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Reap the Benefits

With help from local growers,
Wisconsin's school districts are finding unique ways
for students to learn and make healthy choices



Reap the Benefits

Farm to School program makes sense for some schools and local farmers

SHELBY ANDERSON

Editor's Note

With the state Legislature recently passing farm to school legislation (AB 746), and the national focus remaining on the prevention of childhood obesity and its long-term health consequences, the discussion about how to bring whole healthy foods to the school cafeteria line continues. Like the debate sure to surround any issue, no one idea presents a one-size-fits-all solution. However, two small Wisconsin school districts have successfully introduced locally grown foods to their food service program and share their stories here.

On a warm spring day on the grounds of the Viroqua Area School District, Bjorn Bergman, Vernon Area AmeriCorp Farm to School member, is carrying a tub full of root vegetables from the high school to the elementary school. Bergman is scheduled to give lessons on the vegetables to two separate second-grade classes.

Once in the classroom, Bergman has the students divide into groups and he gives each group a different vegetable. The students smell, taste, and feel the vegetables. They are asked to name the vegetable.

One group calls their vegetable, which is a beet, Mr. Sweet.

Bergman is the district's Pied Piper of vegetables, procuring them for the district's cafeteria and arranging and giving lessons and providing samples to the district's 1,000 students. In the second-grade classrooms, the students are eager to participate in the activities and taste the new veggies. At the end of the lesson, Bergman asks the students what they learned. One student said they learned to "Always try new food," and another said "That beets taste good!"



Bergman's work is the result of Viroqua's Farm to School Program, which brings local produce into the school cafeteria and offers educational opportunities to students. Viroqua School Board Vice President Angie Lawrence says it's a win-win for students and farmers.

"The students win because they are eating fresh vegetables and the farmers win because we are providing another source of income to them that would not be available if it weren't for this program," Lawrence says.

Food and Community

The Viroqua Area School District is located in southwestern Wisconsin, about 30 miles southeast of La Crosse. Because of the area's rich farmland, it boasts as one of the highest concentrations of farms anywhere in the United States. For years, the school has worked with local orchards. Students visit the orchard, help harvest the apples and some of the apples are used in the school cafeteria.

More recently, the school district has taken a more active and formal approach to serving local produce. Beginning in August 2008, Marilyn Volden, Food/Nutrition Program Supervisor at the Viroqua Area School District, and her staff began meeting to process local food and stockpile it for the coming school year.

In the first year, Volden and her staff processed about 700 pounds of vegetables in a single day. The vegetables were cleaned, cut, and frozen so they could be used all year long. This past fall, Volden and her staff processed 1,000 pounds of vegetables and froze them as ratatouille, which is a healthy roasted vegetable dish. It is also very versatile; it can be served as it is or on pizza or in a calzone.

When it comes to safely handling fruits and vegetables from local farmers, Volden says, the district just has to make sure that it receives whole, uncut produce. Fruits and vegetables cannot be cut or processed in any way by the farmers

— the school food service employees must do any necessary prep work. Otherwise, as long as the food is handled according to state and national food safety (HACCP) standards, it can be safely and legally used by the district.

This year, the food service staff at Viroqua was especially busy. In addition to utilizing 1,000 pounds of produce as ratatouille, carrots and zucchini were processed and saved to be used in the school's harvest muffin mix. Onions and other vegetables were also chopped and frozen for a soup mix that could be used throughout the school year.

"In August and September, we have this glut of produce," Volden said. "We wanted to take advantage of that."

The result is that more food choices are making their way into the high school/middle school cafeteria and money from the local school district is going to local farmers and back into the local community. In a short documentary "Food for Thought" produced by

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Wisconsin's Farm to School Program Gains Momentum

As this article was going to press, important Legislation regarding Farm to School Program in Wisconsin was being considered by the Assembly and Senate.

On April 13, Assembly Bill 746 passed through the Assembly and Senate. According to the Web site, Wisconsin Ag Connection, the bill creates the framework for a statewide Farm to School program by establishing a statewide council to coordinate the process of selling Wisconsin-grown products to schools.

If the bill is signed into law by the Governor, a statewide council will be established. Diane Chapeta, child nutrition services director for the Chilton Public School District, said this would allow guidelines for Farm to School programs to be drawn up, making it much easier for interested districts to begin a Farm to School program. □

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Madison filmmaker Nathan Clarke for the television show “World Report,” Viroqua Area School District Superintendent Robert Knadle emphasized the local aspect of the program.

“We spend many, many dollars feeding children,” Knadle said. “If we can incorporate those dollars back into the community — where those dollars get exchanged and exchanged throughout our community — we see value in that.”

Two Goals

The program is about more than saving money and offering more healthy school meal choices, it also educates students about what is produced locally, “local food in school lunches...is an excellent way to reconnect kids with the path of our food from farm to fork,” reads a pamphlet from FarmtoSchool.org.

That’s where Bergman comes in. Each month, Bergman does a “Harvest of the Month.” This involves featuring a fruit or vegetable that is in season. This vegetable is used on the lunch menu and Bergman provides samples and recipe ideas at lunch time. He also coordinates and gives lessons and in-class activities to students and coordinates field trips to farms for the older students. When it comes to the Farm to School movement, Bergman says there are two goals.

“One is that this is an intervention to childhood obesity,” he says. “We’re getting kids to try different fruits and vegetables. And two, we’re getting more food locally. We’re buying from local farmers and that means less travel time.”

The first goal: Getting students to eat fruits and vegetables is also one of the goals of the Task Force on Childhood Obesity, established in February by President Obama. Among other initiatives, the task force hopes to reduce childhood obesity in a generation and one of the ways the task force hopes to accomplish this goal is by ensuring that all students have access to healthy foods.

Monique Hooker, a renowned

French chef, cookbook author, and former restaurateur, helps with Viroqua’s Farm to School Program and is one of its most ardent advocates.

“The health issue facing our young generation is a huge epidemic: children are diabetic, overweight, and suffer from attention deficit disorder,” Hooker says. “It is our responsibility to see that they are cared for before it gets worse and we owe it to our next generation to make them healthy and keep them healthy.”

Will They Eat It?

However, to become healthier, students must learn to make healthy choices. Some may wonder how

Farm to School in Wisconsin

Here’s a quick look at a couple of other Wisconsin school districts that are bringing local foods into their schools.

NORTHEAST WISCONSIN FARM TO SCHOOL INITIATIVE

The NE Wisconsin Farm to School Initiative was formed to assist growers and school districts within the CESA 7 boundaries interested in working in partnership. Hilbert and Chilton Public Schools are purchasing fresh produce from local farms for their fruit and vegetable buffets.

THE MOUNT HOREB AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

The district has been purchasing local fruits and vegetables directly from farmers since 2005. Future plans include increasing the amount of locally grown fruits and vegetables on the menu and identifying local sources for dairy and bakery products.

Source: *FarmtoSchool.org*

R.E.A.P. FOOD GROUP

This organization connects local farmers and consumers in south-central Wisconsin. It runs a number of programs, including several Farm to School initiatives with school districts in the Madison area. Through its snack program, chef in the classroom, and harvest of the month, R.E.A.P. increases access to fresh, local, and sustainable produced foods for school children; explores opportunities to build reliable markets for local sustainable farmers and food processors within school food services; and connects children with food and farmers by providing hands-on educational opportunities focused on the local food system and the connections between health, food, farms, and the environment.

Source: *Reapfoodgroup.org*

Photo courtesy of Spooner Area School District



many students are actually opting to eat the locally-grown food that the district is working so hard to serve. Infusing information into the classroom about the food the children will find in their cafeteria is a strategy employed by Viroqua and the Chilton Public School District, another pioneer in the Farm to School movement. This introduction and taste-testing increases the students’ awareness about the food and gives them an opportunity to try it before it is served for lunch.

Diane Chapeta, child nutrition services director for the Chilton Public School District, also goes into



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— Monique Hooker, French chef



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the classrooms of the younger students to acquaint them with locally-grown fresh fruits and vegetables that are used in the cafeteria. She has found that when students try the produce, they usually decide they like how it tastes.

“Once they taste it and you ask for their honest opinion, about 75 percent say that they like it,” Chapeta says. “And then I tell them to look for it in the cafeteria.”

At the middle school and high school levels, Chapeta says when students hear what farm the produce comes from, they are more eager to eat it, “Students see the name of the farms and the farmers and they say, ‘That’s my neighbor,’ and they go for that food.”

Board Support

Recognizing and supporting innovative ideas, Lawrence says, is the job of every school board. When Volden and Hooker presented the idea for the Farm to School program in Viroqua, Lawrence said they had the support of the board from the beginning. The district secured a grant to get the program off the ground and staff completed the necessary research and dedicated the labor hours to make the program work.

“We are fortunate to have individuals willing to go the extra mile to provide educational opportunities for our students through many different avenues,” Lawrence says. “Board members should always be supportive of new ideas that staff

members want to start, especially when there is very little cost and it benefits our kids.”

Support for the program goes beyond the school board. Volden recognized community support as well, “It’s hard for schools to do this on their own,” Volden says. “It’s great to get community help.”

Making it Work

The district’s efforts to bring local produce into the school doesn’t cost any extra, but it doesn’t necessarily save money either, Volden says. Using local produce for items like the ratatouille, Volden has to make sure that the cost of the produce doesn’t exceed her limit of \$1 of food cost per meal. For instance, for the ratatouille, the

Visit wasb.org/cms/wisconsin-school-news.html to learn more about the Farm to School movement and view a podcast of fifth-grade Viroqua student describing the school garden.

district bought seconds from farmers, which are the veggies that may not be perfectly shaped but work fine for the district's uses.

Chapeta, who is also the lead contact for the Northeast Wisconsin Farm to School Initiative, helps other schools establish a Farm to School program and she says the number one concern is always cost. However, she says, buying locally can save a district money.

"It's actually very economical for us," Chapeta says.

In the Chilton Public Schools, Chapeta says she can buy local, seasonal produce cheaper than from the national distributor. For instance, Chapeta can buy apples from a local orchard from September to February for 13 cents apiece, compared to 24 cents from the distributor.

In Viroqua, through other efforts, like the Harvest Challenge, which gives high school students a chance to cook with local chefs and serves as a fundraiser, the district's food service program is self-sustaining and doesn't draw money from the dis-

trict's other resources.

Another concern districts may have is the issue of staff time and labor. Volden says it does take more time to process local fruits and vegetables but there are solutions. In Viroqua, the food processing days that take place before the school year are a big help. On these days, the staff processes much of what it needs for the entire school year. In addition, the district will be acquiring a Buy Local Grant, which they may be able to use to get help processing the food.

In Chilton, Chapeta says her staff has adapted well to new cooking methods in the kitchen but added that districts must realize that, like all change, this too is a learning process.

"We taught our cooks how to cook again," Chapeta says.

She says it took about one year until her staff were proficient and comfortable cooking and working with local goods on a large scale. Chapeta held training days for her staff where, among other things, they

were taught how to cut and process fruits and veggies. Chapeta said the only kitchen upgrades needed that year were knives and cutting boards. While some staff may not be initially receptive to change in the school kitchen, she says the key is to involve the staff in the process.

For instance, in the Chilton Public Schools all potatoes used in the schools' cafeterias are bought locally. When deciding how to serve the local potatoes, Chapeta had her food service staff bring in their favorite recipes from home. The recipes were tested and nine recipes were developed. (None of the recipes require staff to peel potatoes, a time-consuming task.)

"It opened their eyes," Chapeta says of her food service staff. "Now they know how to cook."



The Garden as the Classroom

In 2006, Viroqua Middle School fifth-grade teacher Sue Berg started a school garden.

"Our goal was to use the garden as a place where hands-on learning could occur," Berg said. "In addition, we wanted the students to develop a greater appreciation for the role of food in our lives."

So far, it seems that the garden has successfully fulfilled those goals. Berg says the multi-sensory learning environment of the garden has affected the students' engagement in real-life science. Science terms come to life as they see plants take root and grow.

Other subjects relate to the garden as well. Students keep a daily garden journal, and they help plan garden extension activities, such as the Garden Harvest Festival.

"The garden has been the learning vehicle to improve student skills in science, math, language arts and social studies," Berg says.

Students have also been able to see how the veggies in the garden can be used at the dining room table. When students come back to school, they hold a Garden Harvest Festival in which they harvest the garden and produce dishes. Last year, during a special event, about 100 students were served a variety of dishes including southwest corn chowder, eggplant pizza, zucchini cake, and more.

Although, none of the food is used in the school cafeteria, Berg hopes to change that. This summer, while student volunteers and parents maintain the garden, veggies will be donated to two local food pantries. In addition, the district will offer a summer school course called Garden to Fork, which will teach students how to cook with fresh garden produce.

Overall, Berg says the school garden has been a success, "Students have become more aware of the garden-to-table cycle and its importance in the production of healthy, homegrown food." □

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Global Movement Starting at Home

Though they may not realize it, the Viroqua Area School District and Chilton Public School District are part of a world-wide movement to improve the world's accessibility to quality food. New phrases such as "food poverty," "food desert," and "food apartheid" are entering our lexicon, and not for good reasons.

Food poverty refers to the inability of people in certain geographic locations or socio-economic classes to obtain healthy, affordable foods. "Food poverty is worse diet, worse access, worse health, higher percentage of income on food and less choice from a restricted range of foods. Above all, food poverty is about less or almost no consumption of fruit and vegetables," said Tim Lang, professor of food policy at City University of London on the Web site sustainweb.org.

Likewise, food desert refers to many different factors such as the phenomena of smaller grocery stores disappearing and being replaced by larger supermarkets that are not always readily accessed by large portions of the population. This is especially true in large, urban areas where it can be very hard for groups of people with low socio-economic status and limited transportation to access affordable, non-processed or whole foods.

About the Cover...

This month's cover features a photo of a student in the school garden on the campus of the Spooner Area School District. With the help of AmeriCorps members Janet Oakland and Amy Young, the district has been working hard to bring local produce into the district's schools and educate students on healthy eating. One aspect of the district's effort is its thriving school garden, Helping Hands School Garden.

The garden began four years ago through a joint effort by the district's AmeriCorps member, local Master Gardeners, and district staff member. Since then it has developed into a source of pride for the district and community.

"It has very well supported by the community," said Karen Collins, Community Education Coordinator for the district.

Master Gardeners in the community have stepped forward to help maintain the garden and educate the district's students. The garden has also been used to teach classes in the district's after-school and summer school programs. During the summer community member volunteer to water and maintain the garden. □



As the impact of poverty continues to influence more and more children, and these other factors threaten their access to a healthy food supply, it can be seen why a local food movement is viewed as one way to reverse these trends. Students in the Viroqua and Chilton school districts will leave with a better understanding of the importance of access to healthy food.

"The connection is imperative to the success for better health and eating habits that will influence their diet in the future," Hooker says. "This will nurture a better health not only for themselves but also for their own community." ■

Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.

Interested in Farm to School?

After seeing the Viroqua Farm to School program take off, Marilyn Volden, Food/Nutrition Program Supervisor at the Viroqua Area School District said other area districts have expressed interest in developing a similar program. This August, Volden will be holding a training day and staff from others districts are welcome to come into her school to see how the Viroqua Area School District utilizes local produce in the school kitchen. Interested districts can contact Volden at 608-637-1645 or mlvolden@viroqua.k12.wi.us.

If your district is in the northeastern part of the state, contact Diane Chapeta, child nutrition services director for the Chilton Public School District and lead contact for the Northeast Wisconsin Farm to School Initiative. She can be reached at 920-849-2393 or by e-mail dchapeta@chilton.k12.wi.us.

Any districts interested in starting a farm to school program, can also contact Camilla Vargas, AmeriCorps Farm to School Program Manager at 608-224-5017 or by e-mail Camilla.vargas@wi.gov. □