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Farm to School

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Regional and Local Approaches

The absence of a statewide food plan or food policy has not hindered the formation of numerous organizations and strategies to build Maine's food system. Most of these "from the ground up" actors and actions are local, regional, or statewide and include many efforts already discussed in this issue. In this section, we include a sampling of some additional models that are building momentum, transforming lives, and altering the future of Maine's food system. These include farm-to-school and farm-to-institution efforts, the emergence of food hubs in various regions, the establishment of the Maine Network of Community Food Councils, new online tools and web sites to connect producers and consumers, and some "good news" stories about community revitalization through food endeavors. No doubt there are many more efforts underway. Since the beginning of time, people have come together to break bread, celebrate the harvest, and share in nature's bounty. This spirit is alive and well in Maine. 🐾

Farm to School

by Amy Winston

Farm-to-school programs connect K-12 schools to local farmers and (in Maine) to fishermen to improve the quality of school meals by incorporating fresh, whole local foods. Successful programs expand market opportunities for local food producers and fisherman and educate students about good nutrition and the role of local foods in sustaining rural communities. Many programs extend beyond local foods in the cafeteria to include waste-management programs, such as composting, and other educational experiences, such as planting school gardens, cooking demonstrations, and farm tours.

Farm-to-school programs simultaneously address contemporary social, economic, environmental, and public health issues related to sustainable agriculture and economic development, public health, and education. They enjoy broad-based support. This movement cuts across demographic, economic, and political differences, and is easily tailored to varied community, classroom, and cafeteria settings. It is a nonpartisan, proven, responsible, sustainable form of economic development, and promotes healthier eating habits in students.

There are more than 2,000 operational farm-to-school programs in 48 states serving nearly 10,000 schools in more than 2,200 districts (www.farmentoschool.org). The University of North Carolina (for the National Farm to School Network [NFSN] and W.K. Kellogg Foundation) and Tufts University (for Harvard Pilgrim Health Care) evaluated two Maine programs—Lincoln County and Unity’s RSU3—as national and regional models. The NFSN Northeast Regional Lead Agency, housed at Coastal Enterprises, Inc., provides technical assistance to programs in seven states (New England and New York) and directly connects Maine to peer programs and other farm-to-school models to identify mutual gaps and obstacles, develop cross-state trust and collaboration, and work together to strengthen the food system.

Farm-to-school programs are profitable for farmers and improve the viability of school foodservice programs

through increased participation in school meals (Joshi, Azuma and Feenstra 2008). In an address to the National Press Club on February 23, 2010, U.S.

Agriculture Secretary Vilsack identified farm-to-school programs as a key component of nutrition education and an effective way “to increase the amount of produce available to school cafeterias and help to support local farmers by establishing regular, institutional buyers.” He called on education leaders and states to embrace farm-to-school programs to connect consumers and farmers. In testimony William Dietz, of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, identified “Farm to School Programs as an effective mechanism to improve the quality of school meals, enhance effectiveness of nutrition education, and provide opportunities for eco-literacy training of students through hands-on experiences in the outdoors. *Farm to school programs support local farmers and economies, and make schools leaders of socially responsible and innovative food policy*” (Dietz 2011, emphasis added).

Today, Maine schools serve nearly 30 million meals annually, with food costing \$1.14 per meal. Food expenditures in Maine public school represent a \$44 million market with significant potential and value-adding opportunities for Maine food producers.¹ A five percent increase in local purchases by K-12 schools alone—not counting private schools, colleges, and universities, not to mention hospitals, assisted living, or correctional facilities—generates \$2.2 million in additional income annually for Maine’s food economy. A 20 percent increase in local purchasing sends an \$8.8 million ripple in additional income through the economy, creating jobs and further economic opportunities for Maine farmers, fishermen, and food businesses.

To illustrate this potential, in December 2010, I interviewed five Maine foodservice directors from



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TABLE 1: 2010–2011 School Food Expenditures: Rural, Suburban, Urban

District	Total Budget	Food Budget	Amount Local	Percentage Local	Number of Suppliers
Unity RSU3	\$904,336	\$450,000	\$66,000	40.00%	13
SAD6	\$1,773,728	\$680,000	\$25,000	3.67%	3
Auburn	\$1,002,500	\$483,000	\$175,000*	3.60%	5
Portland	?	\$1,140,000	\$40,000	3.35%	4
Bangor	\$1,300,000	\$395,000	\$900	0.23%	1
Total:	\$4,980,564**	\$3,148,000	\$306,900	9.76%	26

*Includes bread and milk

**Missing data (incomplete)

three urban, one suburban, and one rural district serving 6,383 students in 41 schools with combined food budgets of \$3,148,000. These districts spend an average 10 percent of their respective budgets on food. Of \$3.1 million spent on food in 2010, \$306,900, nearly 20 percent, already goes to 26 local suppliers (including Oakhurst, LePage, Sysco, and NorthCenter); 18 of those were actually direct purchases that supported Maine family-owned businesses without a middleman (see Table 1).

With 8,000 farms and more than 1.35 million acres of land in farms, Maine has the potential to supply much more of the food that is served in school meals. It makes good economic sense to link institutional purchasing to the viability of family and small-scale farms and preservation of working landscapes. Current (outdated) purchasing practices (intentionally or not) unnecessarily discriminate against small-scale food producers, processors, and distributors. It has become clear, because of several factors including fuel costs, food safety, and carbon impact, that bigger is no longer better in terms of mass movement, procurement, and processing of school foods. Maine can both save money and promote local industry through responsible, enabling legislation.

To succeed, foodservice directors must balance cost, nutrition, and student participation—and *be motivated* (Izumi, Alaimo and Hamm 2010; Sacheck et al. 2010). For example, in Lincoln County, technical assistance for economic development and community support increased staff commitment and capacity to purchase and serve local products on a regular basis (Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention 2010). According to one superintendent, a *wellness policy with farm-*

to-school language was critical for his district. Now Lincoln County serves as a successful economic model. Gorham's Maine Harvest Lunch, Healthy Acadia's Hancock County Farm to School program, and the Western Mountains' Eat Smart Eat Local campaign catalyzed initial interest around the state.

Requests for technical assistance from parents, teachers, school nutrition directors, administrators, farmers, and fishermen are ongoing.

Along with being a sound form of economic development, farm-to-school programs also have important health benefits. With a captive audience of 56 million students, the nation's 126,000 "schools are in a unique position to influence and promote healthy dietary behaviors and to help ensure appropriate nutrient intake" (Dietz 2011). Peer-reviewed research shows that school-based nutrition education cultivates healthy eating habits in supportive environments (O'Toole et al. 2007; Gonzalez, Jones and Frongillo 2009). Farm-to-school programs increase students' consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables. Experiential learning and the use of locally grown produce in school meals through farm-to-school and school garden programs provide lifelong lessons in health and nutrition. There is extensive health data available with respect to the benefits of farm-to-school programs (including obesity prevention, minimizing the risk of foodborne illness by decreasing food miles and storage times, among others). Farm-to-school programs have broad support from the health care sector in Maine.

In 2008, the Maine Farm to School Work Group (MF2SWG) was established to bring together community organizers and other stakeholders to increase the number of farm-to-school programs in Maine. In 2009, a legislative resolve (L.D. 1140) requested that MF2SWG research and recommend ways to strengthen farm-to-school in Maine. In 2010, MF2SWG submitted its report to the legislature with recommendations and actionable suggestions for state support. The next step in this process, L.D. 1446, *An Act to Establish a Maine Farm and Fish to School Program*, proposed a state Farm and Fish to School Program (the nation's first),

with financial incentives for schools and food producers to develop sustainable local-procurement strategies, convert kitchens to scratch cooking, and integrate food-based education into school curricula. The legislation proposed technical assistance and training through inter-agency collaboration and coordination with stakeholders to help schools and farms to build capacity to supply and source local foods within existing school budgets by buying in season, providing knowledge about how to work with local products, and processing and storing readily used products year-round. L.D. 1446 also directed schools to adopt farm-to-school language in federally mandated school-wellness policies to support, promote, and facilitate local purchasing.

The guidelines concerning local purchasing contained in L.D. 1446 alarmed some school nutrition directors justifiably concerned about tight budgets. Department of Education testimony incorrectly portrayed these targeted procurement percentages as unfunded mandates. Yet, existing purchases from large distributors sourcing Maine products count toward those benchmarks and, more importantly, qualify for the 33 percent match. In 2011, due to updated federal child nutrition standards, Maine schools will receive an additional \$1.7 million (\$.06 per meal) in reimbursement. *Schools should spend these funds locally.*

Careful research informed this legislative effort. Thirty-three states have passed farm-to-school legislation to create effective new statewide programs to get locally grown produce to schools and help them get the equipment needed to prepare fresh foods, to encourage preferential local purchasing, to allocate grant money for implementing farm-to-school projects, to establish databases with participating schools and producers to facilitate and track procurement, and to offer incentives through income tax credits for farmers. Fourteen of those established state-supported programs, and 10 funded farm-to-school programs directly (NFSN 2010; Winterfield, Shinkle and Morandi 2011).

Despite solid data and more than two years of collaborative statewide research, instead of a full-fledged Farm and Fish to School Program as set forth in L.D. 1446, Maine is taking a step back to replicate a temporary pilot similar to that in Oregon, which produced a multiplier of \$1.86; beyond the direct impact of buying local food, every dollar schools spent

on local food generated an additional \$.86 of economic activity in income and spending by affected food businesses and their employees (Kane et al. 2011).

A third party rather than the state will fund the allocation (additional reimbursement) to two districts, one rural and one urban, to justify the return on a relatively short-term (five to 10 years) investment in farm to school that promises to deliver outcomes that stakeholders in public health, economic development, education, and agriculture will welcome. 🌱

ENDNOTE

1. Data on expenditures on food in Maine schools come from http://www.maine.gov/education/sfs/data_tab.html.

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