their desks to see what the visitor is holding — a bag of this month’s fruit or vegetable. It’s Farm to School day and never have you seen kids so excited about fruits and vegetables. But that is the norm for the interns at Farm to School who bring this program to schools and create an “edible curriculum.”

Sheila Mcquaid is the Farm to Fork coordinator at Center for Healthy Communities. The duties, programs, and work she does is so broad, we both had to settle on only one thing to discuss. I knew it had to be Farm to School based on how quickly she lit up when our conversation turned to the program. Farm to School is a program designed to help educate K-6 students about local and seasonal produce. As you can imagine, the first time a student is handed a vegetable, their instinct is to turn up their nose at it. But with Farm to School, the students begin to not only discover the importance of the produce presented, but the farmers who bring it to them. It doesn’t take long before fresh produce becomes more than just something the students push around on their dinner plates at night. Studies have shown that students who are educated on the importance of fresh, whole food tend to reach for the apple in the cafeteria before the chocolate cake. This is more than just a fun day in class, it is an important way to teach children the importance of healthy eating beyond the food chart.

“Some children have never seen some of the produce we bring in,” Sheila told me. “We always bring strawberries in May, and I can’t tell you how surprising it is when the teacher emails us after the tasting to thank us for our program, telling us there are some students who have never eaten a fresh strawberry before!” While this should be a shocking sentiment, it is actually a reality. The program prides itself on knowing that the work they do is more than just educational and delicious, but a necessity.

Farm to School reaches over 25,000 K-6 students each year throughout the community. In fact, the grants given to Farm to School go directly back into the local community as Sheila gets the privilege of contacting local farmers to find the produce of the month. The positive relationships Sheila has created with these farmers is reflected in how successful this program has been. The more we begin to appreciate the bounty of fabulous produce we have in our community, the better it is for everyone.