



FARM TO SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Hutchinson, Litchfield and Dassel-Cokato Public School Districts

“Funding from our MDA Farm to School grants has inspired our kitchens to adopt a more seasonal menu and bring in freshly harvested, nutrient-dense foods for our lunch and breakfast programs. Student excitement is growing as they are exposed to new ingredients, community stories and better tasting foods. This excitement means increased participation rates, and that means increasing great nutrition for students of all ages.”

— **Aimee Haag**, Farm to School Coordinator for Hutchinson, Litchfield and Dassel-Cokato Public School districts



Director of Child Nutrition Lesli Mueller and Farm to School Coordinator Aimee Haag work with their food service team to coordinate meal service for the three separate public school districts of Hutchinson, Litchfield and Dassel-Cokato in West Central Minnesota. They serve meals to over 6,300 K-12 students across 12 schools, each with its own kitchen. Their districts have been recipients of MN Department of Agriculture (MDA) Farm to School Full Tray and Kitchen Equipment Grants between 2020 and 2023, and together, the three districts are on track to purchase over \$630,000 of local foods in that short time. The districts purchase local foods from over a dozen farms and ranches in three counties — from fresh produce like carrots, cucumbers and cherry tomatoes to products like local beef, dairy, maple

syrup, honey and dry beans — and are continuing to grow their Farm to School efforts by boosting the amount and varieties of local items purchased and testing innovative ways to menu Minnesota products.

Mueller’s commitment to growing their Farm to School program led her to carve out space in her budget to create the Farm to School Coordinator position and hire Haag, a former farmer excited to connect farmers with new distribution methods. “Our program has really taken off since she has joined us, and it’s just been huge for us to have that relationship with the farmers through her,” Mueller shares. This regional Farm to School Coordinator position has been instrumental in the work to get more local foods into school meals.

Written by Erin McKee and Karla Moreno Polanco, October 2023

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Haag has supported the three districts through her work by:

- Researching and building relationships with nearby farmers and ranchers, knowing what products they offer, when they are available and what they will cost
- Knowing what local items will fit well with school menus, researching recipes, and bridging the connection between what is needed, within budget and locally available
- Being familiar with food safety concerns and best practices for both farmers and school kitchens
- Replicating successes among classrooms, school kitchens and farms to make meaningful change quickly in all of their schools
- Sharing stories and information about local foods and the farmers who grew them with school staff to create buy in, so staff can be Farm to School ambassadors for kids
- Consulting with the nutrition director to design a seasonal menu that reflects the specific abundance of farmers nearby
- Plugging into statewide Farm to School and Harvest of the Month networks for support
- Supporting educational activities in schools to deepen students' connection to where their food comes from
- Helping farmers fill gaps within a community's local food system and advising them on new expansion projects, such as season extension efforts or indoor production
- Being the point person to support BIPOC, emerging and small-scale farmers, who typically face barriers to accessing scalable markets that will be important to their farms' success
- And more!

As a former farmer, Haag has the background to understand and work through farmers' concerns as they partner with schools. She notes, "Having a focused Farm to School Regional Coordinator has helped our districts in a very rural, isolated part of



Lesli Mueller and colleague Rob speaking to the Farm to School team in Hutchinson.

the country take our Farm to School Program from zero to 60 in three very quick years."

As the districts' Farm to School program has grown, they have found new ways to welcome abundance. With the help of MDA's Farm to School kitchen equipment grants, they have purchased industrial food processors, better oven technology and vacuum sealers to support preparing fresh items from the farm and preserving produce at the height of the growing season to be used in the winter. A particularly abundant crop for many farmers, zucchini is shredded and frozen, so it can be used throughout the school year. Basil is vacuum sealed and preserved for later use. New freezers and coolers, also acquired with funding from the kitchen equipment grant, are used to store these local products. "Our success in the cafeterias is without a doubt because of these improvements. This equipment gives our food service staff the tools they need to do these Minnesota high quality ingredients justice," emphasizes Haag.

Mueller and Haag are not afraid to experiment and persevere beyond initial challenges. For example, during the process of testing how to make freezing local products work for their nutritional staff, they realized they needed an amendment to their food safety plan to be able to serve cooked frozen local foods. Most of what they had already frozen was raw (meatballs and vegetables), so they fortunately

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Mueller and Haag complement serving local foods in school meals with educational opportunities for students to connect with where their food comes from. Hutchinson's school farm is within walking distance, so students have great opportunities for hands-on learning. For example, in May, Haag goes into every 3rd grade classroom to seed pumpkins with the students. They observe and care for the seedlings until they are about 2" tall, and then the seedlings are brought to the farm's greenhouse. Haag and her garden staff transplant and care for the pumpkin plants at the garden during the growing months and then deliver the fully grown pumpkins to the 4th graders in October! They use these pumpkins in a math lesson to gather data and practice mean, median, mode, etc.



Pumpkin planting activity at Hutchinson Elementary.

did not need to discard too much frozen local food. Despite this challenge, they remained committed to freezing, understanding how it could greatly impact the amount of local produce they are able to purchase and serve their students. Additionally, their experience has prompted members of the MN Farm to School Leadership Team to begin creating a resource compiling relevant guidance on food safety regulations and best practices on freezing local items — information that will benefit districts around the state.

Mueller notes that it takes time and patience to grow your program, and it's especially important to support nutrition staff to be enthusiastic about doing Farm to School so students can interact with passionate food educators. "We did technical assistance and training with our kitchen staff working with new local items, bringing in chefs and farmers to help them feel comfortable. The more support you can offer, the better. Staff really appreciate it, and it puts them more at ease working with new local products." Additionally, Mueller emphasizes the importance of listening to her staff, who could identify their kitchen equipment needs and provide feedback on local items and recipes.

"Student excitement is growing as they are exposed to new ingredients, community stories, and better tasting foods," Haag says. Taste tests of local products at the beginning of the year not only introduce

students to new foods but also help food service staff create meal plans that students will enjoy. Nutrition staff have found success while experimenting to learn how students will accept produce, for example, roasting instead of steaming vegetables or adding new foods along with familiar ingredients.

Haag notes that all students come with different food preferences and customs: "With unpeeled carrots, one kid will say yeah, that's how I always eat them, and the other one will never touch that," however, Haag comments that she has learned that even getting 50% of students on board with a new food is an achievement.

Looking forward, Mueller and Haag plan to continue to grow their own local purchasing efforts and generously share their experience with other districts around the state. Mueller is particularly proud of how their districts' food purchases invest back into their own communities, saying "By purchasing food closer to home, students can have a clearer picture of where food comes from and farmers can see in action the farm to table end result of their efforts." Haag agrees, "Our goal is to create a lasting community-based food system that works for farmers, small business owners and institutions, making space for farmers' stories in our schools and investing in community feeding community."

“From our perspective as buyers and food service professionals, the top two things are communication and building relationships — that’s what local food systems are all about and that’s what feeding our kids good food is all about.”

Lesli and Aimee’s tips for farmers considering selling to schools:

- There’s no such thing as communicating too much! Constant communication, early warnings and photos of produce and farm items are the cream of the crop. We always ask our farmers how they want to communicate — by phone call, email, text — and who is their secondary point of contact.
- Aimee shares: “I am a former farmer, no longer actively farming commercially, but I always felt like I didn’t have time for the food safety classes, FSMA trainings or post-harvest handling trainings. Right now that’s my number one recommendation to farmers that we work with. It matters. We are in the business of serving kids and our staff high quality food, and if the salad is wilted or the edges are browning or if I can tell it’s been cut and held at maybe 55/60 degrees instead of 40, the kids notice. We want the kids latching on to this idea of Farm to School and really gravitating to and choosing food because it is fresh, local, crispy, alive and tasty. If it’s not handled appropriately after harvesting (speaking of produce), it doesn’t look as nice, and students aren’t going to buy into that. Post harvest handling is so valuable. It’s the number one concern from our food service folks in our kitchen: Is it safe? Is it clean? What’s it going to look like? How is it packaged? All of those things they expect to be industry standard. Do yourself a favor if you are a produce grower looking to sell into schools — be educated on those post-harvest handling best practices for sure.”
- Communicate with schools about their preferences on items’ size, packaging and labeling, etc. There are little quirks you will want to know about if you want to grow produce for a school

district — for example, we use industrial food processors to process all of our fresh produce, so that means we don’t want carrots that are very forked or cucumbers over an inch and a half wide because they won’t be able to fit into the chute of our processors easily. Lesli notes, “That being said, we also don’t turn away the abundance that comes year to year, so communicate with us and we are glad to work with you to figure out something we can prepare and put on the menu.”

- Students love to see outsiders in the cafeteria, especially after a lot of tightened restrictions during the first couple years of the pandemic. They love to meet farmers and ask questions about cows, pigs, chickens and carrots — so if you have the time, especially in the off season, come into the schools to share your story. Stories sell food, and we want the kids to love the food.
- Grow crops in succession, if that is your mode of farm. We like to know that we will have carrots not once, but for 12 or 15 weeks. We like to have tomatoes for as long as possible in the fall. So, if you can consider planting a later succession to boost your abundance when school is in session right at the end of the season, that’s great. Those are the



All local lunch at Hutchinson! Slaw: cabbage, carrots, zucchini and cilantro from Loon Organics; Salad: cherry tomatoes from Loon Organics, greens from Prairie Drifter Farm; cucumber from Hutchinson’s school garden; Cantaloupe and tomato slice from Prairie Drifter Farm; Lettuce from Hutchinson’s School Garden; Pesto (on sammy): Kale and basil from Loon Organics; Bun from Coldspring Bakery; Shredded Chicken from Fowl Mouth Farms in Stewart, MN.

communications we have with farmers in November and December to plan for the next school year.

- Different schools are at different levels of equipment and technical skills in their kitchens. We have a lot of equipment because we have amassed it over the last few years, but we still have limitations. Cherry tomatoes are expensive, but they don't require a lot of labor in the

kitchen. Cucumbers or beets can be cheap, but they might take more labor on our side. Engage in conversation with the schools to which you want to sell— learn their strengths, limitations and what they are looking for in terms of labor.

- On pricing, we ask our farmers to set their prices based on what's fair and works for their system. We can say yes or no to the price. If it's a no, we can work with them.

FARMER PERSPECTIVE: LAURA FRERICHS, LOON ORGANICS FARM

Laura Frerichs co-owns Loon Organics, a 40-acre organic farm located in Hutchinson, MN and sells to Hutchinson, Litchfield and Dassel-Cokato school districts.



Aimee Haag with Laura Frerichs of Loon Organics Farm.

How did you start selling to Hutchinson, Litchfield and Dassel-Cokato, and how do Farm to School sales fit into your overall business model?

Laura: In 2020, we were approached by Farm to School Coordinator Aimee Haag about growing a few produce items for our local school district. It was a good time for us as we had been transitioning from selling at the Mill City Farmers Market for the last 15 years and were looking to add some wholesale sales to our business model.

What items do you sell to schools and how do you choose those items?

Laura: We sell a wide variety of produce to the schools. In 2023, cherry tomatoes, beefsteak tomatoes, sweet peppers, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, cucumbers, zucchini, potatoes, sweet potatoes, winter squash and root crops made up the bulk of our sales. We consult with Aimee during the winter on what produce items will be mutually beneficial both for the school kitchens and students, and for our own farm production. We have focused on growing produce items that we know we can grow well in our soil, that we can grow, harvest, wash and pack efficiently, and that can be scaled up easily to fit in with our existing production. We also agree on a price point with Aimee beforehand so that we know we can grow that item and cover our cost of production. Some crops are too labor or land intensive for us to grow and sell at a wholesale price (green beans, sweet corn, strawberries, for example) so we choose not to scale those up for wholesale sales.

What do you like about selling to schools?

Laura: I love that our local food is going to local schools less than 10 miles away from our farm. It just makes sense. I love that our two kids that attend Hutchinson Public Schools and all their classmates get to eat fresh, organic food in their school lunch. I love how flexible the school is in taking almost whatever we have. We had bumper crops of tomatoes and peppers this summer, and they took so much of it for preserving which was amazing. I appreciate that they know that the bounty comes during the summer, and they make good use of that so that we don't just have to wait until September and October to sell produce to them. They will also take small amounts of items and incorporate them into their meals. It is a very farmer-friendly process.

What challenges have you encountered selling to schools and do you have any recommendations for schools in general who are interested in buying from local farms?

Laura: With any wholesale account, it can be tricky to predict when and how much product you will have available. With climate change, we are encountering new pest, disease and production challenges, which makes it harder to consistently have weekly organic broccoli, for example, or to germinate our fall carrot crops in hot, dry weather. In our districts,

we are lucky to have an amazing Farm to School Coordinator in Aimee Haag, with a background both in farming and food service. Aimee is able to bridge the gap between the unpredictability of farming and the predictability of daily school lunch. I absolutely recommend that a school interested in Farm to School pursue a coordinator position that can give support to both farmers and food service and figure out what will work best for their school and their farms. Start small, there will be hiccups to work out and lots of learning along the way.

What advice would you give to other farmers interested in selling to schools?

Laura: If wholesale is a new market for you, think about just a couple crops that you could start scaling up to sell into the schools. Think about what you can grow well and what price point you need. When is that product ready and for how long do you harvest it — does that line up with the school year or is the school willing to do some preservation? Starting with fall crops like root crops, squash, etc. can be a good way to dip your toes in, and also you are dealing with product that isn't super perishable and can hang out in a school cooler for a couple months even. It can be an amazing and heart-warming partnership so it definitely is worth sticking with it and figuring it out.



Farm tour of Loon Organics.