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Implementing a seasonal cycle menu for public schools featuring Iowa-grown and processed foods

Abstract

New nutrition regulations for student meals spurred a project to help schools use more Iowa-grown products with the creation of a seasonal, cycle menus. Utilizing cycle menus, training students in cafeteria coaching, and access to a local food hub yielded good results for several northeast Iowa schools.

Keywords

Community-based food systems, Farm to institution

Disciplines

International and Community Nutrition



Implementing a seasonal, cycle menu for public schools featuring Iowa-grown and processed foods

Abstract: New nutrition regulations for student meals spurred a project to help schools use more Iowa-grown products with the creation of a seasonal, cycle menus. Utilizing cycle menus, training students in cafeteria coaching, and access to a local food hub yielded good results for several northeast Iowa schools.

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Budget:

\$25,000 for year one

Q Can a cycle menu featuring Iowa-grown foods lead to increased local food purchases by Iowa public schools?

A Yes, incorporating Iowa-grown foods into a cycle menu for schools is an effective way for schools to increase their local food use. Schools use the most local food from August through October. However, Iowa products with a more consistent supply such as yogurt, eggs or meat, or frozen produce can be used the entire school year.

Background

The Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative (FFI) adopted Farm to School (F2S) in 2009 to connect children to agriculture, tackle the challenges of procuring food locally, and build school gardens. This regional approach brings together schools to achieve greater capacity and creates a learning community support system for smaller districts in rural environments.

Funding from the Leopold Center was used to launch a three-year Farm to School project in six pilot schools. It focused on a four-component program: 1) cross-age nutrition education, 2) food service education, 3) teacher education, and 4) school gardens.

In 2012, the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act (HHFKA) was passed and imposed new nutrition regulations for school meals. Several school food service directors asked partners of the Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative for assistance in creating menus that would meet the new regulations. FFI leaders saw this as an opportunity to create a menu that would also be friendly to Iowa-grown food.

Approach and methods

Strategy 1: Menu Planning HHFKA stipulates that school meals meet daily and weekly component requirements for protein, dairy, fruit, vegetable and grain. In addition, there are average weekly limits on calories, sodium and fat.

Initially six schools were identified to participate in the project based on willingness to adopt the cycle menu. In a day-long planning session, the group inventoried the current meals served in the schools. From this list, menu themes and entrees were identified. While a wide variety of foods can be produced locally, the menu specifically focused on those that were affordable to schools and available in larger quantities.

Strategy 2: Cafeteria Coaching To encourage students to try the new menu choices, the project leaders developed a “Cafeteria Coaches” youth development program to



MARKETING



Lunch tray: An All-Iowa meal served at Decorah Community Schools featured locally-processed roasted pork on a school-made bun, local cabbage, apples from area farms, and potatoes and side salad from the school garden.

engage high school and middle school students as ambassadors and peer leaders in the lunchroom. Youth were trained to lead taste-tests, conduct surveys and encourage other students to provide feedback for the new recipes.

The training curriculum was developed by ISU Extension and Outreach Youth Development Specialists and modeled after best practices from programs in Minnesota and Vermont. Students from 12 school districts received training on being cafeteria coaches in October 2013. After a brief orientation, students joined elementary students during lunch to practice their skills.

Results and discussion

Six schools started the project with planning activities in spring 2012. One school left the project after a month of implementation because of the resignation of the food service director. Five schools implemented the cycle menu during the 2013-14 school year (Year 1). A second school left the project after Year 1 citing concerns about the cost of menu implementation and student dissatisfaction.

The goal for this project was to double purchases of local foods by schools – increasing the total from \$8,900 to \$18,000 in two years. By the end of the project, purchases by four pilot schools increased 158 percent (or \$22,900) from the baseline year (2013-14 school year). Preliminary data from the third year of menu utilization indicates the schools had already reached over \$24,300 in purchases by the end of the first semester. (Contributing to the increase was additional funding from a USDA Farm to School grant and another Leopold Center grant to assist with distribution logistics for a food hub and product processing for schools.)

Four schools implemented the cycle menu in Year 2 (2014-15) with minimal support from developers. The schools continue to utilize the menu and customize it for their needs. For Farm to School Month (October 2014), the Allamakee Community School District highlighted the local products being served. Researchers have received inquiries from three other school districts about using the cycle menu for the 2015-16 school year.

There are many other cycle menus available for school food services to utilize as they plan menus to meet HHFKA standards. What makes the Northeast Iowa Farm to School Cycle Menu unique is its customization with Iowa foods, and the goal to get schools to use more local products. This project was an outcome of several years of capacity building with local schools and was highly leveraged, both financially and socially.

Working with a food hub magnifies the results In Year 2 and 3 of this project, a local food distribution business called the Iowa Food Hub was utilized to help schools find farmers and local products to use in cycle menus.

Chad Elliott, Decorah Community Schools' Food Service reported, "When it comes time to plan a menu, it's sometimes easier to just order from [the broadline distributor] than perhaps try and call someone up, track down a farmer, and get something ordered. Whereas the Iowa Food Hub has taken care of everything for us."



Cafeteria coaches.

Perspective from the supply side The food production side shows equally striking results. There were large spikes in Iowa Food Hub sales from September-October of 2013 and 2014, largely due to increased sales to schools. October is National Farm to School month and generates demand and excitement.

At the peak in October 2014, 15 school districts purchased \$9,200 from the Iowa Food Hub. Seventy-four percent of those sales were from the four cycle menu pilot schools. (Schools also will purchase directly from farmers during this time, and those figures are not reflected in these numbers.)

The cycle menu is a way for schools to create a plan to use local food, but it is not an answer to changes in supply or demand. Schools will feature local foods in October to celebrate Farm to School month, and then demand drops sharply. The drop also coincides with the seasonality of local produce and the end of the

growing season. While processed products, meat, dairy and storage crops are ways to extend Farm to School through the school year, it is clear that the fall months are the peak season.

Cafeteria Coaching Three schools (Decorah, Waukon and St. Joseph) took the Cafeteria Coaching concept back to their schools to be implemented. In Decorah, the program also expanded to a private school, St. Benedict. All the eighth-graders at that school were trained to be coaches as part of their health class. The formation of a new FFI 4-H Youth team at that school was an unexpected, but pleasant, outcome. Students at North Winneshiek Community School District were trained in October 2014.

Conclusions

- Incorporating Iowa-grown foods into a cycle menu for schools is an effective way for schools to increase their local food use.
- It was anticipated that the cycle menu would lead to discussions on production planning with farmers to meet demand for local food products. Up to this point, the supply has been in synch with demand without intentional planning. This will not always be the case as the school and other local food markets grow. How the cycle menu can be used to assist with production planning needs further investigation.
- The largest amount of local food is utilized by schools from August through October. However, Iowa products such as local yogurt, eggs or meat, or frozen produce are available in a more consistent supply and can be used during the entire school year.
- Utilizing middle school or high school students as cafeteria coaches is an effective way to encourage students to try new foods.
- Cafeteria coaching provides a leadership opportunity for youth and gives them an opportunity to practice their communication and persuasion skills.

Impact of results

School food service directors have many factors to consider when they create menus: cost, preparation, product availability, nutrition requirements, etc. The Northeast Iowa Farm to School Cycle Menu is a roadmap for using Iowa-grown foods while taking cost, preparation, availability and nutrition into consideration.

Implementing the Northeast Iowa Local Foods Cycle Menu should remove much of the guesswork for a school food service director when using local foods in the cafeteria. The Cycle Menu meets the nutrition requirements of HHKFA and has been tested for two years in both large and small rural school districts. It should be noted that the menu is focused on local foods available in northeast Iowa. Availability of products, especially produce, will vary across the state. School districts can be significant markets for local food producers who are able to produce a consistent supply of quality products. A cycle menu also would be an effective method to increase local food use in other food service operations like colleges or hospitals.

The Cafeteria Coaching Training Manual and Northeast Iowa Local Foods Cycle Menu will be available on the Leopold Center and ISU Extension and Outreach websites. Here are some of the recipes and resources for the cycle menu: <http://www.iowafoodandfitness.org/site/recipes.html>

Education and outreach

Publications

- “Cafeteria Coaching Training Manual,” ISU Extension and Outreach, Revised October 2014
- Northeast Iowa Farm to School Cycle Menu, ISU Extension and Outreach, in progress

Education and Outreach

- Monthly meetings with school food service directors
- Monthly technical assistance offered to participating schools
- Cafeteria coaches training, ISU Extension and Outreach, October 2013
- Cafeteria coaches training, Decorah’s St. Benedict School, ISU Extension and Outreach, November 2013
- Cafeteria coaches training, North Winneshiek schools, ISU Extension and Outreach, November 2014
- Utilizing the Northeast Iowa Farm to School Cycle Menu, ISU Extension and Outreach, March 2015

Leveraged funds

This grant was supplemented with funds from the Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative and a USDA Farm to School Grant. The use of a regional cycle menu was the asset leverage to receive the USDA funding.

Northeast Iowa FFI: Ongoing, \$26,500 in funding:

- Put Food Corps and AmeriCorps service members in schools
- For grant project director and service member coordinator
- For continued technical assistance for school food service

USDA Farm to School: December 2013 – September 2015, \$97,600 in funding:

- School kitchen equipment
- Funds for processing studies
- Continued funding for food service honoraria
- Funds for distribution to schools
- Funds to send food service staff to National Farm to Cafeteria Conference, Austin, TX, April 2014.

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