



Farm to School Programs in Southeastern Michigan

A Preliminary Literature Review

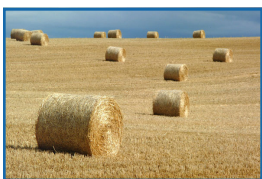
Research Questions:

- What is the feasibility of developing a Farm to School Program in Southeastern Michigan?
- Where is there interest from communities, farmers, schools, and school districts?

What is a Farm to School Program?

One strategy for rebuilding and strengthening the local food system in Southeastern Michigan is the implementation of a Farm to School program (F2S). F2S programs work to establish direct markets between local farmers and school districts to provide students with nutritious food and farmers with new customers from the community. Often, F2S will include classroom educational components on farming, in addition to student-created school gardens (Flock, 2003).

Farm to School programs are collaborative efforts among schools, teachers, parents, farmers, administrators, food service personnel, local food producers, processors, vendors, and nutritionists. Together these stakeholders work to address the growing problem of child obesity by increasing the availability of nutritional, locally grown, fresh produce in school lunches and classrooms (Parker, 2003). In turn, F2S programs bolster local economies and support agricultural livelihoods, forge stronger relationships among community members, and reduce overall fuel costs from transporting food (Cornell F2S website, 2006).



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Why Farm to School?

Sixteen states and hundreds of school districts throughout the United States currently participate in F2S programs. Though many of these programs are in their infancy, the F2S successes and benefits are already evident. Some benefits of F2S programs include:

- Support for the local economy (McDermott, 2003).
- Helps small to medium sized farms remain viable. (Harmon, 2004).
- Positive programs for schools with health and edu-

- ational benefits for youth (Haase, 2004).
- Farmers can forge new relationships with other farmers through cooperatives.
- Increases community participation.
- Enables students to ‘find out where their food comes from’.
- Gives underserved low-income students greater access to fresh and healthy food choices (Haase, 2004).
- Increase in participation rates in school lunch programs (Flock, 2003).

What are the Challenges in starting and developing Farm to School? What are potential solutions?

As F2S breaks ground in developing new community relationships and forging new operating procedures within schools and school districts, we have a unique opportunity to learn from what strategies have been successful and those that have not worked well. F2S stakeholders have incurred barriers in the implementation and development stages, many of which have been articulated in case studies, reference guides, and other published materials. The following is an outline of the challenges experienced within schools and school districts and from the agricultural professionals’ perspective.



Distribution and transportation of agricultural products to schools: School districts are often not close to agriculturally productive areas of the state. Additionally, school meal planners have often used distributions



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centers in the past for transportation of goods. Buying directly from farms means that the school districts and farmers must develop new methods of distribution. This can be costly and time consuming. However, districts have experimented with multiple distribution models. Success of these models has been shown to be dependent on the correct matching of distribution models with the unique circumstances of each region (USDA, 2005).

Seasonality: In most regions, the productive season only partially overlaps with the school year. (Harmon, 2004) To address this, food service directors may request that produce suppliers provide in-season products. However, many other products are available year-round or at least well into the school year, including many local salad greens that are grown under cover (Cornell F2S website, 2006).



Bureaucratic challenges and limited administrative capacity: Buying local often means purchasing from many farmers, which increases administrative paperwork. In addition, food planners must adhere to complex school meal regulations, often have inadequate funding (Harmon, 2004), are required to get competitive bids on larger purchases, and choose to purchase products that require minimum processing. Therefore, it is important to focus on ensuring administrative capacity by working to make local food prices competitive, applying for Federal food programs, and building school site and farmer relationships. Schools may need to increase their whole food options while farmers may be able to increase their profits through on-site value-added processing (Rimkus, 2004).

Sufficient and reliable supply of food products: Schools must be assured that the necessary food items will be delivered at the time they request it. Instituting growers' cooperatives may generate sufficient supply for institutional markets. Putting farmers and meal planners in touch with each other months before menus are planned will allow the farmer to anticipate the demand and may allow the schools to request that certain crops are planted. This may also reduce prices by allowing schools and farmers to negotiate bids (Harmon, 2004),

(Cornell F2S website, 2006).

Lack of connection and communication with communities: The success of many F2S programs is dependent upon the support and involvement of teachers, parents, and the community. It is vital that pilot projects choose schools where parents and administrators share similar beliefs around the importance of local food systems and childhood nutrition (USDA, 2005). They must be willing to translate these beliefs into becoming active advocates for F2S. Teachers must see these programs as an on-going process, not simply a unit to be taught (Flock, 2003). Increasing community-based participation will depend upon education, outreach, and marketing.

Lack of infrastructure: Most schools will have additional labor demands and will require equipment such as salad bars and access to distribution links (Rimkus 2004). These types of investments in the district's infrastructure must be considered to ensure funding for school district needs. Parental and community volunteers may lessen the labor constraints. The use of existing distribution channels, such as those used by produce and grocery vendors, can be a reliable solution to distribution challenges (Harmon, 2004).

Farm to School in Michigan?

Currently, the cities of Lansing, Grand Rapids, and Beluah have instituted F2S programs. All three programs are in early developmental stages, working to develop stronger direct market ties between school districts and agricultural professionals (National F2S website, 2006).



Activity for F2S at the state level has been promising. Governmental participants include the State Departments of Education and Agriculture, Michigan Works/Thumb, and the USDA Department of Defense. As of last year this group made significant strides in identifying vital stakeholders and strategies to link farmers with schools (National F2S website, 2006).

At the university level, the C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at Michigan State University



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(MSU) runs a program that focuses on establishing F2S throughout the state. This summer a master's project group from the University of Michigan, along with the Food System Economic Partnership, will conduct a feasibility study for F2S programs in Southeastern Michigan.

References

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For More Information:

To submit additional resources or to provide feedback, please contact the University of Michigan Local Food Masters' Project Team at foodsys@umich.edu.

The Local Food Masters' Project Team consists of five University of Michigan graduate students from the School of Natural Resources and Environment and the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning.

Our objective is to work with FSEP throughout the 2006 calendar year to provide research support and tools to begin to realize the organization's preliminary goals.

Primary outcomes will include: 1) a review of local food system research focused tightly on issues and components of local food systems germane to the Southeast Michigan region; (2) a profile of the community food system within the five-county area; (3) an in-depth analysis of the viability of an intentional local food system in the region with recommendations for increasing access to and promoting efficient, effective distribution of local foods; and (4) an organizational assessment of FSEP during its first year in existence. In support of FSEP's mission, outputs will inform future efforts to develop food system networks and collaborative multi-stakeholder partnerships, and to promote entrepreneurial opportunities within a five-county region of Southeast Michigan.