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.”
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 necessary processes 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 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.

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.
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.

GOING FORWARD:
Strategies for increasing teacher buy-in

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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.