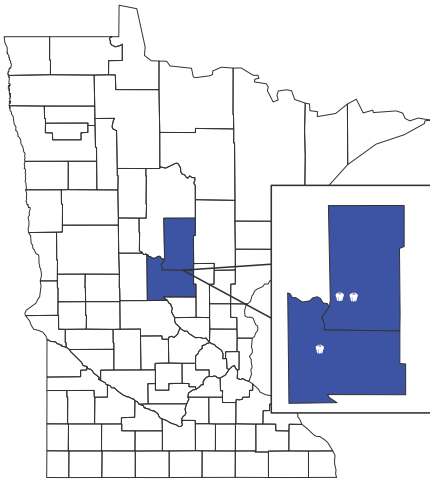


# FARM TO HEAD START

## TRI-COUNTY

### COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP



Brainerd, Baxter and Little Falls,  
Minnesota



# 220

KIDS SERVED



In working with Tri-County Community Action Partnership (Tri-County), the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) was excited to partner with a Head Start program that could take advantage of Sprout, a local well-established food hub in Little Falls. Beginning a Farm to Head Start initiative with a distributor that was already familiar with local growers and experienced in institutional sales was a huge help to Tri-County. The initiative also established a new customer relationship for Sprout and its farmers.

“Starting small can really be a benefit to [Farm to Head Start], making sure you can work out any kinks or issues that may arise.”



**POUNDS**  
of local food  
served annually

## FARM TO HEAD START

THREE CORE COMPONENTS

1

**Classroom  
Activities**

2

**Local  
Foods**

3

**Family  
Engagement**

### WHAT IS “FARM TO HEAD START?”

“Farm to Head Start” is a type of Farm to Early Care initiative. Farm to Early Care initiatives connect young children with healthy, locally grown foods and support farmers in their communities. Farm to Early Care’s three core components are serving locally grown foods in Early Care meals and snacks, offering food and farming-related educational activities for children and organizing food and farming-related family engagement activities.

Want more information on Farm to Head Start?  
Visit [iatp.org/farm-to-institution](http://iatp.org/farm-to-institution)



## GETTING STARTED: Beginning with a distributor



With many of their Farm to Head Start partnerships, IATP started first with a relationship with the Head Start program and then connected with local growers. In this case, however, IATP was initially familiar with Little Falls’ innovative food hub Sprout, and was interested in taking advantage of this established local foods distribution chain. IATP connected with the local Head Start program Tri-County Community Action Partnership (Tri-County), which has centers in Little Falls, Brainerd, Baxter and surrounding towns. Renée Dormanen had started as Tri-County’s Nutrition Manager at the beginning of the partnership in the spring of 2017. She was motivated to revamp the Head Start menus, with greater emphasis on local foods and scratch cooking, and saw Farm to Head Start as a great strategy to help her get away from heavily processed foods and improve her children’s health.

Established in 2012 by a mix of growers, consumers, and economic developers, Sprout’s mission is to increase access to healthy foods, encourage entrepreneurship and foster creativity in Central Minnesota. Coming into the Farm to Head Start partnership with Tri-

County, they already had years of experience selling to institutional markets, but most of those sales had been to K12 schools. Knowing that kids begin to develop taste preferences well before they start kindergarten, Sprout’s Operations and Marketplace Manager Jessie Bavelli was enthusiastic about partnering with the local Head Start program and providing fresh, local produce to children under the age of five. IATP was glad to expand Sprout’s institutional sales to include the untapped potential customer pool of early care providers.

In addition to aggregating produce from multiple local farms and coordinating their delivery, another benefit Sprout provided to the initiative is the professional development they organize for their growers. Sprout assists farmers in obtaining Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification, through completing a program that trains them in best post-harvest handling practices to ensure food safety. Bavelli noted that this certification is becoming increasingly well-known and sought after by institutional partners like schools; it gives institutions more trust in the safety of locally grown foods, and allows growers to more effectively access these markets.





## WHAT WENT WELL: Building on Sprout's Farm to School experience



Sprout's existing knowledge of institutional sales was invaluable to Tri-County in setting up its Farm to Head Start program. Bavelli was able to give Dormanen a picture of how Sprout's established Farm to School program worked. She helped Dormanen through the processes necessary to set up a new

partnership:  
Determining  
what local  
products  
were available

and when, setting up  
an ordering and delivery  
system, and coordinating  
billing and payment. IATP  
shared a list of local  
foods that previous  
Head Start program  
partners had chosen to  
highlight, and Bavelli was  
able to tell IATP and Tri-

County which of those foods Sprout  
would be able to source. She also had  
a good sense of when items would  
be in harvest, which let Dormanen  
set the schedule of highlighted foods  
for the first half of the school year,  
starting with peppers in September  
and ending with winter squash in  
December. Before each food was to  
be served at Head Start, Bavelli would  
begin sourcing it from growers. Almost  
all of the products that Sprout sourced  
for Tri-County were foods that they  
were already getting from growers, so  
availability was rarely an issue.

Each week, Sprout delivered the  
highlighted produce to two of the  
participating centers, at Brainerd and  
Little Falls. Head Start kitchen staff then  
prepared and cooked the food according  
to recipes Dormanen had developed.

Initially, Sprout delivered the produce  
on Mondays, but this schedule did not leave the food  
service staff enough time to prepare the food items  
for that week. Recognizing this challenge, part way  
through the first year Sprout and Tri-County decided to  
switch to a Friday delivery schedule. The additional time  
did ease some of the pressure, however, food service  
staff sometimes still struggled with the additional labor

required to prepare the raw foods. Responding to this  
feedback, Dormanen set a goal to simplify the recipes for  
the second year of the initiative. She and others on the  
leadership team are also revising the highlighted foods  
list, hoping to replace some food items that weren't as  
popular with children. One strategy the Team wants

to try is measuring  
children's responses  
to each highlighted  
food by creating  
interactive charts in  
the classrooms.

To support their Farm  
to Head Start initiative,  
Tri-County applied  
for and was awarded  
a Farm to  
Early Care  
equipment  
grant from the  
Minnesota

“

We wanted to increase our reach  
in the community and loved the  
idea of starting to connect these  
really young kids to nutritious  
foods that are grown locally in  
central Minnesota.

”



Department of Agriculture. These funds are available  
annually to help schools and early care providers  
purchase kitchen equipment to increase the amount of  
local foods they purchase, prepare and serve. Dormanen  
anticipates that purchases made through this grant will  
reduce preparation time and facilitate processing whole  
ingredients at their centers in the coming year.



# GOING FORWARD:

## Strategies for increasing teacher buy-in



One challenge for Tri-County's Farm to Head Start initiative was an initial lack of teacher support. Dormanen received some negative feedback from teachers during the first year related to the menu revisions she was championing (including the new local fruits and vegetables). Some of the local produce coming in from Sprout were unfamiliar to some staff, and they were hesitant to try it. During an evaluation meeting with teachers after the initial pilot year, Tri-County brainstormed ways to generate enthusiasm and reduce skepticism among the teaching staff. One idea was to give all classrooms a sample of each new produce item before it was served in meals. Dormanen realized that involving teachers in the planning process from the beginning is key to increasing buy-in and to greater ownership as teachers saw themselves as role models of healthy behavior for their children. In the second year of the initiative, she has noticed an increase in the number of staff members interested in joining the Farm to Head Start Leadership Team. She hopes that having an educator on the Leadership Team will increase the role that teachers play in planning and implementing Farm to Head Start, thereby increasing their ability to act as effective champions for the program in the classroom. Working with an

educator on the Leadership Team will also help cement and expand the educational component of Tri-County's Farm to Head Start program.



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Many thanks to Renee Dormanen, Jessie Bavelli, and all of the partners at Tri-County Community Action Partnership Head Start Program, Sprout Food Hub and beyond who contributed to the success of this Farm to Head Start effort!

Funding for this project is provided in part by the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

March 2019

### SPOTLIGHT

## PREPARING AT A CENTRAL LOCATION, THEN DELIVERING OUT

Tri-County has been able to reach a third center in Baxter—which has no on-site kitchen facilities—by catering its meals from a central kitchen. Preparing meals and snacks in one central kitchen and then delivering them to other centers is a strategy that's been successfully employed by multiple Farm to Head Start initiatives. It can help reduce food service staff's workload if they are able to accommodate the added delivery time. Of course, it works especially well if multiple sites are located close together.



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