

## **FQA - Frequently Asked Questions about the Farm to School Program**

### **What is farm to school?**

Farm to school programs feature school purchases of food (commonly fresh fruits and vegetables) from local farmers. Nutrition lessons can be coordinated with the fresh produce being served for lunch. Programs can also include Ag-in-the-Classroom curriculum, school gardens, food tastings and cooking classes, and farm visits, all of which get kids excited about healthy food.

### **Farm to school programs feature locally grown food. What does locally grown mean?**

Locally grown usually means grown nearby and includes anything grown in Iowa.

### **How do farm to school programs fit into the school lunch program?**

Locally grown food can be offered as part of a hot lunch, breakfast, as snacks or, as in some schools, offered on a salad bar.

### **How has farm to school in Iowa been funded so far?**

Senate File 601 passed in 2007 has given initial funding for the farm to school program in Iowa. The program is being coordinated through both the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship and the Department of Education. Prior to this year no funding has been appropriated from state appropriations.

### **How can people find out more about the Iowa Farm to School program?**

Maury Wills is the Iowa farm to school coordinator. He works to promote the program and connect farmers and schools. Maury can be reached at the Iowa Department of Agriculture, Ag Diversification and Market Development Bureau, phone 515-281-5783 or email: [maury.wills@idals.state.ia.us](mailto:maury.wills@idals.state.ia.us) .

### **How can I sell to a local school?**

Farmers can call and make an appointment directly with a local school district. Take your business materials (price and crop list, business card, references) and perhaps a sample for the Food Service Director. Or you can inquire about existing farm to school programs that might connect you to a group of farmers that sell or deliver together. Contact the Farm to School Program at the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship.

### **How do farm to school programs contribute to children's health?**

Farm to school programs contribute to children's health by helping kids develop healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime. According to research into existing farm to school efforts, students choose significantly more servings of fruits and vegetables when given the choice of high quality, farm-fresh produce. When they are well-nourished, children learn better.

### **Why would farm to school be good for kids in Iowa?**

During the last 30 years in Iowa, the percentage of overweight children (ages 6-11) has tripled, while adolescent rates have more than doubled. Doctors blame poor eating habits for this “obesity epidemic.” High sugar, high fat “fast foods” are being blamed. Obesity can contribute to serious lifelong conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

While Iowa children are consuming more calories than they need, they are not eating enough servings of fruits and vegetables. Only 27% of Iowa children are eating five or more daily servings of fruits and vegetable. Perhaps this is because they do not see their parents eating healthy foods--only 15% of Iowa adults eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day. Because Iowa kids eat lunch at school and many eat breakfast there as well, schools have a unique opportunity to improve the nutrition of the children they serve.

### **Can you really get kids to eat fruits and vegetables?**

Several research studies have shown that kids will eat more fruits and vegetables when they have easy access to a variety of high quality fresh items, often on a salad bar where they have many different choices. Kids from different socio-economic levels respond similarly. Research and the experience of educators has also established that kids are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables, especially unfamiliar items, if they participate in fun educational activities featuring these foods.

### **Are fresh fruits and vegetables more nutritious than frozen or canned?**

Fresh fruits and vegetables are highly nutritious. Fresh produce is often highest in key vitamins and minerals. Nutritionists believe that because fresh produce looks appetizing, has an appealing texture, and often tastes much better than processed foods, people are more likely to eat it and improve their overall nutrition.

### **Why is locally grown produce better than produce grown elsewhere?**

Because locally grown produce is likely harvested at peak ripeness and brought to the consumer in the shortest time possible, it is often of the highest quality. It is attractive to the eye, with pleasant odor, flavor, texture and feel. If handled properly, with high nutritive value, students and adults are more likely to consume fresh fruits and vegetables when they are of high quality.

### **How are farm to school programs good for farmers?**

Farm to school opens up a large new market for farmers. The potential for significant sales exists: in North Carolina, for example, farmers sold \$500,000 worth of fresh fruits and vegetables to state schools in 2004-2005. In Oklahoma, according to one estimate, farmers could sell \$6 million worth of fruits and vegetables to schools. Such dollars are recirculated in rural communities, improving the economy.

### **How widespread are farm-to-school programs?**

Programs exist in 400 school districts in 23 states, including Oklahoma. The Oklahoma Food Policy Council (a joint project of the Kerr Center and the Okla. Dept. of Agriculture) has spearheaded the Oklahoma program. The motto of the Oklahoma farm-to-school program is “growing healthy kids and a healthy rural economy”.

**How does the school lunch program work?**

The school lunch program is federally funded. School districts are reimbursed for every school meal they sell. Reimbursements fall into three categories— free, reduced, and full price.

**Where do schools get the money to buy locally grown produce as part of a farm to school program?**

School food service directors can purchase locally grown produce with the same federal reimbursement money that they use to buy all their food items. School district local funding can also be used to purchase locally grown produce.

**Is there any federal assistance that schools may get to institute a farm to school program?**

The 2002 farm bill contains language that directs the USDA to encourage food service directors to buy from regional farmers when possible. A federal farm-to-cafeteria assistance program has been authorized but not been funded.

**What have other states done to establish successful farm to school programs?**

Several states have found that a coordinator is very helpful in getting the program up and running. North Carolina, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Washington and Oklahoma have farm to school coordinators who facilitate their programs. California recently passed legislation funding greater procurement of California-grown fruits and vegetables. In North Carolina, the state provided \$1,000 “start-up” grants the first year to 50 schools to make purchases from NC farmers; \$500 in the second year. The program is now operating successfully without grant funding.

**How could an expanded farm to school program benefit Iowa farmers and citizens of Iowa?**

Local sales for Iowa grown produce and commodities keep dollars in Iowa and benefits communities across the state. This is another form of Iowa economic development and provides another market for locally grown Iowa products. A farm to school program benefits farms of various sizes. Large school districts may be a good market for larger quantities of fruits and vegetables already grown on a commercial scale in Iowa, such as watermelons, cantaloupe and sweet corn. Smaller-scale local farms could connect with small and medium-sized schools in the state. This new market for Iowa farm products could spur farm diversification, encouraging Iowa farms to grow a greater diversity of crops that could be sold to schools. Farm to school could also spur technology and research to help fruit and vegetable growers in the state become more productive. A robust state farm to school program might also benefit Iowa food processors and farmers who grow commodity crops.

**Since the growing season and the school year don't completely coincide, how can farm to school work in Iowa?**

No one is suggesting that Iowa farmers can supply all the fresh fruits and vegetables schools use. We do not have the climate to grow some crops such as oranges and citrus

crops that schools want. But many other crops that schools use or could use are already grown commercially in the state and can be harvested in the spring or fall. Watermelons, tomatoes, sweet corn, carrots, and potatoes are good examples of possible fresh produce for schools. In greenhouses or under plastic, the seasons for other crops can be extended. Summer food programs could incorporate a wide diversity of Iowa grown fruits and vegetables.

### **What Iowa grown crops could be served in Iowa schools?**

In a 2002 survey, school food service directors indicated they might purchase tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, lettuce, eggs, potatoes, melons, strawberries as well as ground beef, cheese and dairy products locally.

### **Isn't fresh produce hard to handle?**

In a survey of food service, about ¼ of respondents indicated that lack of staffing or facilities may be a barrier to prepping large amounts of fresh produce. While not quite as easy to handle as opening a can, many fresh fruits and vegetables can be served either raw or cooked, making them more versatile than some canned or frozen items.

**Does fresh produce have to be inspected by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship or any other state government department before schools can use it?** No inspections are required of fresh, raw produce. Processed items have to follow food safety procedures established by the county or state. Food service should follow the same procedures for cleaning and preparation as they use with all fresh produce.

### **What are some of the barriers to a widespread farm to school program being implemented in Iowa?**

On the producer side, some produce items require immediate cooling after being harvested and many farmers lack this capacity. Farmers need information about what schools want, procurement policy, and in general what they need to do to make ordering from them convenient for food service.

On the school side, food service directors are doing the best they can to serve nutritious food on tight budgets. They lack information about how best to connect with farmers and procure farm fresh foods. Teachers need educational activities and ag/nutrition curricula to implement. Distribution issues, quality standards and other issues need to be addressed for both sides to effectively connect in a farm-to-school program.

### **Can these barriers be overcome?**

These barriers can be, and are being, overcome. The new state farm-to-school program is capitalizing on that foothold, placing Iowa squarely in the front ranks of states that are developing farm to school networks. However, school districts continue to need information about buying and using locally grown produce and assistance in expanding food and nutrition programs. Farmers also need information about connecting with local schools. A concerted effort is needed to expand the program and make it an effective tool in the fight to improve children's health. If Iowa citizens are willing to continue committing some of the state's resources to maintain this effort, a viable farm to school

program can be created in Iowa that will greatly benefit both schoolchildren and farmers. Other states have made this commitment. If Iowa continues to embrace a comprehensive farm to school program, it will remain in the forefront of innovative efforts to address childhood obesity and improve children's health for the better.

### **Do kids actually eat healthier because of farm to school programs?**

Farm to school programs in other states have shown if children are given the choice along with education these same children will choose healthier eating options. This is evident by the fact that school lunch participation on Farm Fresh Salad Bar days rivals Pizza days in most schools. Studies of several farm to school programs in California show that more students participate in school meal program when farm fresh products are on the menu. Kids choosing farm to school options eat significantly more servings of fruits and vegetables (3-3.5 servings per salad bar lunch as compared to 1 serving per hot meal in the Davis Unified School District, for example). Students who choose Farm to School meals also waste less food than their peers eating hot lunches.

### **How are farmers benefited by Farm to School programs?**

Farmers can diversify their markets by supplying to local schools. This is especially important when farmers are dependent on limited commodity or wholesale markets. Schools represent a steady, reliable demand that helps farmers plan their crop planting, harvesting and marketing more effectively. Limited research on existing farm to school programs has shown that school sales comprise up to 2 % of farmer revenues. Besides direct revenues, farmers are motivated to participate in these programs as it provides an opportunity to contribute to the health and education of children. The interaction with students, parents and the community often results in additional sales through farmers markets and other avenues,

### **How do I find farmers to supply to my school?**

Contact the Farm to School Program at the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship at 515/281-5783 or [maury.wills@idals.state.ia.us](mailto:maury.wills@idals.state.ia.us). You can visit one of Iowa's 170 local farmers markets to connect with local farmers. Speak with the producer and determine his interest in selling to a local school.

### **Is there data to show that National School Lunch Program participation rates increase due to the program?**

Yes, participation rates in the National School Lunch Program increase due to a farm to school program. Trends show that participation increases substantially when a program is started, and that numbers then level off after an initial rush. In a pilot program at Pioneer Elementary School in Davis Joint Unified School District, participation rates increased by 30% after the program was initiated, and then leveled off to an increase of 7% over pre-salad bar days.

### **Why should schools procure locally?**

Farm to school programs, which buy from local farmers, bring additional educational opportunities for children by way of farm tours, farmer visits in the classroom, waste management and recycling programs, school gardens. Connections with the local farms

and agriculture help children better understand the cycle of food such as how and who grows it, and how it impacts their bodies, health and the community. All these experiences complete the educational framework that motivates children towards healthier eating habits that will last a lifetime. Consumers all over the United States are realizing the benefits of establishing closer ties with the food producers and farmers in their region. Buying local is good for the economy as it contributes to the growth of small businesses, generates jobs, supports local farming and it is good for the environment as food produced locally consumes less fossil fuel for transportation and requires less materials for packaging. It is good for your wallet as local food tends to be cheaper as it doesn't need to include the costs of transportation and it is good for you and your community because you can eat the best quality, seasonal foods that are flavorful and fresh. At the same time support a local farmer in your community.