

GRAND RAPIDS PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MICHIGAN-GROWN DRY BEANS

Overview

Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS) is Michigan's fourth-largest public school district, serving more than 17,000 students. GRPS' Nutrition Services¹ serves approximately 25,000 meals a day with 86 percent of students being eligible for free lunch. About 36 percent of the student body is African American, 33 percent Hispanic/Latino, 22 percent Caucasian, and six percent are multi-racial. Through its central commissary, Grand Rapids School District also manages food services for the East Grand Rapids Public Schools, four parochial schools and six charter schools.

The district has an extensive Farm to School program. GRPS has teamed up with Pearson Foods,² a Grand Rapids-based processor and distributor of fresh-cut produce, to offer students a wide variety of regionally-grown fruits and vegetables in season. Amy Klinkoski, Nutrition Service Coordinator for Grand Rapids Public Schools,³ has found that locally grown produce tends to be of higher quality and competitively priced relative to alternatives when she factors in labor costs. GRPS' Farm to School program also extends into the classroom, where teachers and community volunteers offer nutrition education and taste-testing and nudge students to try unfamiliar foods.

Michigan-grown Dry Beans

Although Michigan is often most recognized for the fruits and vegetables that it grows, the state is also one of the nation's largest producers of dry beans. As Grand Rapids Public Schools sought to expand their Farm to School program, dry beans emerged as an important avenue for exploration. Klinkoski also anticipated that dry beans would actually involve less labor than canned beans that needed to be opened, rinsed and then the cans recycled.

Klinkoski was fortunate to have the assistance of Michigan State University (MSU) Extension, which introduced to her farmer Fran Carlson-Arbogast. Carlson-Arbogast, who is registered dietitian as well as a Michigan-based farmer, shared Klinkoski's passion for introducing students to locally grown beans. She had also sold her beans to other school districts in the past and was familiar with the challenges of working with schools and eager to find a way to make it work for Grand Rapids.



A Michigan bean bag

GRPS was soon able to purchase dry pinto, red, black, and navy beans from Carlson-Arbogast Farms⁴. One challenge they faced along the way was finding a distributor for the product. Klinkoski initially approached her broadline distributor, but they were not able to offer the beans year-round. However, the farm's beans were being distributed by one of GRPS's smaller distributors, Pearson Foods, with whom the district already had a relationship.

GRPS also sources edible soybeans from Bur Oaks Farm⁵ in Ann Arbor, MI with distribution by Cherry Capital Foods⁶, based in Traverse City, MI. In addition, the district buys hummus made with Michigan-grown organic black beans from Cherry Capital. Klinkoski notes the black bean hummus is a unique product and not available from their broadline distributor. Since lentils and chickpeas are not available from Michigan-based sources, she continues to source those products from other areas of the country via GRPS's broadline distributor.

Recipe Development, Food Prep and Costs

Klinkoski and her staff went through extensive recipe testing when they started using the local beans. There was also a learning curve for staff in developing the appropriate cooking techniques for dried beans. Klinkoski asked the local health department to give a presentation to staff about the nutrition profile of beans and invited farmer Arbogast-Carlson into the kitchen to help staff adapt recipes for canned beans to the dried beans.

Once the cooking technique had been worked out, Klinkoski was able to confirm her hypothesis that cooking dry Michigan beans from scratch took less time for her staff than opening, rinsing, and recycling canned beans. Using a 100-gallon steam-jacketed kettle, they found that it took them about an hour and a half to cook the beans—but during most of this time, staff can tend to other tasks. In addition to the time savings, Klinkoski found that beans cooked from scratch had far less sodium than the equivalent canned products, putting GRPS well on the path to meeting federal sodium reduction guidelines.



Grand Rapids staff serving Michigan beans

GRPS currently offers Michigan-grown beans in a variety of different preparations, including baked beans, bean salad, and in a number of soups. Klinkoski estimates that she purchases 13,000 pounds of Michigan-grown navy and black beans each year for roughly \$10,400. For all of the recipes currently used by GRPS, beans are counted as vegetables (in the legume category).

The student reaction to the new bean recipes has varied from one recipe to another. Because many students are not used to eating beans, Klinkoski has had the most success by pairing beans with familiar foods, such as baked beans with a ham sandwich. Klinkoski has found that beans with a bit of a crunch, including honey ginger soy beans and roasted chickpeas, have been popular with students. The bean salads (including a black bean salad and a three bean salad) and the bean hummus are more popular with grades 6 to 12 than with younger students.

District staff note that the Michigan-grown beans are less expensive than the canned beans GRPS had been using. The dry bean one-fourth cup equivalent costs \$0.035 compared to \$0.09 for canned.

Student Education

GRPS has found that the gold standard for Farm to School is to integrate the cafeteria into the classroom. Through a variety of community partnerships, Nutrition Services offers food coaches and interactive nutrition education, and encourages teachers to model healthy eating in the cafeteria. MSU's Kendra Wills, who works as a healthy eating coach, says that having an adult in the cafeteria urging children to try new foods is critical: "We explain the food, how it is grown, how it is good for your body, and we ask kids to try it and tell us what they think...we make it cool to eat something new."

Best Practices

- Training foodservice staff on new foods and cooking techniques is key to success.
- When looking at new food products, consider how incorporating them into your meal program will impact labor time. As Grand Rapids found, a less processed product can sometimes require less labor time than a more processed "convenience" product once preparation methods have been sorted out.
- When exploring your options for locally grown and less processed ingredients like dry beans, consider whether these products could help you meet other goals, such as reducing sodium.
- The likelihood of successfully introducing new foods can increase when new choices are paired with nutrition education in the cafeteria and/or classroom, the use of food coaches, and when teachers model healthy eating.

Endnotes

1. For more information about Grand Rapids Nutrition Services, see <http://www.grps.org/nutrition>.
2. For more information about Pearson Foods, see <http://pearsonfoods.com>
3. Amy Klinkoski, personal communication, May 23, 2014.
4. For more information about Carlson-Arbogast Farms, see this video from the Michigan Farm Bureau: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiEHmEEZC3k>.
5. For more information about Bur Oaks Farm, see <http://buroaksfarm.com/>.
6. For more information about Cherry Capital Foods, see <http://cherrycapitalfoods.com/>.