

*Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack
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The National Farm to School Network improves student health by reducing childhood obesity, supports community-based food systems, and strengthens family farms. The Network is a collaborative effort of the Center for Food & Justice, Occidental College, and the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC). With funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Network coordinates, promotes, and expands the farm to school movement at the state, regional, and national levels. Eight regional lead agencies and national staff provide free training and technical assistance, information services, networking, and support for policy, media, and marketing activities.



The Community Food Security Coalition is a North American organization of 260 member groups that concentrate on social and economic justice, environmental, nutrition, sustainable agriculture, community development, labor, and anti-hunger issues and that together are dedicated to building strong, sustainable, local and regional food systems. CFSC works to ensure that all people have access at all times to affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food. CFSC encourages communities to become self-reliant in obtaining their food and to create a system of growing, manufacturing, processing, and distributing food that is sustainable, just, healthy, and democratic. The coalition offers a blend of comprehensive training, networking, and advocacy strategies to further the efforts of grassroots groups to create effective solutions from the ground up.

School Food FOCUS is a national initiative that helps urban school districts with 40,000 or more students serve more healthful, more sustainably produced and regionally sourced food so that children may perform better in school and be healthier in life. Funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and launched in late 2008, FOCUS works with school food service directors and other stakeholders to collect, analyze, and use food system data and peer-tested research to spur change in procurement methods. FOCUS supports a network of experts who are engaging their big-city school districts in systems change and also facilitates the sharing of best practices and lessons learned.



School meals are a vital part of our responsibility to ensure the health and wellbeing of future generations. Improving the quality of school meals, and making them accessible to all children, is essential to our nation's future. Farm to school programs ensure that our children eat the freshest, highest-quality food available. These programs deliver food that not only nourishes children's bodies immediately, but also knowledge that enhances their educational experience and cultivates long-term healthy eating habits. They are a win-win for kids, farmers, communities, educators, parents, and the environment.

Thanks to the efforts of social entrepreneurs, farm to school programs have bloomed on their own in thousands of schools across the country. The Child Nutrition Act reauthorization is the perfect opportunity to enable more schools—and more children—to benefit from the healthy meals and educational opportunities that farm to school programs can provide.

The three most effective ways Washington can rebalance the way American children eat in schools include:

This would fund 100-500 projects per year up to \$100,000 to cover start-up costs for farm to school programs. These competitive, one-time grants will allow schools to develop vendor relationships with nearby farmers, plan seasonal menus and promotional materials, start a school garden, and develop hands-on nutrition education to demonstrate the important interrelationship of nutrition and agriculture.

This initiative will help provide national leadership to a rapidly growing movement, helping to consolidate and guide the various policies and programs important to expand and institutionalize farm to school across the U.S.

The challenges of farm to school in large school districts include bridging the many gaps in supply-chain and food-handling infrastructure. USDA, together with national and state agencies and non-governmental organizations, should collaborate to share and perfect best practices for increasing local and regional procurement of school food, including evaluation of programs across the country.

For the purpose of this report, "farm to school" is broadly defined as a school-based program that connects schools (K-12) and local farms with the objectives of serving healthy meals in school cafeterias, improving student nutrition, providing agriculture, health and nutrition education opportunities, and supporting local and regional farmers. The definition of "local" or "regional" farms or food is flexible and varies.



Where do children spend most of their waking lives for 13 years and eat at least 35 to 40 percent of their daily calories?

The lunchroom provides an opportunity to overcome the injustice of poverty and food insecurity while also strengthening the local community. Little Lucy needs to be able to focus on her math lesson instead of the rumbling in her belly; independent farmers need a local market for their wholesome food.



Every four or five years, an opportunity arises for all concerned with the health of our nation's children to evaluate, defend, and improve federal Child Nutrition Programs. Nourishing kids and community is the promise of farm to school. Following the authorization of the National Farm to School Program in 2004 and the tremendous subsequent growth and interest in farm to school programs, the time is ripe to support that promise and implement policies that include locally and regionally grown foods in national meal programs.





The major aims of the farm to school approach are healthy children, healthy farms, and healthy communities. Farm to school programs are based on the premise that students will choose healthier foods, including more fruits and vegetables, if products are fresh, locally grown, and picked at the peak of their flavor and if those choices are reinforced with educational activities. Farm to school projects provide benefits to the entire community: children, farmers, food service staff, parents, and teachers.

Existing research shows that farm to school programs influence students on many levels, increasing their knowledge and awareness about food sources, nutrition, and eating behaviors and lifestyles, as well as how these become indicators of good health. Eating locally sourced products becomes part of the educational framework that turns kids on to healthier food options. A connection with the source of their food also deepens students' appreciation for food and agriculture. The major impacts of farm to school programs on children, collated from various programs, are:

The choice of healthier options in the cafeteria through farm to school meals results in consumption of more fruits and vegetables (+0.99 to +1.3 servings/day) and at home. For example, studies in Portland, OR, and Riverside, CA, have found that students eating a farm-fresh salad bar consume roughly one additional serving of fruits and vegetables per day.



Better knowledge and awareness about gardening, agriculture, healthy eating, local foods and seasonality. In Philadelphia, the percentage of kindergartners who knew where their food came from increased from 33 percent to 88 percent after participation in a farm to school program.

Demonstrated willingness to try out new foods and healthier options. In one school in Ventura, CA, on days in which there was a choice between a farmers' market salad bar and a hot lunch, students and adults chose the salad bar by a 14 to 1 ratio.

Reduced consumption of unhealthy foods and sodas; reduced television watching time; positive lifestyle modifications such as a daily exercise routine.

Positive gains in phonological awareness of the alphabet, increased social skills, self-esteem.

Historically, local farmers have found it difficult to access school-food markets, given the complexities of the procurement process. Farm to school programs open up that multi-billion-dollar market to family farmers. Data from farm to school programs suggests that when schools dedicate a significant percentage of their purchases to local producers, local farmers gain a significant and steady market.

For example, the New York City school district signed a \$4.2 million contract with farmers in upstate NY to provide apples for NYC schools over a three-year period. The 60 farms providing products to local schools in Massachusetts, meanwhile, are generating more than \$700,000 in additional revenue each year. For most participating farmers, school sales represent 5 to 10 percent of their total sales.



Some of the benefits reported by participating farmers are:

Diversification of market;

Positive relationships with the school district, students, parents, and community;

Opportunities to explore processing and preservation methods for institutional markets;

Establishment of grower collaboratives or cooperatives to supply institutional markets.

April, 2007 issue of the Journal of the American Dietetic Association



a comment submitted to www.farmtoschool.org on February 6, 2009

Apart from the health and taste benefits of eating fresh, local food, Mary Ann Lopez, South Windsor's School Nutrition Specialist and Food Service Director, says it's good for her budget: Farmers set a price at the beginning of the season and that's what she pays all season. In contrast, during the winter, when she buys from national distributors, her price fluctuates because their food comes from different vendors across the country.

a quote in www.newhavenadvocate.com

With high overhead costs, the financial viability of school food services often depends on their ability to increase the participation of paying students and adults. Farm to school programs typically increase the participation rates in school meal programs, enhancing the overall financial viability of participating school food services.

The Massachusetts Farm to School project noted that Worcester Public Schools have seen a 15 percent increase in school lunch purchases since the district began buying locally. Student lunch participation in one school in Southern California increased by over 50 percent in the first two years the farm to school program was in place. Overall, schools report a 3 to 16 percent increase in participation in school meals when farm-fresh food is served.



Increased participation can cover the additional labor costs associated with food preparation of farm to school programs. Through a detailed cost analysis of 2006-07 purchases, Missoula County Public School District found that buying some local foods in season (apples, cantaloupe, carrot coins and shredded carrot, potatoes, and salad mix) was either less expensive or no more expensive than what it would have cost to purchase comparable foods through mainstream suppliers.

Food service staff participating in farm to school programs show increased:

- Knowledge and interest in local food preparation;

- Knowledge regarding seasonal recipes;

- Interest in interacting with teachers to strengthen classroom-cafeteria connections.

Incorporation of a parent-education component through a farm to school program can ensure that messages about health and local foods are carried into homes and reinforced there by parents and caregivers. Farm to school education inspires parents to incorporate healthier foods into their children's and their family's diets and better equips them to do so through both shopping and cooking tips. In a project in Vermont, 32 percent of parents with participating children believed that their family diet had improved since their child's participation in the program. In another project in Philadelphia, 78 percent of parents with participating children reported that their children ate more fruits and vegetables.

Many parents have exhibited:

- Gains in ability and interest for incorporating healthier foods in family diets;

- Greater interest in guiding children to make healthier choices;

- Positive changes in shopping patterns to incorporate healthy and local foods.



New York Times, February 22, 2009

Farm to school programs also affect teachers in positive ways—a very important and often overlooked outcome, as teachers are role models for students in all areas, especially regarding healthy lifestyles and eating. Some effects:

- Demonstrated positive attitude and eagerness about integrating farm to school related information in curriculum;

- Positive changes in personal diets and lifestyles, including but not limited to purchasing farm to school meals in the school cafeteria.



Fast fact on the bottom: In the U.S., it takes the typical food item 1,500 to 2,400 miles to travel from farm to plate. A head of California lettuce shipped to Washington, DC, requires 36 times more fuel energy just to transport than the caloric food energy it provides.

Each school day, the 600-plus schools in the Chicago Public School (CPS) district serve about 385,000 lunches and breakfasts, 83 percent of which are free or discounted. A more healthful school meal program means healthier kids both now and in the future. Chicago Public School district is working with farmers and processors located within 150 miles of the city, including in Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Indiana, to serve fresh local fruit and vegetables to more than 300,000 students all year long. By doing this, Chicago has found a cost-effective way to make fresh local produce—including apples from Michigan, as well as corn, peas, carrots, and green beans frozen within 48 hours of harvest—accessible and available to students year-round, not just in the summer.

The Chicago Public School district began experimenting with changing the food offered to students with a pilot project in 2005. Greg Christian has run the nonprofit Organic School Project at the Louisa May Alcott School in Lincoln Park, the McCorkle Elementary School in Bronzeville, and Hammond Elementary in Little Village. The group, whose mission is to get kids to eat better food, builds teaching gardens at each school and brings in students from Loyola's School of Nursing to lead monthly nutrition classes. The plan was to work in each school for a few years, then move on to others, leaving the menus and programs in the hands of administrators.

In 2007, building on the momentum of this small pilot project, the district took a bigger step to providing fresh and more healthful food for its students. Partnering with its main food service company, Chartwells Thompson Hospitality, it decided to put fresh fruits and vegetables on the menu twice a week. The change in food procurement creates a healthier meal for students, since the nutritional content of fresh food is far greater than canned food and especially more than highly processed or fried food. The switch to local produce also makes economic sense, thanks to rising shipping costs.

However, the district's changed procurement plan has created such greater regional demand for farm-fresh food that it strains the local supply, as many farmers have prior commitments to other large institutions. Another issue facing the district is financial: the federal reimbursement rate has not kept up with inflation and the rising costs of food and labor. In 2007, CPS ran a \$23 million deficit in its food service program.

In order for Chicago Public Schools to continue improving the diets of its students, reimbursement rates for school meals need to be raised so that they are in step with current costs. The now outdated procurement model for school meals has not reflected a demand for fresh, more healthful food. This model needs to change, and schools and districts need support as they work to improve procurement systems.



Already this year, groups representing education, health, labor, and commercial interests are working together, crafting joint positions and principles that reflect shared goals of advancing student health through an improved school nutrition program. Those involved in the school meals value chain have recognized that collaboration is critical to bring about much needed changes in this federally funded program and that there's no better time to act than now.

The Baltimore Public Schools system feeds 82,000 students several times a day. With a new program to introduce more healthful eating into the system, farm-fresh food is now finding its way to the city's school kids, many of whom had never eaten a fresh peach before. Baltimore has partnered with local farmers to secure fruits and vegetables, including peaches, that exceed nutritional standards, meet the system's school lunch budget, and actually cost less than existing offerings such as fruits processed in high-calorie syrups.

Baltimore is familiar with America's obesity problem: Type 2 diabetes is now one of the most common child health problems in the city. And because of the high poverty and homeless rate in the area, many kids in Baltimore Public Schools get their only meal of the day from the school meal program. The city's new food service director, Tony Geraci, has contributed innovative ideas for turning these statistics around by introducing kids to healthier food through changes in food procurement and hands-on learning. Plans are under way to turn an underused city nature center into a productive 33-acre school farm, where students will work planting, tending, and harvesting—all the while learning about healthier food and how it's produced.

With the help of Geraci, Baltimore schools are acting in step with many food directors at schools all over the country, cutting back on frozen and heavily processed entrees and turning instead to area farms to supply food for schoolchildren. The change in procurement will actually result in cost savings. For example, each week of September 2008, cafeteria facilities supervisor Jeff Wilson brought in 600 cases of peaches from Maryland-located Baugher's Farm. Fruit from a wholesaler would have cost \$5 more per case. The savings also come from buying bulk ingredients rather than purchasing the pre-prepared meals that have become the norm in lunchrooms.

Geraci wants kids to have a say in what's on their trays. Beginning this spring, every school in the system will take part in a citywide contest. Kids will develop breakfast and lunch menus using federal nutrition guidelines, earning extra points if they include a family recipe, source the ingredients locally, or make use of U.S. Department of Agriculture commodities.

Because of the sheer size of the New York City school system—it serves 850,000 meals every day of the school year—any changes in its school food procurement have a huge opportunity to have a positive impact on children's health.

Successes in several of the school system's farm to school partnerships over the past few years can shine light on new ways to get fresh and more healthful food to kids in public schools. Jerry Dygert of Champlain Valley Specialty has teamed up with the schools to sell Grab Apples. Millions of New York state-grown apples, pre-sliced and -bagged, have been purchased by New York schoolchildren. New York City's food service division estimates that kids are eating four times



as many apples as they used to. To make the partnership possible, Champlain Valley Specialty had to invest in infrastructure changes in order to be able to cut and bag the apples—a presentation that was attractive to kids—in the quantities needed by NYC’s schools.

The district’s struggles over implementation point to the kinds of support and resources school districts will need in order to change the tide of ill health of American children. Locally grown sliced and bagged carrots have not yet enjoyed the success of apples, even though the district has been working with producers for more than two years to try to get fresh carrots to New York’s schoolchildren. As the district serves 285,000 pounds of baby carrots trucked in from faraway states, it seemed like it should be an easy, not to mention cost-effective switch to use carrots grown close to the city. The district wanted to serve carrots in the same way they serve pre-sliced, pre-bagged apples because it is too labor-intensive to hand-cut as many carrots daily as they would need. But farmers and producers would have to invest in a different infrastructure to cut carrots. This might initially drive costs up and out of the purchasing price range: current federal and local law require distributors to purchase the least expensive product, meaning schools have not been able to give preferential treatment to local products.

Outdated procurement regulations are among the systems that must be changed in order for school meals to offer the healthy food they were originally intended to include. Growers of other fresh fruit and vegetables, as well as New York dairy producers, have experienced similar frustrations in getting farm products into schools. Well-intentioned schools have also had a hard time navigating the food purchasing bureaucracy. A May 2008 piece of New York State legislation called the Healthy Foods Act sought to improve such regulations by giving farmers greater access to selling to their local schools, making it easier for both groups to serve healthier foods to kids.

One of the pioneers of the farm to school approach, the New North Florida Cooperative Association, Inc. (NNFC), has been working with school districts since 1995 to provide fresh produce for school meals. This group of innovative African-American farmers—60 to 100 farmers based in Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas—has served more than a million students in 72 school districts.

NNFC began selling to Gadsden County schools during the 1996-1997 school year, and since that time has rapidly expanded, selling to a total of 15 school districts. The association initially received financial assistance, mainly for the purchase of infrastructure and equipment to expand processing and distribution, along with a \$40,000 grant from the USDA Agriculture Marketing Service. Although grant monies were used in the initial stage of this program, approximately 90 percent of the funding for the NNFC’s marketing efforts comes from direct marketing sales, which contributes to the sustainability of the farm to school program today.

North Florida, where the program initially began, is an economically depressed area with high unemployment rates. Farm to school was a boon for all sides of the equation: farmers, land use, children, schools, community, and the local economy. Farmers saw that sourcing to schools would create a new market that could bring stability, profitability, and organization to small operations that could not survive on their own. From the food service perspective, integrating fresh local produce into school meals was a nutritionally sound decision that benefited children, the local economy, and community. It’s a win-win-win situation.



Every child deserves the opportunity to eat food in school that ensures their health and wellbeing. Valuing the nourishment of our children is a principle shared by the collaboration forged by the National Farm to School Network, Community Food Security Coalition, and School Food FOCUS. Each organization represents active citizens, communities, and public institutions across the United States working in innovative ways to improve the food served in schools. The National Farm to School Network works with schools, farmers, food services, children, parents, and communities providing direct technical assistance to get farm to school programs off the ground. The Community Food Security Coalition builds strong local and regional food systems, especially in places where food injustice (unequal access to healthy food) is prevalent. School Food FOCUS works with large urban school districts to bring more regionally sourced and sustainably produced food to school meals via changes in procurement policies.

Together, we represent millions of Americans supporting policy solutions that restore the right of all children to access good food in school; that educate and inform communities about healthy food and its impact on the wellbeing of children; and that connect farmers, school districts, food service companies, and great ideas to the food system delivering school lunch.

Nineteen states across the country have passed policies to support farm to school initiatives. Some states have set up statewide farm to school programs, with staff in the Departments of Agriculture or Education, or both. They've communicated the state's preference for schools to buy local food through policy statements, changes to bidding practices, or cost preferences for in-state products ranging from 5 to 25 percent. They have also helped to connect farmers and school food services through websites and databases.

The federal government can learn from the example of these states. The 2004 Child Nutrition Act reauthorization included just one provision on farm to school: a seed grant program with \$10 million in discretionary funding that has failed to receive an appropriation. But farm to school projects are growing explosively, and multiple policy strategies are needed to capture this momentum and propel them to the next level.

The policy recommendations are solutions that are fair to American children, schools, farmers, food producers, and communities. The following lists the three most effective ways Washington can rebalance the way American children eat in schools.

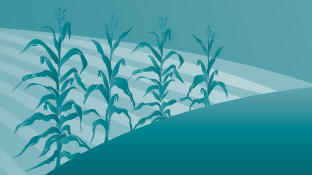
Priorities for Child Nutrition Reauthorization



This would fund 100-500 projects per year up to \$100,000 to cover start-up costs for farm to school programs. These competitive, one-time grants will allow schools to develop vendor relationships with nearby farmers, plan seasonal menus and promotional materials, start a school garden, and develop hands-on nutrition education to demonstrate the important interrelationship of nutrition and agriculture.

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