



**For immediate release
November 5, 2009**

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About IATP

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. IATP is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota with an office in Geneva.

Minnesota farm to school efforts catch eye of USDA Deputy Secretary Merrigan

School districts around the state embracing Farm to School program

MINNEAPOLIS – Minnesota farm to school efforts that provide students with healthy, locally grown food are attracting national attention. Earlier this week, USDA Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan toured St. Paul Schools' commissary to get a first-hand look at the district's Farm to School program and hear about other similar efforts around the state.

"They [St. Paul schools] are pioneers in this, and I want to learn what they're doing; I want to learn from that and extend it across the country," said Deputy Secretary Merrigan at a roundtable discussion in St. Paul yesterday. "But I also know, even in the face of the great efforts they're making, they're still facing challenges. The need is great, the challenges are great, but just because they're great doesn't mean we're not ready to tackle them."

During just the first six weeks of this school year, St. Paul Public Schools have purchased 110,000 pounds of locally grown produce, primarily from farms in Minnesota and Western Wisconsin. Fifty-six percent of the district's total fresh produce purchases were local products during that period. St. Paul Schools, in collaboration with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), are lead players in School Food FOCUS, a national network of large urban school districts. St. Paul is FOCUS' first national "Learning Lab" pilot aimed at increasing the use of local produce, whole grains, and healthier meat and dairy products in K-12 schools.

"School, just like home, is a natural place to role model the importance of eating fruits and vegetables," said Jean Ronnei, director of nutrition and commercial services at St. Paul Public Schools. "By purchasing local products, we connect kids to the farmers in a way that allows them to explore new foods, learn how they are grown, and feel proud to live in the Midwest."

The goal of farm to school is to improve student nutrition, educate children about where their food comes from and how it is grown, create new markets for small and mid-size farmers, and support local economies. The program is viewed as one of the tools to combat unhealthy eating, which contributes to obesity and poor health.

“It’s exciting to see Farm to School participation growing all over the state—in the cities, in the suburbs and throughout greater Minnesota. This movement is growing by leaps and bounds,” said IATP’s JoAnne Berkenkamp. IATP is partnering with the Minnesota School Nutrition Association to expand farm to school initiatives statewide by helping schools with staff training, procurement, student education and communications support.

Other examples of Minnesota farm to school activities this fall include:

- Winona schools serving bison from a nearby ranch as well as local broccoli, winter squash, whole wheat breads and wild rice.
- Locally grown sweet corn served to Rosemount students.
- Northfield featuring local watermelons, salad greens, carrots and sheep’s milk cheese.
- Locally grown apples served to Sartell-St. Stephen students.
- Pine River-Backus Elementary School students offered locally produced wild rice and honey.

“Farm to School is being embraced by food service directors, students, parents and farmers as a wise investment in our kids, our farmers and the future well-being of Minnesota,” said Berkenkamp. “These initiatives are also a unique educational opportunity to teach youth about good food. By offering Minnesota grown apples, broccoli, carrots, and more, we’re able to give our students another way to think about their ABCs.”

The need to encourage students to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables was made clear in a report released earlier this month by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. The report found that the majority of Americans fail to consume the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables and that no state has achieved objectives outlined in the Healthy People 2010 initiative, which aims to have at least 75 percent of Americans consume the recommended two or more daily servings of fruit and at least 50 percent of Americans consume three or more daily servings of vegetables. The CDC recommends farm to school as one of the strategies that should be used to increase fruit and vegetable consumption.

You can find out more about IATP’s work to strengthen local, sustainable food systems at www.iatp.org.

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