

Increasing access to healthy, fresh and local food to students in three rural public schools in northeast Iowa

Abstract: Mini-grants were offered to three school districts and the food service directors gathered regularly to share their insights and experiences. All school districts involved made significant progress in moving toward their goal of offering healthy, locally grown meals.

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How can we increase capacity of food service directors to improve school lunches with local fruits and vegetables? Through regular meeting and sharing of insights among food service directors, small mini-grants, and offering technical assistance in developing supply chains that meet schools' needs.



MARKETING

What was done and why?

The key objectives of this project were to build capacity of food service directors in at least three rural school districts in Black Hawk County, facilitate communications among food service directors in northeast Iowa, and increase access to healthy local fruits and vegetables. The team from Northern Iowa Food and Farm Partnership (NIFFP) worked closely with three partner schools (Dike-New Hartford, Sumner, and Waverly-Shell Rock) to develop their individualized farm to school programs. The group also worked with the University of Northern Iowa's Price Lab School and Independence Community Schools.

The project strategies included convening a small learning community of food service directors who met periodically and shared their experiences, professional development of food service directors through attendance at national and state conferences, and availability of mini-grants (through another grant leveraged from other sources) to initiate changes each school deemed necessary to move forward to feature more locally produced fruits and vegetables in school menus.

A grant received from the Wellmark Foundation allowed the investigator to work with the Price Lab School at the University of Northern Iowa, which resembles a small rural school, and Independence Community Schools to involve them in this process.

All three districts took steps to increase the amount of fresh, local produce in their school meals. The districts also integrated farm to school ideas into curricula through projects such as school gardens and farm field trips, benefiting from the experiences of the other schools in the working group. Working group meetings allowed food service directors to share ideas and suggestions, and get advice.

What did we learn?

Challenges for increasing the volume of farm to school activity include procurement laws and practices. These laws often are confusing, especially for those new to farm to school programming. Other challenges included frequent turnover of school food service directors, which made it difficult to maintain momentum. Six schools hired new food service administrators during the grant period. Also, school administrators have not made school foods a priority, and as a result the needed resources aren't provided to offer healthy meals.