



“I feel we are leaving an impact on the way student lunches are prepared.”

—Janelle Lockington, De Soto High

Youth Get Active with School Lunch

Farm to School in Wisconsin offers students, teachers and community members a wide range of educational possibilities, including school gardening, farm field trips, in-school local food fairs and farmers markets, taste tests and much more. These activities help to expose children to new and healthful foods, with a hands-on connection to where their food comes from and how it is produced.

In Vernon County in 2009 they went a step further to ensure that students gain the skills to plan and prepare a healthy meal that includes local foods. Using farm to school initiatives and the educational moment of school lunch itself cooking skills have been taught to engage and educate students for a life time of healthier eating.

The county’s first ever Harvest Challenge, was born. High school students plan and cook a menu highlighting the benefits of including fresh, nutritious and locally-produced foods in school lunch programs.

Student-created competing lunch menus must meet all National School Lunch Program regulations, utilize both USDA commodity products and local products, show culinary and aesthetic sophistication and taste delicious—and all for under \$1.00 food cost!

In its first year, four Vernon County high school cooking teams spent weeks preparing their menus, conducting nutritional analysis and going “back to the drawing board” supported by volunteering chef mentors from the community. “It does my heart good to work with these students and with the farm to school program. The skills they are learning will last them a lifetime of healthier and more joyful cooking and eating,” says Chef Volunteer, Monique Hooker.

Teams served a panel of eight judges, approximately 200 attendees and their own student peers at the Harvest Challenge Gala. All menus were incredible and delicious, students presented themselves professionally, and judges labored over nuances. In the end, Laurel High School, a 30-student charter of the Viroqua school district, won the over-all award that evening!

“I understand SO much more about school lunch, it’s incredible. I had no idea what went into planning our school meals.”

—Dylan Bruce, Laurel High School

“Farm to School has had tangible educational benefits for our District...”

—Robert Knadle, Viroqua School District

In an extraordinary win for small town students, the same Laurel Harvest Challenge team entered a national healthy school meal cooking contest. In competition with 13 other teams around the country, they were selected to compete against the two other winning teams in the final competition. Hosted by the National Farm to Cafeteria Conference in Detroit, in May of 2010, the three teams competed in a cook-off and presentation for a distinguished panel of judges.



Although the Laurel team did not take first place, all of the competing students were winners to have been offered this extraordinary opportunity. They spent two days at a national conference, fed over 600 people from their winning menus, spoke in front of that huge crowd, and received a standing ovation for providing youth leadership in their communities. But the greatest outcome was the instant connections between the competing youth—urban and rural, culturally, ethnically. No one had to tell these young folks they were in this together. Subsequently, some of the Laurel Harvest Challenge team members visited their new friends on the Tohono O’odham reservation (the winning team) to learn about local food from the perspective of the O’odham tribal people living in the Sonoran desert in south central Arizona. For Wisconsin teenagers, this was a life-changing opportunity, and it all started with farm to school and youth taking up the “challenge” of working cooperatively to eat locally, healthfully and creatively!

In 2010, the Harvest Challenge’s second year, the competition attracted six high schools in the county. Viroqua School District Superintendent Robert Knadle encourages all schools to participate: “Farm to School has had tangible educational benefits for our district, especially in its ability to connect students to the richness of our community and local agriculture. I strongly support the expansion of this program to all Wisconsin schools.”



“Kids are learning to care more about what they eat, and that is the most important aspect to change.”

—Anders Lewis, Laurel High School

