



(Fresh) Food Fight

Farm to school may be a recipe for success, but barriers prevent these programs from taking hold.

BY JESSICA A. KNOBLAUCH

Imagine a young boy walking between rows in a garden, exploring the plants and animals he finds in the dirt. Small green leaves poke out of a plot of earth. With a child's curiosity, the boy grasps the green between his fingers and gives it a tug. He pulls out a long, skinny orange-colored object that's rough to the touch and asks naively, "What's this?"

A kid who doesn't know what a carrot looks like may seem hard to believe, but people like Ben Brown know better. Brown is the market coordinator for Growing Hope, a Michigan-based organization that empowers people through food. He works

with schools to establish garden programs, integrate food into classroom lessons and encourage buying food from local farmers.

"It's not at all uncommon to work with kids who don't have access to fresh fruits and vegetables," Brown said.

A lack of exposure to nature is not limited to kids surrounded by skyscrapers, sidewalks and power plants. It is seen in children across the country and even in places like Michigan, which has the second-widest variety of farm products in the U.S.

A lack of exposure to healthy foods can carry on into adulthood, says Jen Jameslyn, program manager for Mixed Greens, a

garden and food literacy program that works with local elementary schools and neighborhood centers in Michigan.

"We need to give kids the skills to make healthy food choices throughout their lifetime," she said.

She adds that kids will pick healthier food if it's made available. "Give them the chance to choose between fresh food and processed foods. You'll find there are a range of foods that appeal to them that aren't processed ingredients."

Non-profits like Growing Hope and Mixed Greens are part of a nationwide movement to infuse fresh, local fruits and vegetables into school cafeterias. But they're not alone. A coalition of farmers, university researchers and government agencies are also involved in farm to school efforts. They argue that these programs get healthy meals into school cafeterias, provide health and nutrition education and support local farmers.

"The goal is two-pronged: to improve the quality of foods that is offered in the lunch programs and create more opportunity for farmers," said Doug Wubben, interim coordinator for the Great Lakes region of the national farm to school network.



1: A local Michigan farmer hands out fresh apple slices to elementary students at Central Grade School in Traverse City, Mich.
 2: Mixed Green's staff work with elementary schools to start their own fresh food programs.
 3: A pair of elementary students hold up freshly picked produce.

Photograph 1 courtesy of Dana Bolin-Goodwin.
 Photographs 2 and 3 courtesy of Mixed Greens.



FRESH BEGINNINGS

Farm to school efforts in Michigan began with a meeting in the fall of 2001 between federal and state government agencies and local non-profits. They brainstormed ways to get more Michigan farm products into the schools, said Marla J. Moss, then-supervisor of the Michigan department of education's food distribution unit.

"It was our very first effort so we kind of stumbled around for awhile trying to figure things out," Moss said.

It wasn't long before plans were put in motion. Moss began working with the U.S. Department of Defense fresh fruit and vegetable commodities program—part of the federally assisted National School Lunch Program—to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables for Michigan schools. The U.S. Department of Agriculture began working with the Department of Defense in the mid-90s to supply fresh fruits and vegetables to schools because the defense department had already supplied produce to military bases for years. In 2004 and 2005, Michigan received approximately \$1.9 million in fresh commodity produce, some of which came directly from Michigan farmers.

Another venue for fresh produce is the U.S. Department of Agriculture fruit and vegetable program. This one-year grant program began in 2002 and has since been expanded to eight states, including Michigan. It provides free fruit and vegetable snacks to 25 school buildings in select states throughout the day. The Michigan Department of Education works with these schools to encourage them to issue bids to local farmers.

"It was a highly successful program," said Moss, who worked directly with school officials to implement the programs.

Scranton Middle School in Brighton, Mich. participated in the program in 2005. "We explained to the government that we have a group of children that don't eat a proper breakfast and who don't pack lunches," said Cathy Martin, production manager

program, which means thinking about the other commercial produce that they're buying," she said.

But buying locally grown commercial produce is no easy task due to the many regulations of the National School Lunch Act. "There's very little farm to school language, and what little there is is often contradictory," said Colleen Matts, an expert with the C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at Michigan State University. The C.S. Mott Group is just one of the many facilitators in Michigan that help assist in the development of farm to school programs.

One example of this contradictory language concerning farm to school can be found in the 2002 Farm Bill. One part of the bill states that the schools participating in national school lunch and breakfast

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for Brighton Area Schools. "We knew that participating in this program would positively impact those children by supplying them with free fruits and vegetables."

Yogurt parfaits, mango chunks, pineapple strips, fresh salads and fruits cups were among the items kids sampled. "Kids just loved it," Martin said.

The success of the program has served as a counterargument to those who say kids just won't eat fruits and vegetables. "There's a lot of things we've learned that the kids do like," said Martin. "Now we know to provide fresh salads and fruits on a daily basis.

Programs like these also show that children eat fruits and vegetables and that this produce can be bought locally. "A short follow-up survey of those pilot schools indicated several food service directors purchased many of their fruits and vegetables from local farmers," Moss said.

LOCAL FOOD BARRIERS

Though government-funded programs help get local fruits and vegetables into schools, Moss says they should seek out other means as well.

"Schools need to think outside the [Department of Defense's] commodities

programs are encouraged to buy locally produced foods "to the maximum extent practicable and appropriate."

The message of this request seems pretty clear—buy local as much as possible. But the report states later on that it is not the intent of the bill to "create a geographical preference for locally-produced foods." Geographical preference is a fancy term for giving preference to local growers.

"Basically the intention to buy local is there, but practically speaking, the federal government is simply not making it happen yet," Matts said.

Both Matts and Moss hope that the 2007 Farm Bill will clear up the confusion. For now, Matts helps food service directors get local food by encouraging them to have very specific bid criteria.

One way is to specify that the schools want a certain type of apple, such as a Gala or McIntosh, which are grown specifically in Michigan. "We have to stay in line with federal law, but there are ways to work with it," Matts said.

Food service directors can also say they want produce from a nearby farmer for educational purposes such as field trips and class visits. This *continued on page 36* ►



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farmer/child relationship has the bonus of increasing how much local food children eat.

“The community connection with farmers helps to get kids curious about trying different foods,” said Diane Conners, entrepreneurial agriculture coordinator at the Michigan Land Use Institute. At a Traverse City grade school a potato farmer answered kids’ questions about potato farming, she said. “On that day, twice as many students picked the hot potato bar over pizza.”

Another barrier to farm to school is the small purchase threshold or limit that schools must stay under to use informal bids. Michigan’s limit is around \$19,000—not much when buying for an entire school district. If schools exceed \$19,000, they must use formal bids, which means a more bureaucratic process, something that neither directors nor farmers are eager to work with.

“If the threshold was larger, schools could do a lot more with farm to school,” Matts said.

Often the biggest obstacles are within individual lunch programs.

“With different schools come different challenges,” said Ruth Blackburn, a farm to school project coordinator for the Food Economic Partnership Farm to School Project.

She would know. Blackburn coordinates farm to school efforts in three different Michigan school systems.

Ann Arbor public schools contracts a food service company to bring in a food service director and staff, Blackburn said. It contracts with vendors for various foods. A problem is that the company allows the director to buy only from certain vendors.

“It makes it much more difficult to bring local fruits and vegetables into the cafeteria when you are forced to go to a particular produce distributor,” Blackburn said.

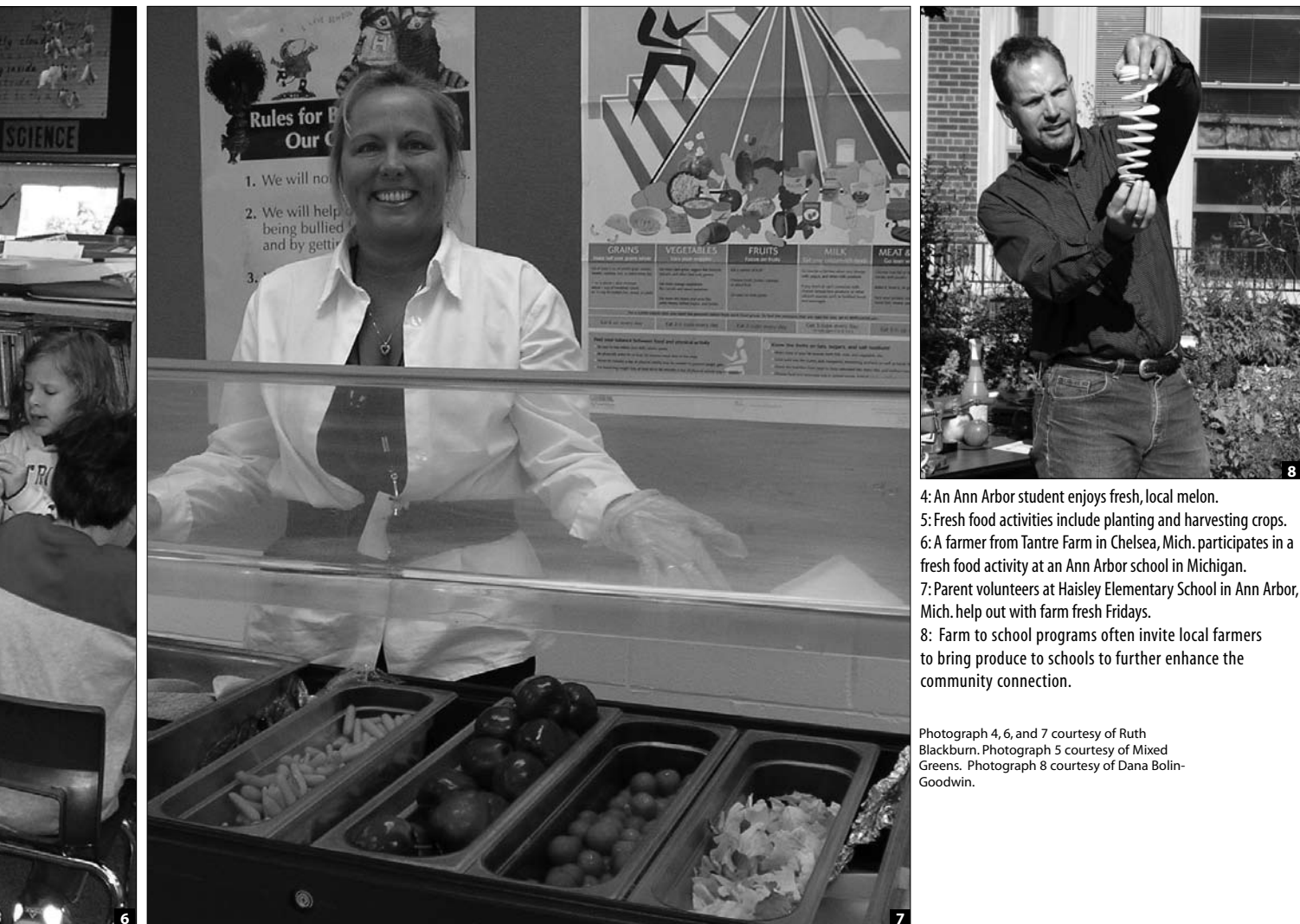
Food service directors also struggle with food service personnel only trained to handle pre-processed and packaged foods.

Those foods are overused to cut costs. But food workers often don’t know how to cook with items from scratch, explained Beth Collins, a consultant for Grand Traverse Catholic Schools. Collins is helping set up a scratch-cooking program that emphasizes local, fresh produce.

“We’ve lost a lot of our vegetable expertise in Michigan,” said Collins. “Some people get a carrot and they don’t necessarily know what to do with it.”

Jodi Jocks, a dietician and nutrition coordinator at Traverse City Area Public Schools District, also struggles with untrained staff. Schools are already crunched with budget cuts, so it’s hard to justify increasing the labor time needed to train staff to properly prepare fresh foods, she said.

“It takes more time and skill when you have to chop, clean and prepare a food item compared to opening something that comes pre-chopped and pre-washed,” she said.



4: An Ann Arbor student enjoys fresh, local melon.
 5: Fresh food activities include planting and harvesting crops.
 6: A farmer from Tantre Farm in Chelsea, Mich. participates in a fresh food activity at an Ann Arbor school in Michigan.
 7: Parent volunteers at Haisley Elementary School in Ann Arbor, Mich. help out with farm fresh Fridays.
 8: Farm to school programs often invite local farmers to bring produce to schools to further enhance the community connection.

Photograph 4, 6, and 7 courtesy of Ruth Blackburn. Photograph 5 courtesy of Mixed Greens. Photograph 8 courtesy of Dana Bolin-Goodwin.

“We could do a better job helping schools offer Michigan-grown fresh fruits and vegetables...” Marla Moss, Mich. Dept. of Education

Food service directors have to take these details into account. “It’s not just about buying the product,” Collins said. “It’s about whether you can get the food to the plate in a cost-effective way.”

THE FUTURE OF FARM TO SCHOOL

Despite barriers, highly motivated people across the state are starting their own farm to school programs. These people give extra effort to provide children with fresh, locally produced foods. “I simply had to set aside time to get it done. I had to make it important,” said Roberto Corona, food service director at Elk Rapids Schools. As a result of Corona’s efforts, all four schools in the district have been receiving fresh, local produce since 2005.

“The district is at the center of cherry orchards, apple orchards and peach trees, so

it seemed like the perfect fit,” Corona said.

The idea is spreading like wildfire among school districts and even into some universities. Local farmer Dale Lesser supplies apples to the University of Michigan’s dining halls. Last year he supplied to two of them. This year he is up to five. “This has been very good for us as a small apple producer because the product has been well-received and we haven’t had to throw away any good apples,” Lesser said.

Distributors are catching on as well. Eric Hahn, president of Cherry Capital Foods, a local foods distributor in northwest Michigan, has seen his business take off since opening in May 2007. The distribution company provides local farm produce and fresh, locally processed jams, apple cider and pickled items to more than 30 schools and 120 restaurants, casinos and resorts.

Though local food efforts continue to plow

their way into school systems, farm to school advocates maintain that barriers remain.

“We could do a better job helping schools offer Michigan-grown fresh fruits and vegetables to school age children,” Moss said.

The tides could be about to turn, as House and Senate versions of the farm bill contain language encouraging the purchase of locally grown foods, something that farm to school advocates eagerly await.

“People get a fresher, more nutritious product and the money goes directly back into the pockets of local growers,” Hahn said. “It’s a win, win, win situation.” 🌱

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