



# Farm-to-school program provides learning experience

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How do you get kids to eat their vegetables? Americans are bombarded with news about childhood obesity and the importance of replacing junk food with healthier fare. But this is no easy task when children are enticed with empty calories by advertisers, restaurants and even schools. When you look at the big picture, getting children to eat their vegetables isn't simply a matter of coaxing picky eaters. For many kids, vegetables aren't on the table.

Farm-to-school projects emerged in the late 1990s in response to the nutritional inadequacy of children's diets, the struggles faced by independent family farmers, and a desire to connect children with farms. By 2006, there were about 400 of these projects in 22 states. In most of these projects, schools purchase food—usually fresh fruit and vegetables—from local farms and serve it in school cafeterias.

How are farm-to-school projects working? Jack Kloppenburg of the UW-Madison Department of Rural Sociology reviewed the literature and found both opportunities and obstacles for such programs. He then drew from his participatory action research in a farm-to-school project in Madison—Wisconsin Homegrown Lunch—to understand some of the barriers.

### Farm-to-school in Madison

Wisconsin Homegrown Lunch, or WHL, began in 2002 with two goals: increasing the amount of locally grown food served in the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) lunch program and teaching students about food and farming. WHL is a joint effort of REAP Food Group, a nonprofit organization based in Madison, and the UW Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems. This project was funded by the USDA SARE program.

Many schools in the MMSD have never had their own kitchens, because past generations of students ate at home. The district now has a centralized food service that faces substantial budget constraints. WHL chose to work in Madison in order to learn about providing locally grown food in a relatively large, diverse school district. Three pilot elementary schools

were chosen on the basis of staff interest and student need. These schools implemented an extensive set of food-related educational activities, including farmer-led field trips and classroom projects, that created enthusiasm and an appetite for fresh food.

Making a difference in the lunchroom and building a market for local farms was more difficult, however. WHL worked with the food service to develop recipes for locally sourced menu items such as rhubarb muffins and vegetarian chili. The project was able to get the MMSD to double its spending on fresh produce at the pilot schools, but it amounted to little more than \$2,500 per year.

Going into this project, the WHL partners knew that working in a school district like Madison would be challenging. Some of the lessons learned through this project involved cultural and infrastructural barriers to farm-to-school that require policy changes. Other obstacles had more immediate, tactical solutions. The barriers faced by this project have been and will be encountered by farm-to-school projects across the country.

### Overcoming barriers

*Overarching food culture:* American eating habits make it difficult for farm-to-school projects to achieve their goals. About a fifth of the average American's daily energy intake comes from soft drinks, burgers, pizza, chips and pastries. Enhanced regulation of food industry lobbying, labeling and marketing can encourage the emergence of a healthier food culture. School districts can reduce the availability of junk food and use the cafeteria to promote healthy eating.

*Quasi-privatization of food services:* The MMSD food service must recover its operating costs from meal sales and subsidies from USDA programs. Lunches often mimic fast-food meals to retain student customers. According to the MMSD food service director, "The single biggest challenge in school food service is to serve a nutritious lunch that students will actually eat." Piecemeal introduction of a few healthy, local menu options risks reduced sales

and fiscal crisis for the food service. For farm-to-school projects to succeed, school districts need to treat food as an integral part of education and should consider assuming full financial responsibility for quality meals.

*Scale and flexibility:* The MMSD food service prepares 15,000 meals per day at a central facility. The meals are compiled and sealed on an assembly line, held in a cooler, trucked to the 45 schools in the district, reheated and served. All menu items must conform to this system. Farm-to-school programs may work best in smaller school districts with in-school kitchens or more flexible production systems.

*Price, procurement and supply:* Of these three barriers, procurement was the least difficult for WHL. While the MMSD food service must purchase 80% of its food from a national distributor, the remaining 20% can be purchased locally. Procurement can be easier where farmers are organized into a co-op or marketing group. The MMSD successfully purchased food through a farmer cooperative as well as directly from producers.

Pricing was more problematic. WHL's partner farmer cooperative sells high-end organic produce, and it was often more expensive than the produce purchased through the district's food distributor. The spinach, cabbage and carrots used for a district-wide event were affordable, but the labor required to prepare them was not. Shredded carrots, diced potatoes and mashed sweet potatoes were affordably integrated into recipes for muffins and soup.

Finding an adequate, consistent supply of fresh produce was a problem. Most southern Wisconsin fresh market vegetable growers raise small amounts of produce for direct markets. Many don't want the capital investment and labor associated with expansion. Furthermore, farmers want a market before they increase production, while food services want a guaranteed supply before they commit to buy. This "chicken-egg" problem is likely faced by most farm-to-school projects.

*Processing:* Due to labor constraints, produce must arrive ready-to-use in most school

districts, including the MMSD. A local grocery cooperative with a commercial kitchen is supplying WHL with some washed and cut vegetables. Constructing a small processing plant in Madison would cost around \$1.5 million. If such facilities are necessary for farm-to-school programs, public or private support is needed to underwrite their construction.

## Tactical choices

*Leadership:* For farm-to-school projects to succeed, buy-in from principals and food service directors and their staffs is critical. As WHL expands to new schools, it seeks to work exclusively with food service directors who are actively committed to change.

*Creating change:* WHL avoided criticizing the existing lunch program and instead emphasized constructive innovation. As a result, the MMSD food service felt little pressure to alter its performance. Greater changes may have resulted had the school board adopted a policy, with funding, that supported farm-to-school.

*Beyond lunch:* Most farm-to-school programs focus on lunch. WHL is currently providing fresh fruit and vegetable snacks at elementary and middle schools with good results. Kids are often hungry at snack time and open to tasting unfamiliar vegetables. As the snacks are prepared at a food cooperative, the technical and labor constraints of the food service are sidestepped. Relatively small quantities of a wide variety of vegetables can be used in the snack program, addressing some of the supply and seasonality issues in the lunch program.

Barriers to farm-to-school programs exist, but aren't insurmountable. The experiences of the WHL program can add to a wider discussion of how farm-to-school programs are performing and how they contribute to the development of sustainable food systems.

**For more information, see the full report at [www.cias.wisc.edu](http://www.cias.wisc.edu) or contact:**

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