

## Wisconsin Farm to School success stories

### Manitowoc County: Ensuring meaningful farmer participation in farm to school



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Farmer involvement is an essential component of comprehensive farm to school programs. Core farm to school concepts such as *local, fresh, healthy* and *community* come alive for students through interactions with the farmers who grow the food found on the cafeteria tray. The greater school community, from food service staff to administrators, can also better appreciate the abundance of reasons to support local agriculture after personally interacting with and learning from agricultural producers.

In their quest to build a sustainable farm to school program in Manitowoc County, Cath Pape and Patricia Sampe knew that growers needed a prominent seat at the table. Pape is the grant coordinator for the local coalition Healthiest Manitowoc County. Sampe is a public health nurse that has been working on farm to school initiatives for half a decade. Together, they recognized that direct local food procurement, producer visits to classrooms, farm field trips and Harvest of the Month activities are all rooted in rich relationships with local farmers. But building farmer-school connections isn't always easy. Pape and Sampe set out to identify challenges producers may face when working with schools. They prioritized two goals to help ensure a smooth and fruitful relationship between the two partners.

The first priority was to develop a common language between producers and school-based nutrition professionals, since each occupation faces unique operational constraints and employs a vocabulary specific to their field. The second major goal was to establish a diverse local market for producers so that farm to school activity would be supported by a high demand for local food in the community, making local sales a viable opportunity for area producers.

Focused on these goals, the farm to school team set out to unite producers with school partners. Pape and Sampe began the process of relationship building by coordinating a meet and greet event for Manitowoc County producers and food service staff. The Farm to School Mixer, which was supported by Transform Wisconsin grant funding, was held on a brisk evening in November, when farm work had slowed down and school food service had settled in to the routine of the school year. The event, which was attended by over 40 growers and food service staff, began with a formal introduction to farm to school. The evening was then opened up for informal conversation and networking, yielding at least one purchasing agreement: the Manitowoc Public School District contracted with Heritage Orchards for deliveries of 20 cases of apples a week, October through February, for over 5,100 students.

Once the Farm to School Mixer successfully established an entry point for producers in school food procurement, Pape's and Sampe's focus shifted to



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**– Cath Pape, Grant Coordinator, Healthiest Manitowoc County**





The Manitowoc Farm to School Mixer, held at a local YMCA, brought farmers and food service staff together to foster partnerships for farm to school.

strengthening producer relationships with the rest of the school community. With encouragement from the farm to school team, teachers invited farmers to visit their classrooms to talk about the history and details of their farm operations. Producers hosted farm tours for students through class field trips. One farmer, Nancy Kellner of Kellner's Back Acre Garden, taught a full academic year's worth of Harvest of the Month lessons to students in the after school program at Manitowoc Public School's Jefferson Elementary. Through the support of Transform Wisconsin grant funding, Kellner was able provide products from her farm as the featured Harvest of the Month fruit or vegetable.

Just one year after holding the first meet and greet event for producers and food service directors, a number of robust producer-school relationships had formed. To involve even more local producers, as well as school administration and staff, Sampe and Pape planned a second meet and greet event. The purpose of this second mixer was "to build relationships within the schools—by connecting the schools with the producers and allowing it to be just between them. Relationship building is so key to making anything happen," says Pape. This gathering, known as the "CHEW," was held on another November evening and included an entirely locally sourced dinner. Many of the attending producers donated meat, vegetables and fruit for the meal and the Two Rivers Public Schools Food Service Director, Paula Erickson, prepared the supper with her staff.

Producers, food service staff and school district administrators were assigned to seats that mixed the professions. The Heritage Orchards and Manitowoc Public Schools apple procurement story was presented as a model for how simple it can be to purchase local produce. In addition, all of the producers at the event introduced themselves, their mission and history of their respective farms. At least two new procurement connections were formed as a direct result of CHEW.

Also stemming from CHEW was an effort to increase the community presence of local farmers through a Meet Your Local Farmer evening event designed to feature farmers and their products, not unlike a farmers' market. This event far exceeded all goals and expectations, with over 200 attendees and the 17 local vendors who attended reporting excellent sales. The producers, whose transportation costs to the event were covered by grant-funded fuel cards, were amazed at the community enthusiasm for local products. Growers immediately asked to make this a weekly or monthly event in the winter months. Pape remarks that "to be able to provide public relations for these farms has really been the key for producers to work with us," for it has provided an interconnected and robust local food market for farmers.

Farmers in Manitowoc County are now firmly seated at the farm to school table. Sales to local schools and producer-school activities now fill the space that was once occupied by communications barriers between farm and school partners. Furthermore, there is a strong community desire to reconnect with local food. Area businesses are showing a preference for purchasing meals from restaurants that locally source their produce, a local hospital welcomes a farmer to sell at a small on-site market for hospital employees, and an assisted living facility is looking for ways to involve their community in the local food movement. By increasing market opportunities for producers and fostering a strong appreciation for local agriculture, Manitowoc County is working hard to achieve a robust and resilient community food system that includes farm to school.