



What is Farm to School?

FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAMS CONNECT SCHOOLS WITH LOCAL FARMS

Schools buy and feature farm fresh foods such as fruits and vegetables, eggs, honey, meat and beans on their menus; incorporate nutrition based curriculum; and provide students experiential learning opportunities through farm visits, gardening and recycling programs. Farmers have access to a new market through schools and participate in programs designed to educate kids about local food and agriculture.

SCHOOL DISTRICTS IMPLEMENT PROGRAMS IN SEVERAL WAYS

1. Farm Fresh Salad Bar offered as part of the National School Lunch Program.
2. Local food featured in the cafeteria.
3. Local food featured at a fundraiser or special event.
4. Local food used in “hot lunch” offering.

FARMERS SELL TO SCHOOLS IN SEVERAL WAYS

Some examples include:

- Selling directly to schools by establishing a relationship with the food service staff.
- Selling directly to schools, but through a Farmers’ Market
- Selling through a cooperative structure where farmers come together to minimize the transportation and administration costs.
- Selling to wholesale distributors.
- Selling to the Department of Defense’s Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, which delivers local food to schools.

FARM TO SCHOOL CAN PROVIDE A VARIETY OF EXCITING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Learning opportunities for children can take the form of school gardens, recycling and composting programs, farm visits, hands on nutrition education classes, classroom visits by farmers, cooking demonstrations, etc.

Produced by the National Farm to School Program

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Why Farm to School?

CHILD NUTRITION CRISIS

During the past 20 years there has been a dramatic increase in obesity in the United States. The percentage of school-age children 6-11 years that are overweight more than doubled between the late 1970s and 2000, from 6.5% to 15.3%. The percent of overweight adolescents ages 12-19 tripled from 5 to 15.5% in the same time period.ⁱ Research shows that obesity is particularly impacting young people of Mexican and African American descent. Family income also seems to impact dietary choices and therefore obesity in children. Children of families below 130% of the federal poverty threshold are twice as likely to be overweight than those above the threshold.ⁱ

The widespread availability of unhealthy food and drinks on school campuses had contributed to children's poor eating habits. There is an urgent need to educate children about food and choices that affect their health. A study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control in 2002 shows that only 23% of children in the country consumed more than five servings of fruits and vegetables a day.ⁱⁱ Research has shown that a poor diet and lack of physical activity influence a child's ability to learn and decrease motivation and attentiveness.

STRUGGLING FAMILY FARMS

While our children are eating unhealthy foods, our farmers are losing out on potential markets due to globalization and corporate consolidation in agribusiness. The farmer share of the food dollar has dropped from 41 cents in 1950 to 20 cents in 1999.ⁱⁱⁱ

Farm to school programs are one solution to the crisis facing small farms. Farm to school offers a new market to family farmers, especially urban-edge farmers who bring the added benefit of preserving open space and slowing sprawl. And by showing children that fresh local produce is delicious, farm to school connections turn on the next generation of consumers to locally grown food.

FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAMS ARE A GOOD MODEL FOR:

- Promoting healthy eating habits in children and reducing their risk for obesity and related health disorders.
- Providing children the access to local, healthy and fresh foods.
- Facilitating education about nutrition, food and agriculture through the curriculum and activity-based or experiential learning.
- Increasing school lunch participation and thereby revenues for the school.
- Opening up new markets and increasing revenues for farmers.
- Generating community support and awareness about local food systems and agriculture.
- Keeping agricultural land as open space.
- Influencing policy makers at local, state and federal level about a variety of issues such as school food and school environments, food assistance programs, support for local food systems and agriculture, and promoting healthy eating and lifestyle choices in our communities.

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ⁱ Center for Disease Control 2002, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/brfss/>

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Economic Research Service, US Department of Agriculture, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodPriceSpreads/bill/>



How Can You Get Involved in Farm to School?

BE INCLUSIVE!

A successful farm to school program involves a wide range of people and organizations – students, parents, school principals, board members and administrators, school food service staff, teachers, PTA, community members, farmers and farmer organizations. The projects may be initiated by any of these stakeholders, but it is important to be as inclusive as possible in the project, as each one of these groups / individuals brings a unique set of ideas, skills and resources to the program. Students, parents and community groups can help provide resources and volunteer time and effort; school staff and administration help find ways to implement the program; farmers and farm groups can contribute time to conduct classroom sessions and farm visits, in addition to supplying the fresh produce needs of the school. You can get involved by finding existing programs in your area, or begin the process of starting a new one.

TIPS FOR STARTING A FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAM:

1. Start organizing by bringing folks together for a meeting, or start smaller with an inspirational activity, such as arranging a farm tour, or a tree planting on campus, to generate interest.
2. Research existing programs in your area. Contact your state farm to school contact person (see www.farmtoschool.org), local school district, farm bureau and community groups for information.
3. Contact local farms, farmers' market managers, farm bureaus, and any other agencies working with farmers in your area. Establish a seasonal availability list, if it is not available through these sources.
4. Contact the food service director and administrators in the local school district. Review existing menus and infrastructure in schools to facilitate inclusion of fresh, local produce in menus.
5. Facilitate dialogue between farmers and school food services staff to understand each others' needs better. A good relationship between these two stakeholders is important for the long-term stability and sustainability of the project.
6. Convene a Farm to School organizing meeting with all the stakeholders involved to assess the feasibility of the program in your area. We can provide a sample agenda, organizing tools, and survey materials.
7. Identify possible funding sources as you gather information about farming and school food service.
8. Market the program to parents, teachers, students and community members.
9. Volunteer time at the school to assist in implementing the program – this may involve setting up a school garden, waste recycling or composting program; transporting kids to a local farm; conducting a cooking demonstration or nutrition education class; creating brochures and marketing materials; making presentations to the school board; helping in the cafeteria; writing an article for the local paper; etc.

PLAN, PLAN, PLAN: Many projects run into problems because of lack of planning. Plan ahead and involve as many people and groups as possible.

TAKE SMALL STEPS: For example, pilot a program at one school and learn from that experience before expanding to more school sites. Start with a small group of farmers, or start with one or two products that need minimal preparation (apples and oranges).

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How Can Farm to School Work in Different Climates?

There is a common perception that farm to school programs are more difficult to organize in areas with colder climates. While seasonality may appear to be a barrier, folks in the Midwest and Northeast have found some very creative ways to develop farm to school programs that reflect the flavors and features of their regions. One successful strategy has been to emphasize farm purchases in the fall and spring, when a variety of crops are more abundant. Fall is a wonderful time for apples, which are produced in many regions of the country and are generally popular with children. Apples that are small in size and hard to sell through normal channels are a big hit with students.

New York has used this strategy by establishing "NY Harvest for NY Kids", an annual week-long event that takes place in October and is backed by the state legislature. During this week, field trips to farmers' markets or on nearby farms, give students the opportunity to churn butter, make applesauce, milk cows, and participate in other farm-related experiences. Last year, beef from a local farm was used to make hamburgers! The exposure to the bounty of New York farms led to the creation of a Farm to School Committee within the New York School Food Service Association, which is now looking for new ways to incorporate New York product into New York schools.

Another strategy is to focus on special events or special meals, offered during different seasons and prepared using locally grown products. This has the advantage of highlighting what's in season during the school year. For example, some schools in Wisconsin offer three special meals every year—one each in the fall, winter and spring. Educational sessions also lead up to these celebratory events, and parents are invited to eat dinner with their children and experience the seasonal menus.

Another method of highlighting the seasons is to pick a fruit or vegetable of the month, and have that product featured once a week or more in the lunch program. Some of the winter crops that might be highlighted include potatoes, sweet potatoes, beans, eggs, honey, kale, winter squash and apple cider, and products that have been canned, dried, frozen or stored. Here's another creative strategy from Wisconsin:

The Wisconsin Homegrown Lunch Program is considering offering a free choice fruits and vegetable program, provided to children during lunch or as a snack. The produce would be purchased locally whenever possible, and supplemented with non-local food as dictated by the season.

One of the best ways to use the seasonal produce is to prepare for those cold, snowy months by processing the abundant harvest of summer and fall to last all year. This can be done by either school food service staff or the farmers, but it is generally the farmers who take on this task. Most schools are not equipped to do food processing - many of them lack the tools, storage space, and labor necessary to process fresh fruits and vegetables. One great example of this strategy comes from North Florida - where it gets chilly in the winter!

The New North Florida Cooperative began selling collard greens to the local schools, but found that their product was suffering from the heat during the summer months, and not lasting through the school season in the winter months. So they decided to do what was necessary to deliver fresh, perky collards in the summer, and bags of chopped, frozen collards in the winter. By purchasing basic

processing equipment, they were able to wash, chop and bag collards that were ready to cook, or ready for the freezer. The schools appreciated the product in its processed form, which saved them labor.

Salad bars are a popular item in school cafeterias, particularly with farm-fresh produce. Salad bars abound in warmer climates, but even in areas such as New Mexico, it is difficult to find farm produce year-round for a complete salad bar. Because of this reality, most salad bars incorporate non-farm produce during the colder months. New Mexico is a good example of this, and has experimented with several kinds of salad bars.

In the Santa Fe Unified School District, one of the elementary schools has a salad bar every day. The salad bar at this site includes a meat entrée three times a week and a vegetarian item twice a week, and is the only meal offered. The food service director has noticed less plate waste than before the salad bar was introduced. The other elementary school offers a side salad of mixed greens, sunflower sprouts, and other seasonal items with lunch, and is part of the National School Lunch Program. The high school has a separate salad bar; students have the choice of the salad bar or a hot lunch.

Although colder climates do not have the benefit of a long growing season, the above examples illustrate that it is possible, nevertheless, to create a thriving farm to school program. Some of the most successful programs are those that integrate agriculture education with what is eaten in the lunchroom. Incorporating agriculture into the curriculum, involving students in school gardens, touring a local farm or visiting a farmers' market - all of these experiences help children to understand the connection between what they eat and their own health and nutrition. This is a strategy that can be pursued by everyone.