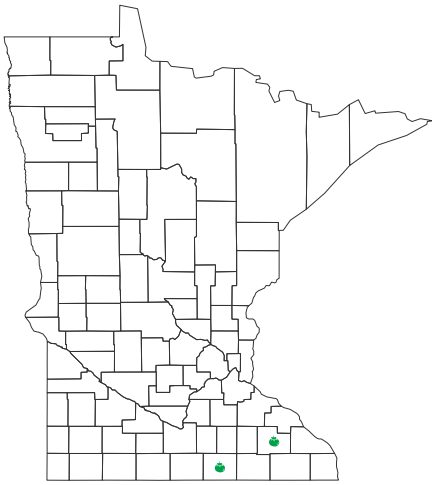


FARM TO HEAD START

Families First Head Start Program

COMMUNITY ACTION COUNCIL



Rochester and Albert
Lea, Minnesota



822

KIDS SERVED



Families First Head Start Program is comprised of 3 centers: The Place and The Empowerment Center in Rochester with food prepared in the kitchen at the Place, and the Brookside Education Center in Albert Lea, with food prepared on-site.

For Sarah Wenum, Nutrition Coordinator at Families First Head Start, the goal of pursuing a Farm of Head Start initiative was to serve locally grown foods in a kid-friendly way. While Rochester already had a robust local purchasing program in place, Families First's partnership with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) aimed to increase local food purchases (particularly at its Albert Lea location), train its teachers on food- and farming-related classroom activities, increase promotion of local purchasing and develop opportunities for family engagement.

ROCHESTER

The opportunity to serve a large volume of local produce was a unique aspect of IATP's partnership with Families First. In addition to serving approximately 750 meals and snacks a day to its own children, Families First's main kitchen in Rochester also serves meals for the Tri-Valley Opportunity Council Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program when they are in session from mid-June through November. Additionally, the kitchen also provides more than 100 dinners for participants in the Boys and Girls Club at that location. The Boys and Girls Club is very enthusiastic about local purchasing, and their interest helped influence Families First's desire to participate in the Farm to Head Start initiative. Including local produce in meals for both programs is an opportunity to provide continuous exposure to locally grown produce, as many children transition from Head Start to the Boys and Girls Club as they get older.

Prior to partnering with IATP, Rochester was already purchasing some local foods from the Southeast Minnesota Food Network, a food hub with more than 90 participating farms. Through the food hub, Families First received weekly deliveries of local produce, meat and dairy products directly to their kitchen. They sourced the rest of their food from several different vendors, opting for locally grown options when available.

In Rochester, getting the locally grown food to the school was fairly seamless. The challenge came from the staff time needed to clean, process and cook the whole ingredients. Reflecting on the impact on her nutrition staff, Sarah notes, "You may have to wash and scrub the items more. You might have to peel and chop the items. It's important to consider what time the kitchen staff have to do the preparations."

With limited kitchen time and tight deadlines for meals to be ready to deliver to other sites, Sarah was strategic in her menu-planning process to facilitate the work of the kitchen staff. When there was a particularly difficult recipe or labor-intensive item on the menu, Sarah planned a relatively easy recipe for the day before. This allowed the kitchen to get started on the more time-consuming recipe for the next day. Rochester's ability to buy in bulk, cook and freeze local produce ahead of time has also been a successful way to save time for their kitchen staff. "We have multiple programs running in this building and each group has different needs," Sarah said. "So it's really finding the products that we can prepare in time and recipes that are simple, yet liked, by the children."

One challenge Sarah found was finding tasty, simple recipes for locally grown food that meet the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) meal pattern requirements. IATP helped with some initial recipe planning, and Sarah hopes to continue expanding her local menu options in the future.



"Ultimately I want the kids in the classrooms to enjoy the foods they are eating and learn to like their local produce."

-Sarah Wenum, Nutrition Coordinator at Families First Head Start

WHAT IS "FARM TO HEAD START?"

"Farm to Head Start" is a type of Farm to Early Care initiative.

FARM TO HEAD START

THREE CORE COMPONENTS

1

Classroom Activities

2

Local Foods

3

Family Engagement

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

ALBERT LEA

In Albert Lea they serve 72 Head Start kids: 50 breakfasts, 100 lunches and 50 snacks per day, while also working with 24 Early Head Start families. Due to its distance from the Rochester site, the Albert Lea location orders ingredients and prepares meals separately, though they do follow the same menu and recipes. Albert Lea's head cook Carrie Kirsch is a key partner in the program and is enthusiastic about local purchasing and serving meals made from whole ingredients.

One challenge in starting Farm to Head Start in Albert Lea was finding a way to get produce from the farm to the kitchen. Families First was unable to meet delivery thresholds due to the smaller volume of produce needed for meals. IATP helped connect Carrie with some of the

farmers at the local farmers market, and together they found a solution that worked for both producers and Families First. The farmers gave Carrie a list of what would be available each week, and Carrie let them know what she needed. The farmers would then bring the Head Start orders with them to the farmers market where Carrie would pick it up. "They're not driving to deliver and we're not driving out to the farms to pick up," she said. "It works better for both parties."

"We're very lucky to be working with local farmers that continuously have products available for us to order and they're so willing to work with us. They have been a great resource."

PROGRESS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Adding educational Farm to Head Start classroom activities to the already established local purchasing program was very important to Families First in order to increase the children's receptivity to the local foods. "It helps when children are exposed to the food and learn about it before it is offered, and the repeated exposure makes it seem less foreign," Sarah said. "The children are more willing to try to the food. It helps them learn to like the food."

Sarah also stressed the importance of helping the teaching staff see themselves as food role models for the children: "These kids are young, and this is when we can shape their eating patterns. If the teachers are more involved in the meal, I notice better eating behavior and more willingness to try new foods."

Supporting and educating the kitchen staff was also key. Food waste was a major concern for the kitchen staff, so Sarah reassured them that teachers would pair classroom activities with local foods on the menu to increase their receptiveness. It's helpful to know that at this age it's developmentally appropriate for children to need to try a new food multiple times before they learn to like it. Sarah also stressed that it can take kids up to 20 tries to learn to like a new food, while it often takes adults only three failed attempts preparing the food before they will stop trying to serve it in the future.

For kitchen staff, there was also a learning curve when it came to working with whole local produce; it might not be uniformly sized or it could have dirt on it. Part of



SPOTLIGHT

Local Produce Served: Onion, Tomato, Garlic, Frozen Raspberries, Cucumbers, Red Potato, White Potato, Carrot, Summer Squash, Watermelon, Bluebell Grapes, Green Pepper, Apples, Cabbage, Butternut Squash and Oregano.

Sarah's Farm to Head Start initiative is about showing both staff and children that it's ok to eat food that looks a little bit different. "It helps with food waste, too," she said. "An apple is an apple even if it's lopsided. It's still ok to eat and still has the same nutrients."

To supplement local purchasing and farming-themed classroom activities, Families First has also adopted farm- and food-related family engagement activities. During October, which is National Farm to School Month, children and their families took field trips to local apple orchards. Albert Lea families were also able to visit a pumpkin patch. As part of a parent meeting, families tasted several different varieties of locally grown apples and rated their favorite. The most popular varieties (Sweet Tango and Honeycrisp) were featured on the menu the following week.

Recently, Rochester opened their own onsite food pantry. While only able to accommodate shelf-stable products now, they eventually hope to add freezer and cooler space, so they can offer locally-grown products. Sarah says one of her biggest lessons is to start small and see what's reasonable for the program. "Don't try to take on too much right away," she said. "Set a specific goal, like featuring one local item this month or each week. It helps to start with an achievable goal. You can set future goals to incorporate more."



Authors: Kelly Kramer, Katie Costello and
Erin McKee

Many thanks to Sarah Wenum, Carrie Kirsch
and all of the partners at Families First Head
Start, the Southeast Minnesota Food Network
and beyond who contributed to the success of
this Farm to Head Start initiative!

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.

August 2019