



FARM TO SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Foley Public School District

Foley Public Schools were among the first to launch a Farm to School Program in Minnesota. Director of Child Nutrition Services Cheryl Pick heard about Farm to School while serving on the board of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) and brought the program to Foley in 2010. Foley Public Schools, located northwest of the Twin Cities, serve 1,900 students across three schools. Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) Farm to School Grants have helped Foley build its program and offer a greater variety of fruits and vegetables to their students.

“We may not have been able to serve produce like rhubarb or asparagus if we had to take them directly out of our budget. Having that extra money [from the MDA grant] really helps us have a different variety of vegetables we can try with our students,” says Pick.

MDA Farm to School kitchen equipment grants have also been critical to expanding the school district’s capacity to expand its scratch cooking. With the support of MDA grants, Foley has purchased two tilted braising pans for making fresh soups and sauces, as well as new ovens and Robot-Coupe food processors that speed up the preparation of fresh produce. Lori Landowski, the assistant director of child nutrition, notes that this equipment has greatly increased the variety of dishes that staff can make in the school kitchens, “We can use our new equipment to make fresh bread... we can rip apart meat, we can make crisp topping for our apple and



blueberry crisp, we can blend fresh fruit smoothies. It has really helped fully evolve our cooking.”

In addition to local food in lunches, Foley engages students in five gardens maintained by the schools. Summer school students plant and care for the gardens. Harvests from these gardens, including peas, cucumbers, herbs and more, are used in the Summer Food Program. Herbs are frozen and used in soups and sauces throughout the school year.

Finally, students engage in Farm to School in the classroom. Schools integrate activities into classrooms with the help of Foley’s agriculture teacher. Each year, students visit a farm to pick sweet corn and then husk it to be used in the cafeteria.

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“I remember the first time we did sweet corn, and husked sweet corn, we had students that didn’t even know how sweet corn was growing. Or that it had a husk on it. And so just teaching the students how things are planted and how they’re grown was amazing at first because a lot of kids didn’t realize that.”

— Cheryl Pick, Director of Child Nutrition Services

In the kitchen, Pick is committed to sourcing a variety of local products. After creating menus for the school year, Pick and her team ask farmers in their area about what products they can provide. In some cases, when the order is large enough, the farmer can deliver, but other products, such as maple syrup, the Foley staff picks up. Local meat is purchased through Grand Champion Meats. In addition to local meat and maple syrup, Foley sources local broccoli, apples, strawberries, rhubarb, asparagus, cauliflower, cantaloupe, watermelon, sweet corn and green beans, among other products to offer students.



Making rhubarb crisp.



Cheryl Pick and Lori Landowski

The biggest challenge for the program has been weather fluctuations, Pick and Landowski say. When big weather events, such as drought or hailstorms, hurt farmers’ yield, they also hurt Farm to School. When a crop is lost due to weather, nutrition staff must think on their feet about how to replace that product while communicating the change to often disappointed students.

Pick allocates extra hours for her staff to help with the additional preparation work required to use fresh local produce. The positive student reaction has validated the extra work required. “You have to get buy in with your staff. It’s important for your staff to be part of this whole process. It’s a lot of extra work but once the students started enjoying it as much as they did the staff were amazed.”

Nutrition staff encourage students who are unsure of trying the new menu items to sample them and come back for more if they like it. They have also noticed that putting fruits and vegetables at the beginning of the lunch line has encouraged students to add more of them to their trays. Pick and Landowski emphasize the importance of school lunches because they introduce students to a variety of foods that they may be unable to get at home.

Pick and Landowski love seeing the community reaction through sharing pictures of the meals on Facebook and connecting with the farmers and distributors with whom they work. In the cafeteria, they often bring in farmers to interact with students and serve their products on the lunch line. Pick makes sure to highlight the connection with where their food comes from, for example, when a former Foley Future Farmers of America (FFA) student provided the school's local beef and came in to serve her beef. "We had a big sign saying that the beef was from their farm and that she had raised these cattle and now you're eating it, that she's providing that for you... making those connections to the community has been a big plus."

Looking forward, Pick and Landowski hope to continue expanding local produce options and maintain their strong community ties. Pick emphasizes that efforts such as Farm to School are significant in rural areas like Foley because they ensure that funds stay within the community.

Landowski encourages schools interested in participating in Farm to School to start small and use available resources, especially the Minnesota Grown



directory and online grant preparation support hosted by the Minnesota Farm to School Leadership Team. Landowski says, "People get scared, but you can start small. There's the smaller First Bite grant that you can just start with one product like fresh apples and then you can get more in depth... even starting small it'll be amazing how it affects your school."

FARMER PERSPECTIVE: BRAD CHMIELEWSKI, STONEY BROOK FARMS



How did you start selling to Foley Public Schools, and how do Farm to School sales fit into your overall business model?

Brad: I was contacted by Cheryl Pick five or six years ago as she wanted to source local produce for their school lunch program. We were very happy to help! Our business sells primarily wholesale to grocery stores and wholesale warehouses, so it is really cool to be able to do something on a more local level for kids right in our own hometown.

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

Brad: We have sold asparagus, green beans, broccoli, cauliflower, sweet corn and winter squash to schools. It is challenging in MN Minnesota because the primary produce season is during the summer months when kids are not in school, so

you need to be flexible with planting windows and try to keep these items available for the growing season.

What do you like about selling to schools?

Brad: I think it is awesome to be able to supply our local area with fresh vegetables. A lot of times you see them shipped off on a truck and never actually know who gets to enjoy them. I hear from my friends' kids how they had my broccoli or asparagus in school today, and it gives me a sense of pride.

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?

Brad: I think schools run into funding issues. - The Farm to School grant that Minnesota has put into place has really helped a lot of schools bridge that gap. It is also a little more legwork for schools who are interested in [Farm to School]: They need to

contact their local farmers and request seasonal produce. [Schools] need to make sure that they have a supply for a certain amount of time, and also that it is enough of a supply to offer on a lunch menu. Don't let it deter you, though, because I bet the produce you get from the farmer down the road is going to be fresher, higher quality and oftentimes cheaper than the produce you would get from a foodservice company.

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

Brad: I would look into it honestly. It is a very small part of our overall business, but it is one of my favorites. We are looking to expand to other schools in our area for next season. Don't be afraid to reach out to your local schools and ask them if they are doing a Farm to School program or if they are interested in starting something up.

