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.

What was done and why?

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.

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.

What did we learn?

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.