Editorial: Help kids reach for healthy food

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With the new school year soon to start, student nutrition will again return as a much-discussed topic of concern.

Childhood obesity in America is a growing problem that requires creative solutions. Some schools have banned junk food and beefed up lunch menus with healthy offerings.

Of course healthy nutrition is supposed to begin at home. Mothers and fathers are expected to ensure that kids don’t live on a diet made up primarily of burgers and fries. That’s easy to say, but reality is that some families simply don’t have easy access to healthy food. Many children don’t benefit from a guiding parental figure who teaches healthy eating. In many cases the parents themselves were raised on junk food. In these situations, schools play a vital role in changing attitudes.

Bridgeton’s very own Rutgers Food Innovation Center has joined this fight to support healthy choices for children.

The center has teamed with the state Department of Agriculture to utilize a $51,000 grant to promote healthy school meals. The idea here is to connect local schools with local farmers. This obviously helps the kids, but it also gives the growers a fresh outlet for their goods.

The healthy kid food craze is a recent trend, with places like McDonald’s offering apple slices as an alternative to french fries. The sale of packaged apple slices has become big business, so the doorway is opening to steering kids away from a diet of non-stop sugar and fat.

In addition to the school food effort, the Food Innovation Center has also teamed with a Camden youth fitness club operator to develop a line of health snacks, called the “Paleokit.” Items include nuts, berries and beef jerky.

It’s not just a matter of offering this stuff to kids, though. The youths in Steve Liberati’s non-profit fitness center are getting involved in the business of healthy foods. These inner-city kids, “in need of direction in life,” according to Liberati, helped launch the paleokit and are helping package the products at the center for sale around the world.

In the process, these kids earn some money, learn about business and take control of their dietary choices.

When children have some participation in the process, they are more likely to stick with better choices.

Many Cumberland County children could benefit from a similar program. Perhaps the model developed by Liberati is one that could be duplicated locally. Remember, the Rutgers Food Innovation Center is right here in our backyard. Let’s put it to work for our kids, too.