

Why Farm to School?

The basic goal of farm to school is to increase the supply of fresh, local, nutritious foods in schools around the state. With that goal, however, come much broader missions that involve developing smarter food decision-making among students, supporting and connecting with local farmers, developing community ties, and reinvesting in local economies.

Farm to school initiatives are gaining momentum across the country in face of two recent phenomena – rising obesity, in particular among the youth, and economic challenges faced by small to medium scale family farms. While one quarter of Americans over 19 are overweight or obese, only 1 in 10 children eat the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables. Rising obesity rates and the growing awareness of negative health consequences of poor nutritional choices has expanded interest in the nutritional quality of food served in school cafeterias.

The percentage of school-age children 6-11 years that are overweight more than doubled between the late 1970s and 2000 (Center for disease Control 2002, <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/brfss/>)

Meanwhile, our nation's food and agricultural system has experienced increased vertical integration, making it increasingly difficult for small and medium size farms to remain competitive. Family farming, which plays a key role in sustaining rural landscapes and the economic prospects and social well-being of American communities, are no longer listed on the national census as a profession. The industrial agriculture model has also contributed to declining farm income: the farmer share of every dollar spent of food has dropped from 41 cents in 1950 to 20 cents in 1999.

Farm to school constitutes an important response to both of these growing concerns because of the interconnected ways it can bring benefits to students, farmers, schools, and communities alike. Farm to school programs are not only about sourcing locally, but about sourcing fresh and nutritious foods, integrating those purchases with educational opportunities for students about food choices and about where our food comes from, and knowing that the dollars being spent are helping to reinvigorate local economies.

For Students: Farm to school can mean having access to fresh, nutritious food, as well as gaining invaluable knowledge and experience with making more informed food decisions. Research has shown that practices tried in childhood have a formative role in shaping food consumption and preparation behaviors as adults. There are countless opportunities for sourcing from farmers in the area to be integrated into school wellness programs or various other areas of the curriculum. Incorporating farm field trips with dining hall options, for example, allows students to make connections between community life, biological systems, and their own health.

- According to a UCLA study the average fruit and vegetable consumption by children increased by one serving a day when a Farmers' Market Salad Bar was

created in the School Cafeteria. These students also saw a reduction in average caloric intake by 200 calories a day, and fat intake by 11 grams a day]

- In Olympia, Washington, school meal participation rates increased 13-16% during the pilot year of the organic choices salad bar, offsetting the higher cost of the organic produce (from the F2S book)

For School Food Service: Fresh and local food options in cafeterias have been shown to increase participation rates in school food programs, thereby boosting revenues. Gaining access to fresh and local foods enabled school food services to expand their options in ways that can support wellness or curricular priorities, while improving public relations and gaining community recognition. While fresh & healthy local foods can sometimes be slightly more expensive, investing in the viability of local food systems can increase the revenues from school food service, maintain the rural land base that helps keep the rising cost of providing school services at bay and can create more community support for school food services.

For Farmers: Farmers can benefit from increased sales opportunities that school lunch programs can offer. Once a relationship is established, schools offer steady and reliable demand for their product. This more direct farm income can also garner farmers a greater share of the food dollar. Farm to school programs are also more likely to expand local food purchasing in the household as well, as students bring home lessons to their parents.

For the Community: Spending on local food sources stimulates the local economy by keeping and multiplying food dollars in the community. Viable farms provide jobs, pay taxes, and protect working agricultural land. Undeveloped farm land can also benefit the region by maintaining open space, a diversified wildlife habitat and reducing the cost of community services. See American Farmland Trust's fact sheet on Cost of Community Service Studies (link to AFT COCS study description: http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/27757/FS_COCS_11-02.pdf).

For the Environment: Sourcing locally also supports a food system that is more sustainable – providing an alternative to the current system of production and distribution in which about 10-15 calories of energy, mostly in the form of fossil fuels, are consumed in order to produce one calorie of food. A twelve ounce can of diet soda requires a total of 2200 kcal to produce (over 70% of which goes toward the aluminum can) and may provide only one kcal of food energy. Sustainable farming has been shown to be an effective method of carbon sequestration reducing greenhouse gas emissions. By supporting sustainable producers through consumer demand for fresh, healthy local foods, individuals can use their purchasing power to vote for more environmentally sound production and delivery of food and help to preserve the health and beauty of farmland.

Why Ohio?

Farm to school initiatives can be an important component of bridging the current gap between Ohio's rural and urban settings, helping build local food systems that can act as a source of food security and an economic buffer. For a state concerned about the decline of rural communities, the challenge of food accessibility in the inner cities, shrinking job markets and declining economic receipts it is important to think about food and farming as an essential part of social, environmental and economic viability. Ohioans spend \$35 billion per year on food. Capturing just 10% of that market for Ohio growers and producers would mean \$3.5 billion of additional income for the state. After recirculating in the state economy Ohio would see an increase of over 7 Billion dollars a year. This is sustainable investment in every sense in that food spending is non-discretionary. People will continue to eat making local food systems a relatively recession proof industry.

Ohio in particular has important potential opportunities and benefits associated with local purchasing, beginning with our interest in protecting farmland. While Ohio's prime farmland is one of our greatest resources, the state has been ranked second in the nation for the rate at which it is losing its farmland. Our farmland face the challenges associated with growing development, environmental degradation, and all various growing pressures on economic viability, and these challenges have significant consequences for the long-term prospects for Ohio farms, the communities that depend on them, and the rural settings we treasure. Part of Ohio's unique opportunity in local food systems relates to the fact that Ohio's sixteen metropolitan regions account for more than 80 percent of the state population and over 80 percent of jobs. (from Greater Ohio/Brookings- Restoring Prosperity preliminary report). We have the advantage of a high percentage of prime, unique and locally important soils in and around those regions—over 11 million acres. Beyond a rural amenity this is a critical resource for life and prosperity. This presents an opportunity to create and expand local food and agricultural businesses and jobs, enhance the viability of Ohio farmers, conserve critical natural resources and increase Ohioans access to fresh, healthy, locally grown food.

Governor Strickland has recognized the opportunities and potential that a strong Ohio local food system provides. In August of 2007 he created the Ohio Food Policy Council by executive order to study state's food and agriculture network and make recommendations to help increase access to local, nutritious food to all Ohioans while strengthening the food and agriculture segment of Ohio's economy. There is work already in progress to improve freezing, storage, and processing capacities across the state. Farm to school initiatives are an important piece of the puzzle – providing markets for farmers, supporting the development of food-related infrastructure, but also raising awareness in the next generation of Ohio food consumers as to the importance of conscious food decisions.