

## **NYC Schools Get Applesauce from China**

By Shane Dixon Kavanaugh

*Sunday, May 29, 2011*

Apples are the official fruit of New York State and the pride of its agricultural system. No fewer than 21 varieties grow in the state, the nation's second-largest apple producer. New York's apples are sold far and wide, including to the city Department of Education, which serves applesauce in its schools.

It turns out, however, that not all that applesauce comes from the Empire State, despite the department's pledge to buy more local food. In fact, at least some of it—the DOE won't disclose how much—comes from China.

Documents show that a food importer used by city schools purchased thousands of cans of applesauce from Shanghai last year. Other data show that canned pears, peaches, tuna and spinach from the Far East were also dished out.

“The Department of Education gets an ‘A’ for serving applesauce,” said Cecil Corbin-Mark, the deputy director of We Act for Environmental Justice, a nonprofit advocating for more locally grown food in schools. “But it gets an ‘F’ for sourcing it 11,295 miles away ... and serving it from a can instead of fresh from a tree in New York state.”

The DOE has promoted its efforts to serve nutritious food, which is often purchased from upstate and elsewhere in the Northeast. It has highlighted lunch menus free of monosodium glutamate, trans fats and artificial ingredients and has encouraged school vegetable gardens. The system gets 36% of its produce and dairy from what it says are local producers, according to a statement, though it does not define “local.”

### **Parents, Politicians Frustrated**

But food from China is not local by any stretch of the imagination.

“It shocks me,” said Beatriz Beckford, a school food coordinator with the Brooklyn Food Coalition.

Ms. Beckford, whose son is a preschooler in Bedford-Stuyvesant, said parents have tried to learn more about where school food comes from but with little success.

“There are a lot of things we need information on,” she said.

Councilwoman Gale Brewer introduced a bill early this year that would require agencies to make greater efforts to buy local food, but it has been tabled since February. In any case, it excludes city schools because state law gives the chancellor control over such purchases.

Food from China represents a fraction of what the DOE buys, according to the statement. “We are working with our distributors to buy more locally,” the department said.

A major challenge is that city law requires the agency's food distributors to buy from the lowest bidder.

## Whatever's Cheapest

“Budgetary constraints are the name of the game,” said Chris Buckley, president of Northeast Marketing Co., in Lakeville, Mass., which has imported applesauce from China purchased by Driscoll Foods of Clifton, N.J., a distributor for the Department of Education.

The commodities market is global and constantly shifting, Mr. Buckley said, and his company buys from whoever provides the best price. Despite transportation and other costs, sometimes that's China.

Of the items Crain's identified, Driscoll bought nearly all the school food from China, including the applesauce. The company declined to comment. Driscoll obtained most of the canned fruit and tuna from importer Port Royal Premium, in Woodbury, N.Y. Labels on the cans show they came from China.

The Department of Education serves more than 860,000 meals a day at a cost of \$142 million a year. It is the country's second-largest public purchaser of food, behind the Department of Defense.

Some of the \$20 million the DOE spends on produce has gone to local growers. The New York Apple Association said it has worked closely with the department in recent years to bring more of the state's fruits and vegetables to city schools.

“The [city] really leads the nation in school food,” said David McClurg, vice president of marketing for the association, which represents more than 600 growers. “And they've made some amazing changes.”

For example, city schools specify a preference for New York apples when they are using federal funding. Even some upstate school districts in the heart of apple country don't do that.

But the association was surprised to learn that the DOE gets applesauce from halfway around the globe.

“Why not support local agriculture if you've got to buy the applesauce anyway?” a spokesman asked. “We'd put our apples and our applesauce against anyone in the world.”

*A version of this article appeared in the May 30, 2011 print issue of Crain's New York Business.*