



FoodHub in the News

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The 10 most impressive farm-to-school programs

While fresh, local food is growing in popularity among consumers, it's also growing in school systems. Learn about these 10 successful farm-to-school programs.

What's not to like about farm-to-school programs? If you're not familiar with the term, it means just what it sounds like: programs that bring farm-fresh, local foods to public and even private schools so that kids can enjoy great nutrition. The programs also offer excellent educational opportunities, bringing students to farms, and chefs to classrooms, while at the same time giving local farmers a great place to sell their products. Read on, and we'll take a look at 10 farm-to-school programs that are doing a great job.

1. Boston Public Schools

Started in 2008 with a "Harvest of the Month" special in 10 Boston Public Schools, this district's farm-to-school program has grown quite a bit in its short life, now serving more than 58 schools. Going beyond simply serving farm-fresh foods, AmeriCorps VISTA members have joined up as well, sharing educational programming, as well as logistics for procurement of farm foods. As a result, kids in Boston public schools are able to enjoy locally grown items including apples, collard greens, squash, strawberries and sweet potatoes. Select schools are treated to a professional guest chef, who rotates between five schools and prepares meals one day a week at each school, while working with the cafeteria staff to create dishes with local produce. A particularly successful part of Boston's program is Local Lunch Thursdays, which features a local fruit or vegetable from a farmers market each week. As a result, staff have had students requesting items like rutabaga fries by name, an action that has been lauded as major success for the program.

2. Native Harvest

Native Harvest has been around since 2007, and in its first few months alone was able to completely revamp the breakfast and lunch menu at a local school. They took out food dyes, and processed foods, instead replacing them with fresh, local, and organic products whenever possible. The program works with 18 farm families, and encourages the farmers to share a feast with the students to see the impact of their food. Further sharing is encouraged, as students take field trips to learn about local food systems, including visits to turkey farms, rice mills and apple orchards. In this program, food comes to the classroom, too, with classes spending time focusing on corn and seasonal food, including its history, harvesting and preparation.

3. Ecotrust

Ecotrust has created a program, FoodHub, that allows schools to get connected with local farms in an easy way. It is an online marketplace connecting wholesale buyers (including schools) to sellers of regionally grown food in the Pacific Northwest. Ecotrust sits down with school food service directors, showing them how to make FoodHub and regional foods work in their schools, and shares guidance in the FoodHub Knowledge Base with resources for farm-to-school programming. One public school district that has particularly benefited from Ecotrust is Portland Public Schools, which is a recognized leader in farm-to-school programming. Portland Public Schools (PPS) has achieved the amazing feat of making 30 percent of purchases from local farms and food producers. PPS has also begun serving 100 percent locally sourced whole-grain bread in all of its schools. Additionally, through the Portland Farm and Garden Educators Network, PPS has created and maintained gardens in both schools and communities that allow students to learn about gardening with hands-on exploration and experiences.

4. Vermont FEED

Vermont FEED works with more than 1/3 of Vermont's schools to bring local, farm-fresh produce to students, and acts as a catalyst of rebuilding healthy food systems in schools. This program involves farm-fresh salad bars, but goes beyond as well, including waste management programs like composting and educational opportunities for students. These include farm tours, school gardens and cooking demonstrations. Through the Vermont FEED program, students are better able to understand the origins of their food, as well as how the food they eat impacts their bodies and the world around them.

5. Cornell Farm to School

Cornell University is a major player in the push to get local farms into New York state schools. Through the Cornell University Farm-to-School Research and Extension Program, the school offers support to increase the availability and purchase of fresh, minimally processed foods for New York's grade schools and institutes of higher education. The program uses outreach education, research, and more to not only further the purpose of getting healthier foods into schools, but also to raise awareness about the need to eat healthy and support local farmers. In addition to helping schools and farmers get connected, Cornell offers significant resources for schools that would like to start a farm-to-school project, including a guide full of all the steps to take and a downloadable toolkit with pretty much everything a school might need to get started.

6. NH Farm to School

In New Hampshire, schools statewide are able to participate in the farm-to-school program, with healthy, locally grown foods in cafeterias, as well as curriculum based on farms, food and nutrition. NH schools also enjoy agriculture-based learning opportunities in this program. The NH Farm-to-School program started out small, as a pilot program introducing local apples and cider into K-12 schools in 2003, growing to Get Smart Eat Local in 2006, which introduced local food to 10 districts in the state. Since then, the program's connections with growers and schools has only expanded, bringing together schools, farmers and distributors for high-quality local food and a great education to go along with it.

7. Seven Generations Ahead

This group is really thinking ahead with its Fresh from the Farm program, the mission of which is to promote a culture of healthy eating and environmental awareness. The program brings together local farming, ecology and healthy eating in lessons and activities, including

classroom food tastings and lessons, organic farm tours, farmer class visits, and chef cooking demonstrations. Fresh from the Farm also teaches students how to grow their own food and convert waste into fertilizer with school-based composting and organic school gardens that give students a new context for healthy food, as well as an educational classroom experience. But education doesn't stop with the students, with SGA including parents in food education to encourage healthy eating at home too.

8. REAP

Based in Madison, Wis., REAP (Research, Education, Action and Policy on Food Group) works to build a healthy, environmentally friendly, and economically sustainable regional food system, making connections to link together "land and table." By shortening the distance from farm to table, REAP is able to support small family farmers while providing safe, diverse food for schools and other groups. REAP achieves this through a few different programs, including a Buy Fresh Buy Local farm to restaurant program, a farm-fresh atlas, and the Farm-to-School Program. REAP sends "Snack Bites" to schools, materials that include heirloom cherry tomatoes, apples, and carrot sticks, along with educational materials that support the snacks. The program's AmeriCorps educators also offer educational programming, including farmer educators with farm field trips with hands-on experiences. REAP extends the program to students in middle and high schools, bringing chefs right into their classroom for cooking lessons, sharing knowledge about making healthy choices and knowing where the food was grown. Finally, REAP offers innovation in school fundraising, coordinating an annual fundraiser that includes fair trade, handmade, and local items like cherries, cheeses, soaps and syrup.

9. Growing Minds

Growing Minds brings educators, farmers and parents together to encourage healthy, local food and nutritious education for students in the Appalachian area. Through this program, farmers supply schools with the freshest food possible, and kids are able to visit farms to see where their food comes from. Growing Minds also encourages nutrition education through cooking demonstrations and classes that enable students to learn how to prepare local foods. In addition to connecting farmers and schools, Growing Minds supports school gardens with free seeds and resources for growing, so kids can eat what they grow. Finally, Growing Minds has a local food guide just for kids, highlighting farms with special activities for kids, kid-friendly farmers markets, and areas where kids can grow their own gardens.

10. Georgia Organics

Georgia Organics offers a farm-to-school program centered around 4 Cs — Classroom, Cafeteria, Culinary and Community — using them as the foundation for local produce in school cafeterias, as well as community support and connections that bring food and curriculum together. With workshops and courses for teachers, parents and school cafeteria staff, the organization is able to educate adults who are in turn able to educate students on the importance of healthy, local food from the farm. Curriculum for students includes organic farming with student experiments and activities for learning. Some courses are even taught on a farm, giving students hands-on experience with the food they're eating.

URL: <http://www.mnn.com/food/healthy-eating/stories/the-10-most-impressive-farm-to-school-programs>