

2013

# Des Moines farm to school pilot project: Local sourcing for special events and summer feeding

Hannah Lewis

*National Center for Appropriate Technology*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/leopold\\_grantreports](http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/leopold_grantreports)



Part of the [International and Community Nutrition Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Lewis, Hannah, "Des Moines farm to school pilot project: Local sourcing for special events and summer feeding" (2013). *Leopold Center Completed Grant Reports*. 429.

[http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/leopold\\_grantreports/429](http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/leopold_grantreports/429)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leopold Center Completed Grant Reports by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [digirep@iastate.edu](mailto:digirep@iastate.edu).

---

# Des Moines farm to school pilot project: Local sourcing for special events and summer feeding

## **Abstract**

Pilot project explored what sorts of activities are successful in raising the interest of school food service personnel and students in buying, serving and eating local food.

## **Keywords**

Farm to institution

## **Disciplines**

International and Community Nutrition



## Des Moines farm to school pilot project: Local sourcing for special events and summer feeding

**Abstract:** Pilot project explored what sorts of activities are successful in raising the interest of school food service personnel and students in buying, serving and eating local food.

### Principal Investigator:

**Hannah Lewis**  
National Center for  
Appropriate Technology  
(NCAT)  
Des Moines

**Budget:**  
\$7,475 for year one

**Q** Is it possible to incorporate locally grown food into the Des Moines Public Schools meal program, and if so, what are the best ways to introduce local foods?

**A** The project showed that district staff members welcome the possibility of sourcing ingredients from local farmers because of the freshness and quality of the produce. However, processing whole produce takes extra time and money for the district, and in this way can be burdensome for staff to manage. When fresh, local food is introduced to students, it needs to be highlighted so they recognize it as something special.



**MARKETING**

### Background

This pilot project aimed to increase students' access to and consumption of fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables in the Des Moines Public School (DMPS) District. One avenue is to help prepare local farmers participate in a competitive bid process for the school lunch program. Working with a large, centralized school food service that serves 20,000 meals per day can be a daunting undertaking requiring large volumes of any given ingredient.

Therefore, this project started with small-scale, practical activities that: (1) cultivated connections between the school district and local farmers, (2) created awareness and enthusiasm among students and staff about locally grown food, and (3) created opportunities for project partners to observe and evaluate the costs and best practices for local procurement in order to assess the feasibility of expanding the program. This allowed the Des Moines farm to school program to expand at a manageable pace and build on successes and lessons learned.

### Approach and methods

This project was implemented by two FoodCorps members based at NCAT and serving DMPS. FoodCorps ([www.foodcorps.org](http://www.foodcorps.org)) is a new national non-profit in the AmeriCorps service network, and its mission is to encourage youth to have enduring relationships with healthy food. In addition to helping schools source food from local farmers, FoodCorps members in 12 states, including Iowa, build school gardens and conduct nutrition education. FoodCorps members Daniel Schultz and Mauricio Rosas-Alvarez had two-year terms with NCAT in Des Moines, where they intensively served six schools during the school year.

Pilot activities for the farm to school program in Des Moines were varied. In spring 2012, the project team worked with DMPS Central Campus Culinary Arts high school program on a one-day event to prepare a local food lunch special. It was



*Farm to school month*

served at the Central Campus Café, which is open to the public on Thursdays and Fridays and can accommodate up to 100 guests. Students learned about local foods and how to prepare a creative, healthful dish using these foods. During the summer, the team collaborated with the DMPS Food Service program's central kitchen to provide weekly local food tastings in conjunction with the summer lunch program at three feeding sites. For Farm to School Month (October 2012), they worked with the head chef to prepare "special event" local food lunches at four schools, rotating to a new school each week of the month. They promoted the local foods featured at each of these events through signage, educational activities, a "Tried it, Like it, Loved it" bean poll, incentives (fruit/vegetable stickers and stamps), farmer profiles (including pictures) and farmer visits.

They evaluated the project's impact by measuring produce consumption rate and/or attitude change by students (before and after local food offerings) and farmer and central kitchen staff satisfaction (price, logistics, overall experience, etc.).

## **Results and discussion**

This project helped NCAT and its partners identify opportunities and constraints to local food procurement for Des Moines public schools. The unanimously positive feedback from DMPS staff about sourcing local foods offered a green light to continue building connections between the school district and local farmers. In fact, the DMPS Nutrition Service is now participating in School Food FOCUS's Midwest Regional Learning Lab. The program seeks to leverage the combined buying power of more than a half-dozen urban school districts to replace highly processed items (such as chicken nuggets) with unprocessed, hormone/antibiotic-free, regionally produced foods. This speaks to DMPS Nutrition Service's receptiveness and commitment to using healthful and locally grown foods.

The constraints and/or unanticipated costs identified by this project were:

1. Mismatched schedules of local farmers and DMPS Nutrition Service, which requires deliveries to be made before 2 p.m. Monday through Friday. Several farmers cannot deliver until late afternoon or evening.
2. The time gap between receiving produce (on Thursdays), processing (on Mondays), and serving (on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays), which can diminish the freshness of the produce.
3. The limited options for preparing the produce when served cold. For instance, serving cold, minimally processed zucchini isn't necessarily the best way to introduce children to that vegetable.
4. The difficulty of anticipating when a particular produce item will be available given weather problems such as 2012's severe drought. FoodCorps members created a weekly schedule at the beginning of the season, but had to adjust it several times due to drought-delayed harvests.
5. The importance of uniform produce size. Food service staff commented that the sweet potatoes took extra time to cut into fries due to the inconsistent size and shape of the potatoes.
6. The labor expense of extra produce processing. It took two to five labor hours at about \$25/hour to process the produce each week; volunteers are not permitted to replace these union-protected employees.



*“Tried it, Like it, Loved it”  
bean poll.*

## Conclusions

Based on the positive experience in 2012, there are several adaptations that would benefit the project in 2013. Potential changes are to:

1. Exclude vegetables that are not easily prepared and served cold (such as zucchini), and focus instead on fruits and vegetables that are an easy sell with children (strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, watermelon, carrots, and perhaps grapes or sweet corn).
2. Expand the number of summer feeding sites, but reduce the time length for the program. This would allow for an increased volume of production and narrow it to very successful products to avoid waste. The program helps the central kitchen improve the processing of local food and work out distribution logistics with a manageable amount of volume.
3. Expand the number of local food lunch sites for Farm to School Month and switch from Monday to another day of the week for these events (since sweet potatoes had to be processed on Monday morning, precluding them from being delivered through regular channels).
4. Ensure that the entire school community is prepared in some way to acknowledge these are local foods. This includes principals (for morning announcements), teachers (so they can prep the kids on the way to the lunch room), food service staff at the individual schools (to really sell, or at least “know” it is a local product), and parents (so the conversation can continue at home).
5. Shift the project focus toward DMPS Nutrition Service staff and away from the students. While students will remain the ultimate target beneficiaries of this project, it is important to focus more on systems change within the district and generating enthusiasm and awareness among staff by adding an educational component for food service staff.

## Impact of results

### *Impact on farmers:*

Through this grant, NCAT purchased less than \$2,000 of produce from four Iowa farmers for the summer feeding program and National Farm to School Month event in October. Hence, the economic impact on farmers was negligible, although as one farmer pointed out, even a slight increase in sales helps. This farmer noted that while her operation didn’t increase the quantity of crops planted in order to supply DMPS Nutrition Services in 2012, nor do they plan to do so in 2013, they do plant extra crops every year to supply wholesale markets on an as-needed basis. Two farmers said that while they won’t pursue school food service markets in the near future, they welcome the opportunity to supply any school that might approach them.

### *Impact on DMPS Nutrition Service:*

The DMPS Nutrition Service director hoped to expose kids to healthy, locally grown foods, and attract more kids to the summer feeding sites by creating a buzz about it. Summer feeding participation rates are low compared to the size of the student population in Des Moines, especially considering the pervasiveness of poverty and hunger in the district.

Reasons for the low participation may include a stigma connected to receiving free food, and the lack of formal activities associated with the free lunches that could provide an additional draw. There was some media buzz about the program that helped increase attention.

The project also appears to have created excitement within DMPS Nutrition Service itself. For instance, the head chef said his expectations about the quality of locally grown produce were exceeded; the produce was cleaner and fresher than anticipated. Several food service staff said they learned new things through the project, whether through exposure to varieties they didn't know existed (such as yellow watermelon) or new ways of cooking produce. The worker responsible for loading meals onto the trucks said the drivers started asking each week what the new produce item was and wanted to sample it.

*Impact on students:*

This was the hardest audience to measure because the students in attendance varied from week to week. The feeding site staff observed that students responded positively to the project, and appeared to look forward to sampling a new fruit or vegetable each week.

## **Education and outreach**

Findings from this project were presented at the Leopold Center's March 2013 Local Food Conference in Ames. In addition, FoodCorps Fellow Flannery Cerbin will profile DMPS Nutrition Service's local food initiatives through a forthcoming "Faces of Iowa Farm to School" website platform. NCAT's ATTRA program is developing a farm to school technical publication series which will include information developed through this project.

## **Leveraged funds**

This project was leveraged by NCAT's partnership with FoodCorps, which places two AmeriCorps service members in Des Moines to build farm to school connections. By initiating the conversation about local foods with the Central Campus Culinary Arts high school program, the program leveraged funding from the district for those high school students to take a field trip to Coyote Run Farm in Marion County in October 2012 for Farm to School Month.

***For more information,  
contact:***

*Hannah Lewis, National  
Center for Appropriate  
Technology, 206 Sixth  
Avenue, Suite 1101,  
Des Moines, IA 50309;  
(515) 288-0460, e-mail  
hannahl@ncat.org*