

Wisconsin Farm to School success stories

Madison Metropolitan School

District: Garden bars



July, 2015

In several schools within the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD), Farm to School AmeriCorps members are introducing elementary school students to their new garden bars. The new garden bars allow students to choose up to five or six different fruit or vegetable options, rather than assembling traditional salads. Garden bars are a new experience for students because most meals at MMSD elementary schools are served as pre-packaged hot and cold packs that students take off the lunch line, along with utensils and milk. Students use trays to select produce from the garden bars and, for many students, this is their first time using a tray in the lunchroom. After being handed a shiny blue tray, one student exclaimed, “I feel like I’m in high school!” Students are clearly empowered by the garden bars and the power of choice they provide.

The MMSD garden bar initiative is led by REAP Food Group, which works with MMSD on a variety of farm to school projects. This non-profit with a focus on local food is thinking big, with plans to implement garden bars featuring local produce in all MMSD schools. Garden bars and salad bars are a great avenue to get fresh, healthy and local products into the cafeteria. They also encourage students to think about their eating habits as they exercise autonomy over their meal choices.

The primary goal fueling this project is to increase fruit and vegetable consumption among children, and salad bars are a proven way to do this. Salad bars are also effective at reducing food waste from school lunch, as “students are more likely to eat a fruit or vegetable if they have the power to choose it,” says Natasha Smith, Farm to School Program Manager at REAP Food Group.

Now that twenty-nine garden bars are implemented in MMSD cafeterias, REAP’s goal is to fill the bars with local produce. This may be a challenging task. The district currently prepares and distributes pre-packaged meals from a central kitchen site and many individual schools lack standard kitchen equipment to handle fresh produce. In addition, the central kitchen usually works with pre-processed produce and does not have the equipment or staffing necessary to process fresh produce. Until further processing is available at the central kitchen or individual schools, REAP is coordinating efforts with regional processors to prepare local items for garden bars and school lunch service.

REAP is also working with Dustin Lundt, MMSD food purchasing specialist, on innovative strategies to procure local food for the garden bars. School food



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Farm to School
Program Manager at
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contracts are typically set up to ensure low prices and ease of ordering. “The bidding process ends up being dominated by large distributors and limits local farmers,” says Smith. One solution is the use of informal procurement, as piloted by REAP and MMSD to bring local carrots and kohlrabi into school meals in recent months. This alternative bidding option is simpler for farmers and vendors to navigate, can be tailored for local products and is less of an administrative burden. It’s a win-win situation, and a creative way to increase local produce to garden bars and lunch trays.

“Parents often tell me that their kids are eating more vegetables, both in school and at home, since the garden bars were introduced in their schools,” says Steve Youngbauer, Director of MMSD Food and Nutrition. Resounding approval from the schools, students and parents, in addition to grant awards, has helped establish a solid collaborative partnership between REAP and MMSD. Smith says that, “More than ever, MMSD sees REAP as an ally, and values farm to school as a vehicle for health and positive change.”

REAP has crafted thoughtful approaches as it works towards building a strong and sustainable farm to school garden bar program within the Madison Metropolitan School District. The positive feedback

MMSD is receiving about the garden bars further motivates REAP’s mission to provide local fruits and veggies to children on a daily basis. This project has shown that even the largest of goals can be achieved with a strong vision, persistence and a dash of creativity.

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