Schools embrace farm-to-school connection

By **DARIN LEACH**

USDA'S most recent Farm to School Census indicates nearly half of the school districts in Iowa are, or plan to participate in, some sort of farm-to-school program. One way schools make this farm connection is through the purchase of local foods for student lunches.

"School can be a tremendous place to learn about healthy lifestyles and making good food choices," says Bill Menner, USDA Rural Development state director in Iowa. "There are many USDA programs in place that can help schools develop programming and services to connect today's youth to the many exciting aspects of agriculture."

Thanks to efforts of the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Initiative and the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition, schools in northeast Iowa are embracing the farm-to-school connection.

"Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness particularly focuses on schools as a site to influence broader community shifts toward healthy living, and has spent much of its efforts on instituting active school wellness teams, encouraging physical activity, building school gardens and providing nutrition education for students in the classroom," says Teresa Wiemerslage, regional program coordinator for Iowa State University Extension and Outreach in northeast Iowa, who coordinates the work of the coalition.

Opportunities for farmers

The mission of the coalition is to create opportunities for farmers to engage in the food system. The coalition views schools as one of those opportunities in the rural area, which includes school districts ranging in size from 300 to 1,500 students.

The coalition has now been working to provide local foods to school districts for six years. The efforts started out small and have grown significantly. This fall, nearly 20 school districts representing more than 12,000 students in northeast Iowa worked with Iowa Food Hub to purchase food from local farmers, while many other school districts made local food purchases directly from farmers.

BUY FRESH, BUY LOCAL: The Decorah Community School District has worked with the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition for five years. Teresa Wiemerslage (left) is the coalition coordinator. Chad Elliott (right) is a culinary specialist with the Decorah school district.

PHOTOS COURTESY NORTHEAST IOWA FOOD AND FITNESS INITIATIVE

Key Points

- Northeast Iowa schools are embracing farm-to-school local food connection.
- Consuming locally produced, healthy foods appeals to today's students.
- Local food movement is benefits both farmers and rural communities.

Types of local foods purchased include apples, watermelon, broccoli, squash, sweet potatoes, peppers, pears, yogurt, sweet corn, cucumbers, frozen strawberries, cantaloupe, pork and turkey. Wiemerslage says this past fall, some of the larger school districts were purchasing as much as 200 pounds of pork, 800 apples and 300 pounds of watermelon for just one meal.

The recent establishment of National Farm to School Month in October expands what used to be just a week each fall that promoted homegrown school lunches.

Schools, students involved

The Decorah Community School District has been working with the coalition for five years, and so far this year the school has purchased more than $10,000 in food, says Chad Elliott, culinary specialist with the school district. He says students are enjoying the local food options.

"We see students trying more fruits and vegetables," says Elliott. "Some students have even helped pick or plant these products, and they seem to have more interest in trying something they grew themselves. 'Local' has a new tone among the students today; they know they are getting a fresher piece of fruit or being socially responsible by consuming these vegetables."

Elliott says district staff enjoys preparing meals with the local food products and intends to work with the coalition for many years to come. "Food service directors really started to embrace the farm-to-school connection, and we saw they wanted to expand their purchases past the one week," adds Wiemerslage. "At the same time, USDA was launching [National] Farm to School Month, so the timing for all of this coming together has been perfect."

A report issued in November by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at ISU suggests sales of local foods to grocery stores, restaurants, schools, residential food service operations, food hubs and other high-volume markets are rapidly eclipsing direct-to-consumers sales at farmers markets and through community supported agriculture arrangements.

"All of this activity spells good economic news for rural communities and farm-based businesses in Iowa," says Corry Bregendahl, a Leopold Center associate scientist who coordinated the data collection. "Schools all across Iowa are finding the benefits of purchasing local foods."

SCHOOL MEALS: The Decorah Community School District is finding more students trying fruits and vegetables. "Local has appeal. Students know they're getting fresher fruit and being socially responsible by consuming these locally grown vegetables," says Chad Elliott, culinary specialist with the district.

Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition members have learned many lessons over the years. Here are a few:

- Start small. If a school is new to local food, shoot for two or three measurable goals, such as sourcing all fresh apples locally from August to December, or hosting a local foods night each month.
- Measure success. What will success look like? Is it a purchasing goal of 20% local foods, or is it a specific dollar amount for local foods? Make sure the food service provider is supportive of the goals.
- Define local. Determine the definition of local to start identifying potential suppliers. A larger radius may be needed to source greater quantities of product.
- Identify local products. Find those you would like to serve. Schools should identify the foods they want and quantities needed per month. Identify potential farmers for those products, and have discussions with suppliers about availability.
- Farmer involvement. Farmers need to respond to bid requests. Schools have procurement rules they need to follow. If schools contact you asking for prices and quantities, be sure to share information and answer their questions honestly. They cannot buy from you if you do not respond. Consider sending them your price list at the beginning of the year.

Wiemerslage says the coalition continues its research into light processing for schools. The fruit and vegetable processing project is funded by a USDA Farm to School grant and funds from the Leopold Center.

Processing food for schools

"We are working with two commercial kitchens in the area to investigate costs and logistics of providing shredded cabbage, cubed squash, diced sweet potatoes and frozen strawberries to schools," Wiemerslage says. "We also worked with a sweet corn grower to provide a husked sweet corn product for schools."

The price studies for this work are still being evaluated, and coalition members continue to work with local farmers and a new food hub to scale up production and investment in aggregation infrastructure to meet school needs. They are also working with the four rural school districts to expand their Farm to School programs in hopes to raise local food purchases by 200% in the coming year.

"Working with the Iowa Food Hub, we believe, we have created a school-food program model that has potential to be replicated in other parts of the state and across the country," Wiemerslage adds. "Food service directors are using more local products in their meals; students are more excited about healthy, local foods; and farmers and the communities we are working in are more interconnected."

Leach is public information coordinator with USDA Rural Development in Iowa.

Find fresh produce locally

FINDING locally grown produce is easy, thanks to the directory, The Iowa CSA Farms: 2015 Statewide List of CSA Farms and Organizers Serving Iowa.

Produced by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Iowa State University Extension, the updated directory lists 85 Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) enterprises offering fresh produce and other products.

The 2015 CSA directory is on the Leopold Center's website *www.leopold.iastate.edu/2015-iowa-csa-farms*. It's also available from ISU Extension Online Store at *store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/PM1693*. Iowa CSA Farms is updated at least once each year. Visit *www.leopold.iastate.edu/csa* to provide additions and modifications to the directory.