



### About JoAnne Berkenkamp

Local Foods Program Director JoAnne Berkenkamp joined IATP in 2007. For the prior eleven years, Berkenkamp led an independent consulting practice working with nonprofits, food businesses and foundations across the United States.

### About IATP

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. IATP is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota with offices in Washington D.C. and Geneva.

# Farm to School's teachable moment

## Teaching the value of healthy eating in schools is a great way to fight obesity

**MINNEAPOLIS, OCTOBER 6, 2010\*** — Schools throughout the country are shaking up the cafeteria through new initiatives to improve children's health while giving a boost to local farmers. It's time to give the mystery meat a break and bring out locally produced apples, squash, tomatoes and chicken.

You'd think that a program linking local farmers producing fresh, minimally processed foods with local schools would be a no-brainer. But several decades of federal farm programs have discouraged farmers from targeting local markets—instead encouraging farmers to expand acreage with a few commodity program crops (like corn, soybeans or wheat) or get out of farming all together. At the same time, school lunch programs dealing with tight budgets have taken advantage of more highly processed foods over buying fresh from local farmers.

We're clearly seeing some of the consequences of a flawed farm policy and tight finances for school lunch programs. Approximately 17 percent of U.S. schoolchildren are obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control. And we have the highest obesity rate among 40 countries analyzed in a recent Organization on Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report. The costs of our obesity are astronomical: at least \$147 billion per year in direct health treatment costs, by an estimate published in the journal *Health Affairs*.

Teaching the value of healthy eating in schools is a great way to start turning these numbers around. Aside from the great tasting local food, Farm to School programs help improve kids' "food literacy" by teaching them what food is grown nearby, how their food is grown and what a healthy diet looks like. Some schools are scheduling field trips to local farms and making Farm to School a part of their classroom curriculum. Others are starting their own gardens, or teaching children to cook what's sourced locally.

Farm to School programs also support small- and mid-sized farms that have often been left out of school lunch programs. Thanks to our flawed federal farm programs, one of the challenges schools often face is finding enough steady supply of locally produced food to serve at their schools. But the economic benefits to the community can be considerable when more of the “food dollar” stays in local economies. A University of Minnesota study estimated that the economic benefit to the local region ranged from about \$20,000 if each school in the area served one locally grown meal a month, and up to \$430,000 if schools bought larger amounts from farmers.

Other challenges to expanding Farm to School programs are related to infrastructure, such as the labor, kitchen equipment and preparation time needed to bring locally produced food to the lunch table.

Despite these obstacles, these programs are taking off. Just think of what could happen if federal nutrition and farm programs were geared more toward supporting Farm To School. This fall, Congress was expected to reauthorize the Child Nutrition Act. Both the House and Senate versions of the bill contain a number of provisions to increase fruits and vegetables, including relatively small, but significant, mandatory funding to support Farm to School programs designed to address some of the challenges schools face.

But while members of Congress from both sides of the aisle support the Child Nutrition Act, budgetary issues have stalled the bill and it likely won’t be considered until after the elections.

Congress can do better. No matter how you calculate it, Farm to School programs are an investment in the education and health of our children, and the economic future of our farmers. The Farm to School approach will pay us all back many times over.

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