

Wisconsin Farm to School success stories

Plymouth High School: Food Science and Agriculture Center



February, 2017

It all started with a small group of educators and a big idea: “What if our high school could grow its own food? What if we could create a state-of-the-art facility and a place for community learning?” recalls Jessica Mella, Plymouth School District’s Nutrition and Wellness Coordinator.

In September 2015, that dream became a reality when Plymouth High School opened a 5,100 square foot Food Science and Agriculture Center (FSAC) on campus. The new building includes a greenhouse and indoor classroom space, fulfilling the farm to high school vision by providing students with a hands-on setting to explore agriculture, food science and culinary arts.

As soon as the Food Science and Agriculture Center was completed, classes such as Botany, Sustainable Food Production and Biotechnical Engineering started using the new space to teach students both soil-based and hydroponic growing techniques. Students are even experimenting with a combination of freshwater prawns and lettuce in an aquaponics system that uses nutrients from water, instead of soil, for plant growth.

“Not only do students have a better idea of how quality food is produced, but the greenhouse also provides them with an authentic learning experience,” explains Tracy Heinbuch, Agriscience Educator and FFA Advisor at Plymouth High. Unlike a traditional indoor classroom environment, at the FSAC students can directly apply scientific concepts through food production and preparation. Educators have a hands-on opportunity to encourage young students to cultivate their talents and consider professional careers in Wisconsin’s agricultural system.

Greenhouse grown in the cafeteria

Plymouth School District Food Service Director Tony DeStefano and District Chef Caren Johnson already featured student-grown food on the cafeteria lunch line before the FSAC opened. The high school’s agriculture students were even involved in raising hogs for menu offerings like BBQ pork sandwiches, pork tacos and ground pork stuffed peppers. Students grew produce for school meals such as string beans, squash and lettuce in outdoor gardens, but were limited by the short growing season during the academic year. With the addition of the FSAC greenhouse, season extension has greatly expanded the opportunities for food service staff to serve fresh, student-grown vegetables from September through June.

The district has observed that providing more food raised by students corresponds with less plate waste and higher participation in the school lunch program. Mella features school-grown produce in the district’s “Harvest of the



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Month” program, which highlights a different local fruit or vegetable on the lunch menu each month. Promotional materials in the cafeteria encourage students to try garden items that they may be unfamiliar with. “Students really like to take the items that were grown in the greenhouse,” explains Jessica Mella. “Even if it’s something they’ve never seen before, like sunflower sprouts, they’re more willing to give it a try if they know it was grown here.”

Community involvement

Not only does FSAC benefit high school students, but the whole Plymouth community is invited to make the most of the space. “We wanted the greenhouse to be a place where the outside community would feel welcome in the school,” says Mella. “We hope this space helps people feel like this is their building, too.”

High school students host community members at FSAC by leading public tours of the greenhouse, helping Heinbuch teach adult hydroponics classes, and contributing their skills and talents through other outreach opportunities. The school has hosted several open house events in the greenhouse space, like a “Warm Winter’s Night” event that featured warm apple cider and food prepared by high school culinary students.

From pie in the sky to the sky’s the limit

A resource such as the FSAC is not created overnight. The Plymouth school district has been involved in farm to school initiatives since 2011, when Jessica Mella joined the team to make connections between what students were learning in the classroom and

what they were eating for lunch. Shortly thereafter, Mella and high school staff formed a greenhouse committee that envisioned a space where students could learn about agriculture and provide fresh produce for school meals.

The group met regularly and shared their vision with educators, administrators, food service staff and school board members. In the spring of 2012, the committee drew on this support to build an outdoor garden at the high school. Student participation in growing vegetables in this garden for school meals demonstrated the power and potential of farm to school. Word about the greenhouse and culinary classroom concept made its way to the Plymouth Education Foundation, which embraced it as its main fundraising priority in 2014.

“We are truly thankful to every person, business, and organization who donated to the project,” says Heinbuch. She is also grateful for ongoing partnerships with local businesses like Plymouth Foam, which provides foam for students to use as growing media for their hydroponic systems.

“Communicating a clear vision for the project to the school and broader community was key to getting the Food and Agricultural Science Center built,” observes Mella. She especially encourages farm to school enthusiasts to share their excitement with people in decision-making roles, like school administrators and school board members. Without support or involvement from the school district’s leadership, FSAC would not have been built.

When asked what advice she has for other districts looking to build their farm to school programs, Mella says, “Keep the conversation going, and include more and more people along the way.”

