



Growing up Healthy: From the Farm to the Cafeteria

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As a FoodCorps Member in Mississippi, my responsibilities included grant writing, school garden development, and educational outreach. In particular, I coordinated with local farmers and local District Nutrition Directors to source local produce into school cafeterias. The benefits for children are extraordinary including describing healthy choices, identifying new fruits and vegetables, and introducing different nutritious recipes and food preparations. The following discussion provides teachers with information to secure fresh, local produce on behalf of the health of all children. Building on my experiences and those of my colleagues, the following guidelines provide a map to creating a “culture of food appreciation”.

1. Developing a relationship with a local farmer. Start by asking about farm practices (Is it organic? Is there a heavy use of pesticides? How much product do they cultivate? What produce do they grow to sell? What are the seasons for the available produce?).
2. Establishing a solid understanding of local farm practices and capacities is critical. This knowledge allows you to ask informed questions regarding the farmer's interest in sourcing to local schools.
3. Thinking cautiously. Be sure not to lead the farmer in believing that you will need an overwhelming amount of produce. Starting small in your buying is key to program sustainability.
4. Developing a relationship. A relationship will assist in the ultimate cost of your produce and the possibility of your farmer making a school appearance. Remember, this is about building a relationship.
5. Talking with the district Nutrition Director. School district personnel are responsible for layers of paperwork with respect to sourcing food for the district. This may be a “new” concept for your district. Initially, they may not be willing to consider this proposal. The best access point into this process is through your Nutrition Director. They know the guidelines for the district and will ultimately be the “yes” or “no” on whether or not the buying will happen. Be prepared for some hesitancy, but do not be dissuaded. Focus on the benefits for children and move forward.

Moving forward, stay small. This is worth repeating, “start small.”

6. Talking with your food service staff. These are the individuals that will be preparing the new produce. Be sure they have the knowledge and equipment to implement the recipes identified for the new produce.
7. Getting the word out. It is critical your school families are well informed regarding the significance of locally sourced produce. It is important this information is shared with the community prior to program implementation. In this way, families are included in the discussion and become part of the conversation. Family support is integral to ultimate program success.

Involving students. Including students of all grades in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of this partnership is important. For example, create a problem-based lesson wherein students brainstorm, investigate, and interpret harvest and recipe possibilities; highlight a Harvest of the Month board, and create a healthy recipe book.

10. Extend media coverage by inviting local television news and newspapers to your event. This is an excellent way to spread the message.

11. Be sure to actively include students. Identify what produce and recipe the students will eat. This can easily be done through a school wide taste test. Based on the Farmer's availability, select what produce to be served and then describe what simple recipe can make the vegetable/fruit delicious.

12. Talk to your school principal, cafeteria manager and cafeteria staff to set up a date for the taste test. Volunteers help pass out the samples and support the children in their voting.

13. Recruit volunteers to assist in the cafeteria on this day. Help will be needed to prepare the recipe, to scoop the samples, and to assist children in voting. This vote will determine whether or not the new recipe is added to the school menu.

14. Set up a buying plan: this is accomplished only after there is a evidence-based idea of what produce the district can afford, the farmer can source, and of course, the children can enjoy.

15. Work with the nutrition director to set up the buying plan with your local farmer. Did I say to remember to start small? Begin with getting one local item in the cafeteria monthly or biweekly and gradually work your way forward. Build the program slowly, offer more taste tests, try new recipes, and continue stronger community support and partnerships.

16. Do not forget to capture these moments in picture. The community and school websites will enjoy this opportunity to celebrate this partnership.

Finally, remember the reason you started this initiative. It is always about helping children to be healthy. And yes, this will take some time and effort, but the benefits are long-range and most rewarding.