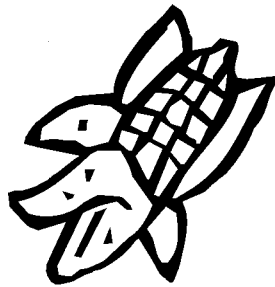


Getting Fresh with Farm-to-School Programs

By making direct connections between growers and schools, farm-to-school programs provide local markets for family farmers and healthier food choices for schoolchildren



Bonnie Hallam

by **Marion Kalb**

THESE DAYS, IT IS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE to talk about children and food without acknowledging the epidemic of childhood obesity. Unhealthy eating habits — along with lack of exercise — play a major role in this epidemic. Only ten percent of children ages six to eleven eat the recommended five daily servings of fruits and vegetables. During the past 30 years, the percentage of children in the United States who are overweight doubled to 30.3 percent, and the percentage of adolescents who are overweight tripled to 15.5 percent.¹ Statistics are similar in Canada, where the percentage of adolescents who are overweight more than doubled between 1978 and 2004, from 14 percent to 29 percent, while the adolescent obesity rate tripled from 3 percent to 9 percent.² Seventy percent of overweight adolescents remain overweight into adulthood, thereby increasing their risk of heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and high blood pressure. For the first time in 200 years, children today are likely to have shorter life spans than their parents.

At the same time that obesity has reached epidemic proportions, family farming is facing its own crisis. Of all occupations in North America, farming is in the greatest decline. In the United States, less than two percent of the population is employed in farming, and the federal Census

Bureau has declared the number of family farms “statistically insignificant” and no longer keeps statistics on them. In Canada, only 2.4 percent of the population works in farming,³ and between 1996 and 2001 the number of farms dropped by 11 percent.⁴ The farmers’ share of the food dollar declined from 41 cents in 1950 to 20 cents in 1999. The bleak outlook for earning a good living by farming is discouraging to the younger generation: only eight percent of today’s farmers are under the age of 35 and nearly half are over 55. With fewer marketing outlets, rising costs for land and water, and the growth of agribusiness, many family farmers find themselves having to sell their land to feed their families.

While a wide range of approaches is needed to address these issues, farm-to-school food programs help to counter these negative trends systemically. By making direct connections between growers and schools, these programs provide local markets for family farmers and healthier food choices for schoolchildren. In California, for example, students line up at salad bars supplied with produce from the local farmers’ market. A cooperative of farmers in Florida provides collard greens to over 300,000 children throughout the South. In North Carolina, schools have the option of purchasing produce grown in the state through the Department of Defense’s “DoD Fresh” program. These are just a few examples of what’s happening in over 400 school districts and 22 states nationwide.

Benefits of farm-to-school programs

Educational and health benefits

A farm-to-school program provides opportunities for integrating food and agriculture topics into science, math, and social studies curricula. Further connections can be made by visiting with farmers, participating in school gardens, composting waste, or cooking in the classroom. Most students have no direct connection to a family farm or opportunity to learn first hand how vegetables, fruits, grains, and animal products are produced. And while nutrition is taught in the classroom, there is generally not a strong relationship between the school curriculum and the school cafeteria. If lessons in nutrition are reinforced by the availability of fresh foods in the cafeteria, and if students are involved in gardening, farming, cooking, and other “real-life” experiences with food, they are more likely to adopt healthy eating as a lifelong practice. As an example, when the Los Angeles Unified School District instituted school salad bars stocked with local produce, students, parents, and teachers participated in farm tours, produce tastings, and nutrition education sessions. As a result, participation in the lunch program increased. Students not only enjoyed the fresh, healthy, and tasty salads, but also reduced their calorie intake by an average of 200 calories a day, and their fat intake by 11 grams a day.

Benefits to farmers

Farmers are always looking for direct markets because their profit margins are higher when they can sell directly to retail outlets and consumers. Selling to schools not only gives them a better return on their land and labor, but also provides greater community exposure. This in turn increases farmers’ opportunities to market their products directly in other local outlets, such as grocery stores or Community Supported Agriculture projects. Selling to schools can also help farmers to increase the total amount of produce that they sell. Many schools and school districts are large-volume customers, and they represent a reliable and steady market that allows farmers to establish better controls on planting and harvesting.

Environmental and community benefits

Farm-to-school programs provide a number of benefits to local communities and economies. By ensuring a steady



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market for locally grown produce, such programs can help farmers to stay on their farms, and healthy farms provide jobs, pay taxes, and keep working agricultural land open. The retention of farmland has its own community benefits, which include maintaining open space and providing a greater diversity of wildlife habitat, greater food security, and flood control.

The environment also benefits when agricultural products are sold within the region where they are produced. In our present highly inefficient food distribution system, the average food item in North America travels 2,100 kilometers (1,300 miles) before reaching the table. When products are sold within the region, delivery vehicles travel shorter distances, burning less fuel and emitting fewer greenhouse gases. Local sales also mean that less storage and

refrigeration are required, and that packaging can be reduced or even eliminated.

Organizing for success

Organizing a farm-to-school program can be a challenging prospect. There is no “correct” way to develop one, yet there are some commonalities among programs. About 75 percent of them are organized by someone other than a farmer or school district personnel: by a non-profit organization or by a group of concerned parents or community members. Most start small, with one or two schools, and with one product, such as apples. Almost all are collaborative efforts in which a number of people are involved in the program’s development and school food service staff play a key role.

Each of the following examples of farm-to-school programs has its own unique characteristics. The New York program began with a push from the state legislature to educate children about New York agriculture. The Philadelphia program targets kindergarteners from low-income families living in an urban environment and combines farm tours and nutrition education. The Madison, Wisconsin, example focuses on a large school district serving about 15,000 meals per day. Their biggest challenge is finding the supply to meet the demand!

New York Harvest for NY Kids

In most people’s minds — including New Yorkers’ — the state of New York is not usually associated with food production. In 1996, the New York State Assembly Task Force

on Farm, Food and Nutrition set out to change that and, at the same time, to help New York farmers, by bringing state-grown foods into school cafeterias. The Task Force declared the second week in October to be “New York Harvest for New York Kids” week and sent educational materials to schools. There was one small problem, however: no additional funding or support was provided, so that the success of the program depended on local initiative. In response to the educational mate-



A kindergartner learns the magic of picking an apple from the tree during a farm visit, part of Kindergarten Initiative’s nutrition education program.

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rials sent to schools, a surprising number of school food service directors developed new programs. In some cases, they partnered with teachers who incorporated lessons on farming and agriculture into their curricula. School cafeteria managers teamed up with teachers, parents, farmers, community groups, the Cooperative Extension service, and the Farm Bureau to teach children about farms and inspire healthy food choices. The program received a boost in 2002 when state legislation mandated that the state departments of education and agriculture work together to promote the purchase of New York farm products by schools, universities, and other educational institutions.

Another boost came from NY Farms!, a non-profit organization dedicated to maintaining farms and educating people about agriculture. The organization helped to promote New York Harvest for New York Kids week and encouraged its farming members to visit school cafeterias to see how they could help with this event. They also held a meeting at a farm to which they invited members of the New York State School Food Service Association (NYSSFSA), an association of school food service administrators and managers. According to NYSSFSA member Ray Denniston, Food Service Director for the Johnson City Central School District, the meeting was an “eye-opener” that allowed them to “see what the farmer goes through on a yearly basis.... We developed a lot of respect for the farmer from that visit.” The farm visit also helped them see how working directly with farmers could benefit both farms and schools. Says Denniston, “We had been looking to improve our programs by providing kids more wholesome and nutrient-dense foods.... And it just made sense to do what we could to help save the family farms in our own neighborhood. It was win-win — there really wasn’t anything not to be excited about.”

New York Harvest for New York Kids Week has subsequently led to other promotions throughout the school year. For example, a program called “Give Me Five” highlighted a different state-grown fruit or vegetable each day of the week and included school announcements and informative posters about the health benefits of eating fruits and vegetables. For

an upcoming New York Harvest for New York Kids Week, Denniston plans to continue this approach, featuring not only fruits and vegetables but also bagels, milk, cheese and turkey: “We can pretty much fill the whole menu with products that are made in New York state.”

Pennsylvania Kindergarten Initiative

A celebrity sighting has just occurred at Robert Blair Pollock School in Philadelphia: a kindergartner student has spotted Chef Harv’s

truck, filled with farm-fresh snacks for students, on its way to the school. According to Bonnie Hallam, Education Coordinator for the Kindergarten Initiative, “This program has created a buzz around healthy eating. I feel like a star when I visit these schools — I’m known as the Healthy Food Lady.” The Kindergarten Initiative, created by the nonprofit organization Food Trust, began in the fall of 2004 as a pilot program for about 450 students in 15 kindergarten classes in Philadelphia. The goals of the program are to engage young children and their parents in learning about food, farms, and nutrition, to introduce local foods into students’ diets, and to integrate nutrition education into the curriculum.

One component of the program is providing students with healthy vegetable and fruit snacks grown by local farmers. Chef Harv, a key player in buying and distributing these snacks, runs an incubator kitchen in West Virginia where farmers can try their hand at processing their farm products. He delivers the farm-fresh snacks in his own truck once a month and uses an overnight delivery service for additional weekly deliveries. Some of the snacks the kids have enjoyed are yellow carrots, sliced apples and pears, roasted corn on the cob, and cubed cantaloupe. During the winter they have tasted strawberry applesauce, apricot muffins, sweet potato biscuits, and peaches in a light sauce. Along with each snack comes a picture of the farmer who grew the product. One vegetable the students didn’t much care for was a watermelon radish. However, they were fascinated by its colors: green on the outside and pink on the inside. According to Hallam, there was concern about kids not liking some of the new snacks. “But the really important thing is that they are open to trying new foods. That’s the key.”

The nutrition education component of the Kindergarten Initiative is ambitious. The activities include cooking demonstrations in the classroom by a local chef, a trip to the supermarket with parents, the introduction of school gardens, and field trips to farms in fall, winter, and spring. The farm visits have been immensely popular with the students. While farm tours in the winter are somewhat unusual, the students thoroughly enjoyed helping farmer Bob Solly with his



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Parents and children take part in classroom cooking demonstrations in Philadelphia's Kindergarten Initiative program.

winter chores. They had the opportunity to rake leaves from under the trees (to discourage mice from building homes), to lay straw on the strawberry plants (to help keep them at a constant temperature), and to plant hothouse broccoli (so that it will be ready for the students to transplant in the spring). And of course there was time for a farm snack of popcorn and an apple cider doughnut.

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Wisconsin Harvest Festival Meals

A chicken fajita wrap with carrots, cabbage, and spinach, a sweet potato muffin, and a fresh Wisconsin apple were all part of the Harvest Lunch enjoyed by elementary school students of the Madison Metropolitan School District Food Service. "We are thrilled about this meal," said Doug Wubben, coordinator of the Wisconsin Homegrown Lunch program. "It's good for the kids and it's good for local farmers, too."

The Harvest Lunch is part of a Harvest Festival Meals program being piloted at three elementary schools in Madison, Wisconsin. The program provides students with special meals in the fall, winter, and spring that highlight local foods of the seasons. The winter meal is an evening meal and the whole family is invited to share in the bounty. Sara Tedeschi, co-founder of the program, says, "People often assume that if you're in a northern climate you don't have any local produce during the school year, and this isn't true." Last year's winter dinner, prepared and catered by students in the Culinary Arts Program of the Madison Area Technical College, featured squash bisque, Asian noodle salad, egg rolls, apple cake, and organic ice cream. Wisconsin-grown products included onions, carrots, spinach, winter squash, meat, apples, cream, butter, and maple syrup. The meal also featured an educational event that focused on Wisconsin agriculture and healthy eating.

Although organizers would like fresh to include Wisconsin products in all school meals, the cost of the additional labor required to prepare fresh fruits and vegetables is currently prohibitive for a food service that makes 15,000 meals a

day in a centralized kitchen facility. However, one benefit of the small-scale pilot program has been that the food service and the farmers are learning to work with each other. The food service better understands the seasonal availability of produce, and farmers understand the need to supply products that require minimal processing (e.g., broccoli florets instead of broccoli stalks). Tedeschi says they are now working on supplying such products on a more regular basis. This would allow the project to move beyond providing special meals at three pilot schools to incorporating fresh Wisconsin foods into the menu for all 31 elementary schools.

Developing a farm-to-school program

As these examples illustrate, developing a farm-to-school program can provide a number of organizing challenges. Here are a few strategies to address the challenges you may encounter in pursuing this work:

- **Start with the food service director.** The food service director should be the first person consulted when considering a farm-to-school program. What meals are served now? Do they already buy from local farmers? Would they be interested in giving it a try? What products might work with existing menus? If the director is reticent to become involved, it may be because the food service staff is already very busy and the program is regarded as an additional task. This is a very good reason to take a team approach in organizing the program.
- **Collaboration is key.** Take a cooperative approach with

partners, including farmers, food service managers, school administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Form a farm-to-school committee that can identify resources, find additional resources if necessary, and move the program forward.

- **Start small and go slowly.** Begin with one product, such as apples, that have a long shelf life. Working with one product will help define the process, from purchasing the product to delivering it and preparing it in the kitchen. Don't move faster than any project partner is willing to go.
- **Assist the food service in finding farmers.** Food service staff may not know how to make direct contact with local farms, even if they are interested in receiving local, fresh foods. To provide the necessary initial contacts, seek farmers through local farmers' markets, 4-H groups, feed supply stores, roadside stands and pick-your-own farms, community-supported agriculture farms, food cooperatives, commodity boards and commissions, government agencies, and even the Internet.
- **Organize volume and supply.** School food services generally purchase all produce from one broker and are not accustomed to or equipped for dealing with many different vendors. At the same time, successfully marketing products to school food services can be an overwhelming task for a single small producer. Food services and farmers both benefit when farmers are organized to market and sell their products as a group. Look for — or help to organize — a growers' cooperative or informal marketing network by which can farmers organize with other producers in their area. Alternatively, local products may be purchased through farmers' markets or local distributors.
- **Develop a strong educational component.** Education on nutrition and agriculture can help to increase children's acceptance of new foods and menus in the lunchroom. This can include working in a school garden, visiting a farm, taste-testing new products, learning salad bar etiquette, or participating in hands-on nutrition education programs. These linkages help students understand where food comes from and how it is grown.
- **Seasonality — be creative!** The seasonality of produce need not be a barrier to a successful, year-round farm-to-school effort. Fresh fruits and vegetables are only some of the agricultural products available in most regions. Other local products may include dairy products, eggs, grains, beans, meats, or processed items such as honey, maple syrup, and jams. Start small, think creatively, and identify over time what works in your particular agricultural region. Farmers are knowledgeable about product seasonality and can be directly involved in developing seasonal menu ideas or aid the process by providing product availability charts by season. A simple but effective approach is to highlight a different fruit or vegetable each month, both in menu planning and for educational or promotional purposes.

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While the barriers to creating a farm-to-school program may appear to be high, certain trends both in farming and in schools are helping to remedy this. First, school food services are slowly moving towards using fresh fruits and vegetables instead of relying on frozen,

canned, or processed products. This means that kitchens are becoming better equipped for fresh food preparation, and staff are gaining the skills necessary for working with fresh products. Second, farmers are realizing the benefits of value-added products. Food service staff prefer to receive broccoli florets instead of broccoli stalks, peeled and chopped potatoes instead of whole ones, etc. Farmers have an incentive to develop processing abilities, not only for schools, but for other institutional and direct markets as well. Third, food service staff and school administrators are beginning to understand what educators already know: if nutrition classes promote the eating of fresh fruits and vegetables, and the school cafeteria serves only processed products, there's a disconnect between what children learn and what they experience day to day. Students need to receive the same message in both the classroom and the cafeteria.

These trends bode well for the future of farm-to-school programs. As fresh produce becomes more of a priority, budgets will be reallocated accordingly. School administrators and food services in the U.S. are finding out that healthy foods can be good for cafeteria revenues as well as kids' waistlines. Studies have shown that farm-to-school programs can increase both students' participation in the federally funded National School Lunch Program and sales of cafeteria meals to staff members, thereby allowing school food services to reach greater economies of scale.

When students have the opportunity to plant a seed, harvest a peach, or visit a farm, they become more connected to the agriculture that feeds them, their families, and their communities. But ultimately farm-to-school programs work because kids discover that fruits and vegetables can taste really good. Such programs can help children adopt healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime, and convince the next generation of consumers to buy from their local farmer.

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Excerpts of this article are from *Linking Farms with Schools: A Guide to Understanding Farm-to-School Programs for Schools, Farmers and Organizers* by Marion Kalb, Kristen Markley, and Sara Tedeschi, Community Food Security Coalition, 2004, <www.foodsecurity.org>.

Notes

1. American Obesity Association, "Obesity in Youth," on-line May 30, 2006, <www.obesity.org/subs/fastfacts/obesity_youth.shtml>.
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4. CBC, "Agriculture Census, 2005, on-line June 30, 2006, <www.cbc.ca/news/background/agriculture/>.