

Coalitions and Capacity Building

Connecting Classrooms with the Community to Enrich Farm to School

The sustainability of a farm to school program is connected to the depth of integration within a community. When actively supported by school personnel and diverse coalition members, a robust and resilient farm to school program can be established in its formative years.

Crawford County: Community-Initiated Support for Farm to School

The Crawford County Farm to School program has benefited immensely from the process of coalition building. Over the years, relationships have been cultivated between local food-oriented organizations and area schools, and these external communities now form the backbone of support for farm to school.

Driftless Wisconsin Grown (DWG), for instance, formed seven years ago as a coalition of area producers and local food advocates hoping to engage the community in a conversation about the health and community economic benefits of purchasing and consuming local foods. Soon after the group was formed, they discovered that Crawford County Farm to School shared this same vision. Collectively, the DWG coalition and Crawford County Farm to School set out to achieve the important first step in building program capacity, that of securing community “buy-in.”

Both DWG and Farm to School coordinators found that educating residents about the benefits of purchasing locally-grown products has been an important piece in the farm to school puzzle, and have responded to the challenge with several engaging strategies.

Kale sales increased six-fold at the local Piggly Wiggly (in Crawford County) when kale was featured in an in-store display as the Harvest of the Month product!



The DWG coalition started connecting with the public by helping to start one of the area’s first local farmers market. The coalition then began screening sustainable agriculture movies for the public, with panels and discussions following each film. The DWG now regularly hosts Local Harvest Dinners featuring local foods and area chefs, to raise funds for the local food movement. Also new this year, DWG held a self-guided Farm Crawl, where participants toured several area farms and breweries on a designated day in the summer to meet producers and purchase products direct from the farm.

Coalition Members Actively Support Farm to School

In addition to offering these broad-reach events, producers on the DWG coalition are directly involved in farm to school programming. DWG farmers sell their products to area school food service departments and speak in classrooms when their products are featured as the Harvest of the Month. Through interacting with vegetable growers to honey producers, students are able to gain an inside perspective on local agriculture, the food system, and the value of supporting their farming neighbors. Accordingly, monthly flyers featuring the farms, fun food facts and recipes are sent home so that the learning does not stop with just the students.



Crawford County Farm-to-School
(Photo: Driftless Wisconsin Grown)

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Crawford County: Community-Initiated Support for Farm to School (continued)

Other area coalitions support farm to school, as well. This includes Healthy Roots of Crawford County, a University of Wisconsin-Extension-based wellness coalition that promotes the importance of physical activity and healthy eating. Healthy recipe seminars and family-oriented taste tests are just two examples of the programming they offer in the community.

“Having a wellness coalition and local foods coalition makes me feel confident that we can accomplish our farm to school objectives.”

– Kathleen Hein (Transform Wisconsin Project Coordinator, Driftless Wisconsin Grown)

Expanding Food Processing Capacity through an Area Partnership

Another community partnership is helping address a common farm to school challenge of aggregating and processing a large volume of local fruits and vegetables. Sharing Spaces Kitchen, a shared-use incubator kitchen in Prairie du Chien, is working with DWG coalition producers and area schools to effectively process and transport fruits and vegetables from the farm to the cafeteria.

In the future, Sharing Spaces Kitchen hopes to work with the Crawford County Farm to School program to collect produce pre-orders from schools, and then coordinate with farmers to grow the requested products. Sharing Spaces Kitchen will then process and distribute the products to the schools. Although the project is in the beginning stages of development, it has already found success with product test runs. One of the first big achievements has been the production of chicken broth for a Harvest of the Month feature, which used chicken necks and backs from nearby Coulee View Family Farms.



Above: A Harvest of the Month grocery store display in a local Piggly Wiggly. *Below:* Coulee View Family Farm has worked with Shared Spaces Kitchen to make chicken broth a Harvest of the Month product. (Photo: Driftless Wisconsin Grown, Coulee View Family Farm)

Bringing Large Institutions on Board

The farm to school team has also expanded community capacity by working with large-scale area institutions such as hospitals and grocery stores. For example, the regional hospital produces healthy recipe cards that feature Harvest of the Month products. The recipe cards are offered alongside informational flyers at Harvest of the Month displays in all locally-owned grocery stores in Crawford County. The DWG coalition also partnered with the Madison-based FairShare CSA Coalition to designate a Crawford County school a community-supported agriculture (CSA) vegetable share drop site. This makes it easier for local families to eat fresh and local and to strengthen the local food coalition network.

Area coalitions and local food advocates in Crawford County have worked hard to develop a resilient and diverse system of support for farm to school in the area. It is the hope of this growing team of champions that they will continue to be able to find ways to weave farm to school into the fabric of the community.

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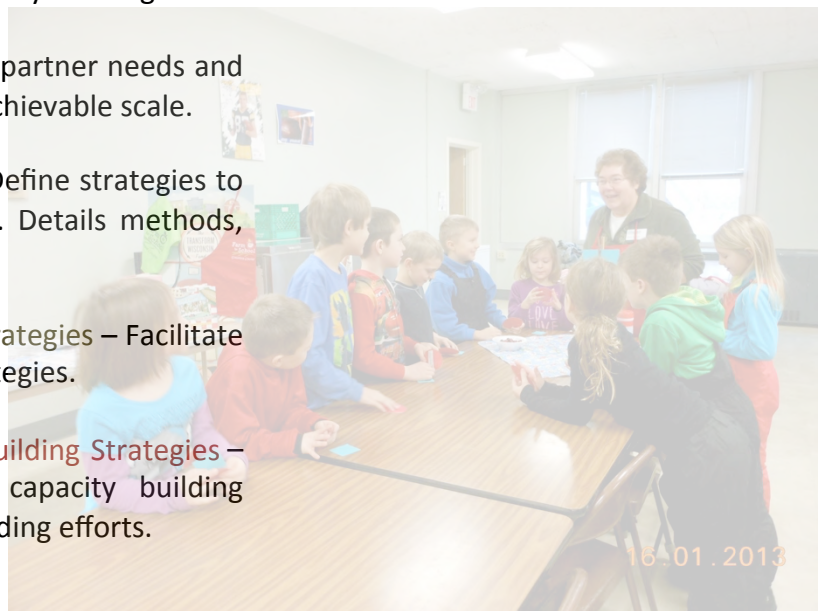
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Capacity Building: Definitions & General Steps

Capacity building is the process of improving an organization or program's ability to carry out its specific activities by increasing organizational resources and program effectiveness. Capacity building can take a variety of forms, and in the farm to school world, this might include establishing a diverse team of champions; re-defining program goals; or increasing community engagement in farm to school activities.

The process of capacity building can be broken down into five general steps. ¹

- ① **Engaging Partners and Building Consensus** – Convene partners, discuss and agree on main challenges, then determine the scope and focus of capacity building.
- ② **Capacity Needs Assessment** – Identify partner needs and interests. Prioritize focus areas to an achievable scale.
- ③ **Define Capacity Building Strategies** – Define strategies to fulfill priority capacity building needs. Details methods, costs, timeline and participants.
- ④ **Implementing the Capacity Building Strategies** – Facilitate capacity building, based on Step 3 strategies.
- ⑤ **Monitoring and Evaluating Capacity Building Strategies** – Gather and evaluate feedback on capacity building activities to inform future capacity building efforts.



The following case study focused of the Columbia County Farm to School team provides an example for how the above capacity building steps can be transformed into action! Each capacity-building step is highlighted in the story with the corresponding number from the sequence above.

Columbia County: Informed Capacity Building

Engaging Partners and Building Consensus (1)

The local food movement in Columbia County has been growing and evolving since 2007. It was in 2012 that farm to school found its voice in this larger movement, following a series of structured coalition meetings and capacity building sessions. The Columbia County Local Foods Collaborative (CCLFC), an area coalition that hosts local food festivals and events, decided that it was time to focus on increasing the capacity for serving local food in institutions. A CCLFC visioning session led by University of Wisconsin-Extension agent Kathleen Haas, determined that the coalition would begin their institutional food capacity building in school environments. Farm to school quickly became the new local food priority in the county, but Haas knew that there was important work to do before stepping off into this new frontier.

¹ Adapted from Social Accountability Curriculum: http://www.sasanet.org/curriculum_final/cb2.jsp

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Columbia County: Informed Capacity Building (continued)

Needs Assessment & Defining Strategies (1 & 2)

As the first step in creating a lasting framework for farm to school success, Haas assembled an advisory team comprised of major partners (e.g. food service directors, producers, teachers and elected officials). She asked advisory team members to write out their farm to school goals and detail their capacity to coordinate different farm to school initiatives. Haas and the advisory team then widened the scope of their needs assessment by hosting a Columbia County Farm to School Summit. CCLFC coalition members and additional representatives of the farm to school programming areas were invited to attend.



The Columbia County Farm to School Summit underway in February, 2013 (Photo: Columbia County Farm to School)

The goal of the Summit was to merge and prioritize farm to school goals, as determined by the different partners at the table. The Summit was also intended to outline the resources needed to accomplish these goals, and to begin forming partnerships between attendees.

Implementing Capacity Building Strategies (2, 3 & 4)

The Columbia County Farm to School Summit identified three main goals:

- Answer nutrition service directors' questions about food safety requirements
- Provide growers with logistical details about how to sell their products to schools
- Talk to administrators about the process of procuring and serving local food in the cafeteria

The advisory board organized the following activities to address each goal:

- The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction presented on food safety mandates to nutrition service directors
- Local apple grower, Kim Lapacek, gave a presentation to farmers about her experience with getting local product into schools
- The advisory team led a tour for school administrators of a successful local foods program in Waunakee

Monitoring & Evaluation for a Stronger Farm to School Program (5)

One year after holding the Columbia County Farm to School Summit, the farm to school team drafted and released two surveys – one for food service directors and one for producers. The intent of the surveys was three-fold: 1.) Assess whether the capacity building strategies had successfully encouraged local procurement, 2.) Establish a baseline of farm to school interest and involvement across the county, and 3.) Begin assembling a school/producer directory that includes products, cost-point and delivery specifications so to be able to better connect the two parties and build additional procurement capacity in the county.

Columbia County coalition members identified and addressed the needs of farm to school partners in the area by pooling their resources to provide tailored skill development and training opportunities. In addition, the CCLFC coalition ensured that all partners were at the table, making informed and unified decisions about the future direction of farm to school in the county.

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LESSONS LEARNED

Forming a Coalition: First Steps

- ① **Identify** and invite existing farm to school champions and other interested community members to a structured kick-off meeting
- ② **Research** existing groups with similar goals to avoid duplicate efforts and strengthen the capacity of current initiatives
- ③ **Engage** coalition members with community organizing strategies
- ④ **Evaluate** community needs, strengths and weaknesses
- ⑤ **Determine** a common agenda with actionable goals
- ⑥ **Meet** on a consistent basis (e.g. monthly) at a mutually convenient location and time

“We are trying to make sure that everything we are working on has a connection. We don’t want to work in a silo. We want to work with the other groups in our area that are looking at food issues so that we can have a broader impact on our community, as a whole.”

– Pat Shumaker (Transform Wisconsin Coordinator, Kenosha County)

Next page: “Tips to Increase & Maintain Coalition Participation”

A diverse and engaged coalition can be instrumental in paving a successful farm to school path

Possible Coalition Members		
School administrators	Teachers	Farmers’ market staff
Producers	Local business representatives	Local food hub
School food authorities	Afterschool program staff members	Area distributors
Community food advocates	Community center staff	Cooperative members
Local public health officials, practitioners	Legislators, local politicians	Hospital administration and staff
Extension agents	City planners	Food & wellness non-profit staff
Parents	School board members	Master Gardeners

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LESSONS LEARNED

Tips to Increase & Maintain Coalition Participation

- ① Form small working groups (e.g. procurement task force, education team) within the coalition and work towards actionable tasks. Encourage ownership of tasks and strive for efficiency.
- ② Create a coalition website that clearly conveys group goals and outlines ways to get involved.
- ③ Craft a short program pitch for different audiences that might be interested in joining the coalition. Highlight coalition goals and successes.
- ④ Check-in regularly with coalition members on core goals.
- ⑤ If there will be a new coalition leader, transition gradually and intentionally. Help build trust in new leadership and keep the momentum of the coalition moving forward.
- ⑥ Meet one-on-one with inactive coalition members to update them on coalition progress and to address concerns, if any exist. Find ways to integrate them back into the fold.
- ⑦ Foster an environment that encourages the sharing of ideas, as well as networking.
- ⑧ Attend the meetings of other coalitions with similar goals – it is a great way to support each other's work and find ways to amplify respective programmatic efforts.

“The coalition has been really successful because everything we do in farm to school is super action-forward. You always leave the meeting with something to do and a way to move forward.”

– Christy Marsden (University of Wisconsin-Extension Horticulture Educator, Rock County)



“Sometimes you lose drive or energy, and then you talk to somebody [in the coalition] about what we are doing and you are immediately re-energized.”

– Dean Zimmerman
(Producer at Coulee View Family Farm, Crawford County)

Edgerton School District students plant apple trees in the school orchard (Photo: Rock County Farm to School)

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RESOURCES

Community Tool Box

An online resource for those working to build healthier communities. The links below are chapters devoted to creating and maintaining partnerships and coalition building.

<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/creating-and-maintaining-partnerships>

<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/promotion-strategies/start-a-coalition/main>

Healthy Wisconsin Leadership Institute: Leadership Library

The Leadership Library provides links to articles, websites, tools and other resources focused on collaborative leadership, partnership building, community engagement, communication, and program planning and evaluation.

<http://www.hwli.org/leadership-library/>

Wisconsin Tobacco Prevention and Control Program: Coordinator Resources Toolkit

This toolkit contains **adaptable** resources from Wisconsin's local tobacco control coalitions and state and national partners. They can help assist you in organizing, managing and communicating with your coalition and the public. The resource also includes sections on coalition structures and recruiting and engaging members.

<http://www.tobwis.org/coordinator-resources-toolkit>

County Health Rankings: Tools for Action

Work Together

Includes tips on how to build, maintain, and sustain diverse partnerships while working collaboratively on projects that will result in meaningful change.

<http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/roadmaps/action-center/work-together>

Vermont Farm to School: A Guide for Farm to School Community Action Planning

Detailed information on forming a farm to school team, facilitating farm to school meetings, and developing a community action plan.

<http://www.vtfeed.org/materials/guide-farm-school-community-action-planning>

Healthy School Toolkit (Food Trust)

see Chapter 3: Team Up to Implement Your School Nutrition Policy

While this chapter of the toolkit is focused on building a school health council to advise schools on matters of health policy, many of the same ideas apply to building a farm to school team.

http://thefoodtrust.org/uploads/media_items/healthy-school-toolkit-original.original.pdf