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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 efforts double in Minnesota

Demand from students, farmers and schools grows for farm to school programs

MINNEAPOLIS – The number of Minnesota school districts purchasing fresh food from local farms has more than doubled in the last 15 months, according to a survey released today by the Minnesota School Nutrition Association (MSNA) and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP).

Farm to school programs link school children with local farmers and farm products, including fruits and vegetables, meat, grains and other items. Farm to school provides fresh, healthy food choices, helps children develop healthy eating habits and supports small and mid-size farmers.

The survey gathered input from MSNA's membership, which includes foodservice professionals from nearly 100 public school districts serving approximately 550,000 K-12 students across the state. Sixty-nine districts reported purchasing Minnesota-grown products in 2009, more than double the figure from late 2008. Further, 77 percent of the districts now involved with farm to school initiatives expect to expand their activities in the upcoming school year, a sign that these programs are taking root and growing.

“Farm to school benefits our students, communities, farmers and the local economy throughout the state,” said MSNA President Mary Anderson. “This is a very positive program on so many levels. The potential for growth is enormous.”

“Parents, students and educators know that good nutrition is essential if our kids are to be healthy and ready to learn. Small and mid-size farmers, whose products have largely been absent from America's lunch trays, can offer our children fresh, less-processed choices and a chance to learn how and where their food is grown,” said IATP's JoAnne Berkenkamp. “The momentum is rapidly building for farm to school programs and it's great to see schools and farmers embracing this opportunity.”

Other key findings from the survey include:

The most commonly used local foods were apples, potatoes, peppers, winter squash, sweet corn and tomatoes. A growing number of schools are also purchasing Minnesota-grown bison, wild rice, dried beans and grains.

Nearly 43 percent of school districts purchasing Minnesota-grown food in 2009 did so by purchasing directly from a farmer or farmer co-op.

While 84 percent of the survey respondents reported purchasing foods grown in Minnesota, 35 percent also purchased foods grown in neighboring areas of Wisconsin, Iowa and/or North or South Dakota.

The biggest barriers to expanding farm to school purchases were the need for extra labor and preparation time in the cafeteria, pricing and tight food budgets, and difficulty finding nearby farmers to purchase from directly.

In the future, schools are most interested in purchasing local vegetables and fruit, with growing interest in bread and grains, dairy and meat. The survey also showed strong interest in expanding student education about Farm to School and growing food in school gardens.

IATP's work on expanding farm to school initiatives is funded in part by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota's Prevention Minnesota Initiative, which works to improve the health of Minnesotans by combating the root causes of cancer and heart disease, of which unhealthy eating is a leading factor.

In the coming year, IATP and MSNA will build on the growing momentum for Farm to School to expand farmer involvement, increase foodservice staff training opportunities, work with more students and increase public awareness

You can learn more at iatp.org and mnsna.org.