

Striving for Farm to School Sustainability

Crafting Today's Program with a Vision for Tomorrow

A sustainable farm to school program can take shape in many different ways and is largely a result of the aspirations and work of those people, organizations and resources that are unique to each community. From dedicated school staff to growers passionate about selling their produce to schools, the foundation for a successful program does not follow a formula. There is, however, one consistent ingredient across sustainable programs: the prioritization of making and maintaining strong partnerships. These important community relationships provide a way to celebrate achievements and lay a stable foundation for commitment, collaboration and enthusiasm.

The following chapter features three different farm to school communities and the diverse ways they have nurtured a sustainable community-supported program.

Manitowoc County: Sustainability as the Measure of Success

Cath Pape, Grant Coordinator for Healthiest Manitowoc County (HMC), has great confidence that farm to school programs in the county will be able to sustain, and even expand programming once the Healthy Food Systems Transform Wisconsin grant comes to a close. For their primary grant activity, Pape and Pat Sampe, a county public health nurse, decided to prioritize strengthening relationships between existing farm to school partners. They also worked on connecting potential new partners in the area. Considering the state of farm to school in the county, Pape and Sampe preferred this approach, in lieu of spearheading a number of new initiatives that may fizzle without future grant-funded support.

Mentorship & Support

The Manitowoc Farm to School team frequently called together school food service directors, Master Gardeners, producers, and hospital dieticians – to name just a few – to build a strong network of support. The team ensured that each stakeholder group was represented by at least one vocal program champion, as well as many supporters, to help solidify collaborative efforts.

For instance, Corrine Schneider, the Nutrition Director for Kiel Area School District, has been instrumental in expanding institutional local food procurement in the county. She has arranged farm visits and procurement trainings for area school and hospital food service directors, with the help of other food service staff members. All of the trainings were arranged by Schneider herself, with Sampe and Pape providing support primarily in the form of mentorship.

Post-Grant Transitions

Pape jokes that HMC Farm to School project reports may appear lean, as it is difficult to track the value of relationship building. However, the organization believes that a strong and sustainable farm to school framework has been left in place *because* of the relationships they have developed.

To maintain program strength, the HMC will capitalize on the existing momentum around the general local food movement. Farm to school is just one way to address community-wide health issues such as food insecurity and high obesity rates, so by combining energy and resources and funneling them into this broader food movement, the Healthiest Manitowoc County may soon be achieved.



Farm visits for food service staff have been helpful for connecting school food service staff with producers (Photo: Healthiest Manitowoc County)

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Kenosha County: The Multiplier Effect of Community Partnerships

Following a community presentation promoting the new Harborside Academy charter school, a businessman approached Environmental Science teacher, Mary Bohning, with an offer. Mark Dirr, Director of Research and Development at local manufacturing firm Xten Industries, wanted to donate the use of five acres of industrial park property to the Academy. He hoped it could be turned into a community garden. Xten Industries is committed to sustainable environmental practices and a partnership of this variety was a great way to support local food system development in the community.

Bohning accepted the offer, and the school broke ground on the garden in 2010. To date, the Harborside Academy Community Urban Garden has built a total of **60 raised beds** and has produced over **10,000 pounds** of produce, most of which has been harvested by students and used in taste tests at the elementary schools or has been donated to area food pantries.

The Academy has also fostered pre-existing academic and business relationships with Gateway Technical College and Carthage College. College students from both schools design garden curriculum for use in Kenosha Unified Schools and act as mentors to the high school students learning in the garden.

While actively seeking new community connections, the Academy was able to form a partnership with the City of Kenosha. The City recently offered to provide many of the raw materials (i.e. wood chips, soil) for Harborside Garden, which is also the largest school garden in the county.

By maximizing the potential of existing partnerships and by pursuing unique opportunities, the Kenosha Unified School District is well on its way to being a community-supported farm to school program.

“Check out any opportunity that comes up, because you never know when one of those opportunities is going to be an outstanding connection.”

– Pat Shumaker
(Transform Wisconsin Coordinator, Kenosha County)



Mary Bohning in action at the Harborside Academy Community Urban Garden (Photo: Kenosha News)



Gardening mentorships in bloom (Photo: Xten Industries)

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Young gardeners examine starter trays (Photo: Vernon County Farm to School)



Viroqua Food Co-op members proudly support Vernon County Farm to School through 1% *Wednesday* sales donations (Photo: Vernon County Farm to School)

Vernon County: The Value of Internal Support and Fundraising

The Viroqua Area School District has discovered just how productive an internal partnership can be for their farm to school program. Thanks to early conversations about how best to collaborate, the Future Farmers of America (FFA) program at the high school has directly supported district farm to school efforts for several years now.

The FFA high school students donate a number of their vegetable starters, grown from seed in the school greenhouse, to the middle school garden. In addition, the FFA students help tend the school apple orchard and donate a portion of their produce to the school lunch program.

Making Connections through the School Board

While the above in-school collaboration has the potential to be sustained for quite some time, the Viroqua Farm to School team realizes that additional partnerships are needed in order to support all programming areas of farm to school in the district.

To solidify existing connections and to also identify new opportunities, farm to school staff present regular updates at Viroqua School Board meetings to celebrate recent successes and field questions from administrators. Securing continued administrative support is critical to the success of the program and is also a way to build diverse alliances with new attendees at the meetings.

Building the Case for a Community Supported Program

Vernon County Farm to School also knows how valuable a program coordinator is for farm to school in their county, as maintaining and augmenting these many relationships is a key element of their program success. Accordingly, a current priority is to establish a stable funding source for the program coordinator position.

To achieve their goal, the farm to school team is seeking sponsorships from organizations that share the values of community health and local agriculture. Sponsors are encouraged to support the program to improve student health and raise the visibility of their company by putting their name behind the well-respected local farm to school movement in Vernon County.

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LESSONS LEARNED

Steps Towards Building Farm to School Program Sustainability

- ① Develop programs with school-based program champions and school-based collaborations
- ② Fundraise for public and private support to establish a community-supported program
- ③ Form creative and dynamic partnerships with area organizations
- ④ Create a permanent position within an area institution (e.g. local government, area hospital, university) to coordinate farm to school efforts

Community Partnership Opportunities

Community Partner	Resources / Benefits of Collaboration
Large and small area businesses	Sponsorships, donations, volunteers
Community Foundations	Grants
Children's Museum	Program collaboration
Local Government	Supplies, land, grants, proclamations of support
Nearby Hospitals	Program collaboration, local food purchasing power, funding, outreach
Local Public Health Department	Educators, volunteers, resources, coordinators
Master Gardeners	Educators, volunteers, donations
Cooperatives	Sponsorships, donations
Non-profits	Educators, volunteers, program marketing
Parents	Volunteers

“Always ask if you can partner, or what can be done together, instead of just coming in and doing.”

– Autumn Grooms (Project Coordinator, Monroe County Schools on the Go)



Holmen High School (La Crosse County) FFA students tour a USDA processing facility. The FFA students raise meat birds in partnership with the District of Holmen Farm to School program. (Photo: School District of Holmen Nutrition Services)

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LESSONS LEARNED

“We think it’s important to get (university) students involved, because if they get excited about the community, they are more likely to stay here, and our community will thrive.”

– Ashley Ponschok, (Farm to School Coordinator, Live54218)

University Partnerships

Professors or degree programs may have a capstone or community involvement requirement that fits perfectly with your farm to school programming. Seeking approval for university student involvement can be of great benefit:

- Dietetic, general education, agriculture, health promotion and wellness, or other interns can:
 - Teach nutrition education lessons
 - Assist students in the garden
 - Design educational or marketing materials
 - Write a case study or newspaper article on your program
 - Collect and analyze data to evaluate program effectiveness
- Student sustainable agriculture or farming groups may be able to teach garden and agriculture lessons
- General university student volunteers can facilitate taste tests and other farm to school events



A University of Wisconsin-Green Bay student and dietetic intern for the non-profit Live54218 teaches a lesson on the healthy properties of beets to 1st graders in the West De Pere School District (Photo: Live54218)

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LESSONS LEARNED

Generating Staying Power: More Tips from the Field

- ① There are almost always simple solutions. Start small and build big with focus always directed at establishing a sustainable foundation.
- ② Avoid being the middleman between groups. Instead, focus on facilitating connections and conversations directly between important stakeholders.
- ③ Be willing to shift your focus if resources and energy are stronger in a different programming area versus another that you are currently working in.
- ④ Explore opportunities to collaborate with neighboring school districts or counties. Encourage in-school champions to make those connections.
- ⑤ Initiate a good connection with local media to increase community awareness about and pride in your farm to school program.
- ⑥ Involve students in the process of making school-based and community connections. This helps community partners see the value of student engagement.
- ⑦ Make sure all stakeholders are at the table and are invited to participate in an organized coalition.
- ⑧ Relationship-building takes time. Patience will pay off in the form of a strong and diverse program.
- ⑨ Encourage schools and districts to seek out creative funding opportunities on their own, including grants and community sponsorships.
- ⑩ If you have access to large grant funds, consider mini-grants for individual districts or schools to help jumpstart their own programs. An RFP process is strongly encouraged to ensure that there is school investment in the project.

"If you get peers from the different sectors of the local food movement to convene and talk with one another about how they have each found success, it goes miles before I can stand up there and say how it has worked."

- Kathleen Haas (UW-Extension Economic Development and Farm to School Coordinator, Columbia County)

In connection to a student group planting a large apple orchard for the Edgerton School District and how both internal and external partnerships can work together to make a big project a reality.

"They have done so much without the coalition. We just grabbed on and provided them with resources. They had this idea on their own and just wanted to make it happen. Everything aligned because we were there to support farm to school and they had already started making connections. Our resources just gave them that extra boost to make (their vision) a reality."

- Christy Marsden & Alison Chouinard (Rock County Farm to School Team)

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RESOURCES

Promoting the progress and achievements of your farm to school program, in addition to mapping out aspirations for future growth, are integral aspects of building program sustainability. As a result, evaluation, outreach and communication are crucial elements supporting any farm to school program.

The following resources focus on: communications, evaluation, fundraising, and school policy change.

CIAS Wisconsin Farm to School: Toolkit for School Nutrition Programs

Build Sustainability

<http://www.cias.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/9-build-sustainability.pdf>

National Farm to School Network

Fundraising Fact Sheet

http://www.farmentoschool.org/Resources/Funding_fact_sheet_web.pdf

National Farm to School Network

Resource Search

Search for 'sustainability' and 'communications' to retrieve a number of resources, ranging from webinars to toolkits, to help you build a farm to school program that can stand the test of time.

<http://www.farmentoschool.org/resources>

The following resources can also be found in the Harvest of the Month chapter:

CIAS Wisconsin Farm to School: Toolkit for School Nutrition Programs

Evaluate Your Work

<http://www.cias.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/8-evaluate-your-work.pdf>

National Farm to School Network

Evaluation for Transformation: A Cross-Sectoral Evaluation Framework for Farm to School

<http://www.farmentoschool.org/resources-main/evaluation-framework>