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Procurement tools to develop sustainable local food purchasing models for farm to school chapters

Abstract

Farm to school efforts often are stymied by the difficulties of sourcing local food in large enough quantities and on a schedule that works for the participants. An Iowa RC&D developed tools and education that were needed to help these programs get started and succeed in bringing more local food into school lunchrooms.

Keywords

Farm to institution

Disciplines

International and Community Nutrition



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Principal Investigator:

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Amana, Iowa

Budget:

\$18,000 for year one
\$18,000 for year two

Q What resources are needed to help school food directors procure local food for school meals?

A Iowa Valley RC&D and a steering committee of school food directors determined that an online toolkit with preformatted templates and forms as well as a regional database of farms and schools would help meet the needs for local food resources. They also concluded that it was very important for the food directors to meet quarterly or twice a year to network with representatives from other districts.

Background

The Iowa Corridor Region's local food system is healthy and growing with diverse local food producers and entrepreneurs, distributors and institutions and businesses that are buying local. Within the Field to Family Regional Food Coalition region, six local school districts (Iowa City, Clear Creek Amana, Mid-Prairie, West Branch, Washington and West Liberty) are actively engaged in Farm to School activities. The largest request for assistance from Farm to School committees and school staff is for assistance in identifying and procuring local food.

As Iowa Farm to School chapters increase their current local food purchasing for meals and snacks, it will be vital to create procedures and tools to make local food procurement sustainable and less reliant on outside funding and technical support. It is important to share information learned and to leverage partnerships with governmental, non-profit and private organizations engaged in promoting the local and regional sustainable food system in the region. The Iowa Valley Resource Conservation and Development (IVRC&D) assumed a leadership role in aiding these farm to school efforts. The project goal was to research and develop templates and procedures for tools that will make local food procurement for school meals and snacks less reliant on outside technical assistance and funding.

Approach and methods

The first phase of the project was focused on research, interviews and regional meetings. Work included research and interviews of seven national case studies of tools to help schools procure local food; advisory committee meetings to determine barriers and resources needed for local food purchasing sustainability, development of a regional food safety checklist for schools; and organization of trainings on menu and crop planning. The second phase of the project was focused on research and development of an Iowa-based online local food procurement toolkit. Work to be completed included website development with supporting tools, school and farm tours, and completion of a food safety checklist for regional farmers.



MARKETING



Scott Koepke, garden educator of Soil Mates instructs students on how to create soil from compost.

Results and discussion

Among the project accomplishments:

- Completed case study interviews with Illinois Market Maker, Gretchen Swanson, Center for Nutrition, North Iowa Food and Farm Partnership, Idaho Bounty Food Co-op, Florida Farm to School, and School Food FOCUS Public Health Solutions. The researchers learned about regional Farm to School resources, online ordering system and online toolkits.
- Created a project advisory committee consisting of regional school food directors and other Farm to School chapter representatives from eight school districts. Facilitated seven meetings at five different regional school districts.
- Facilitated and created a regional school food safety checklist with help of seven school districts; and templates for local food bid request form, purchase agreement, and farmer profile.
- In interviews with regional school food directors and farmers, determined barriers and resources needed to make local food procurement sustainable in schools.
- Assisted the Iowa City School District in creating and sending out bid requests to regional farmers for cherry tomatoes and broccoli in spring 2013.
- Facilitated and supported efforts of three new regional Farm to School chapters.
- Developed and launched online toolkit www.ialocalfoodforschools.org in September 2013.
- Developed brochure to encourage Farm to School activities and local food procurement in schools.
- Evaluated success of project activities and online toolkit by surveying project advisory committee. Survey results included the perception that it is important for an organization (such as Iowa Valley RC&D) to coordinate, develop tools, and make connections to resources (such as farmers, funding, etc.) to support Farm to School activities. All stated they were likely to continue to participate. Among the outcomes from six participants: two schools purchased local foods; one started a school garden; one used tools that were created; and one used models shared by other advisory committee members to improve meal program.

Conclusions

This project succeeded beyond expectation. Successful outcomes included completion of case studies; positive networking opportunities among schools and farms; completion of online toolkit and development of supporting tools; development of online map of regional schools and local food producers; two trainings hosted on menu and crop planning; school and farm tours; actively participating in school local food procurement; as well as advocating for and participating in regional Farm to School activities.



Vern and Mary Zahradnik, along with their daughter and son-in-law Emma and Marcus Johnson of Buffalo Ridge Orchard grow 50 varieties of apples as well as many types of vegetables.

Project challenges noted were:

- Difficulty scheduling advisory committee meetings and activities due to limited time availability of food service directors and absence during summer months when school is out.
- Disruption of support staff needed to assist in coordinating project in year one.
- Limited number of farms that are able and willing to sell to schools and limited number of schools that have additional time and resources needed to participate in Farm to School activities. In meeting with farmers, it appeared that many believe schools cannot pay fair prices and packaging and delivery standards were prohibitive. (This likely is the greatest challenge to expanding farm to school programming.)

Impact of results

As local farms continue to grow in product diversity and volume, it is important to have tools and procedures in place to assist schools in making a local purchasing program a part of their standard menu planning and food procurement process. By interviewing national partners, studying usage trends, meeting with and connecting school food professionals and farmers, hosting trainings and farm tours, an online toolkit was developed to guide local food procurement in schools.

Recommendations stemming from the project include:

1. Creation of a statewide farm to school strategic development plan led by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship and the Iowa Regional Food System Working Group.
2. Iowa Department of Education should incentivize Iowa school districts to implement farm to school efforts as part of the job descriptions of school food directors.
3. Statewide farm to school website should be managed outside of state government to ensure that a robust information source is available.

Education and outreach

- Menu and Crop Planning Workshops, November 28, 2012 and December 4, 2013. The workshops focused on school food professionals covered topics such as local food procurement strategies, menu ideas, engaging students to eat local foods, and Farm to School programming. The Crop Planning workshop for local food producers included topics such as calculating seeds and plants to grow, record keeping, season extension, expanding and diversifying yields, and selling to institutions. Workshops were designed to allow for networking between schools and farmers. Workshop attendance for 2012 was 19 for Crop Planning and 14 for Menu Planning. Workshop attendance for 2013 was 25 for Crop Planning and 11 for Menu Planning.
- Farm tours August 2 and 5, 2013
- Interviews and meetings with farmers (June 5-July 8, 2013) to learn of barriers to selling to schools, and to share information about Farm to School and funding opportunities.

- Additional presentations were made regarding the project at a Local Food Summit in Tipton, Mid-Prairie and Solon school district meetings to initiate a new Farm to School Chapter, the Iowa Farm to School Conference and the Come to the Table Summit. The project was promoted in coordination with many Iowa Valley Food Co-op and Iowa Valley RC&D activities.
- Launching of online toolkit announced in press release shared with regional media sources and published in numerous online websites.

Leveraged funds

The project leveraged additional funding in two school districts. The West Branch School District was awarded \$3,000 and the Solon School District \$4,000 from an IDALS Farm to School Chapter grant. By participating in the project's advisory committee, West Branch and Solon were able to utilize the experience and knowledge of the group to complete their applications.

***For more information,
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