FROM CARROTS TO CURRICULUM:
IMPLEMENTING LOCAL FOOD IN ALLEGANY COUNTY

AN INTRODUCTION

BY CASSANDRA BULL
FROM CARROTS TO CURRICULUM: AN OVERVIEW

In 2018, Cornell Cooperative Extension received a Farm to School Grant through the NYS Department of Ag. & Markets to conduct a two year program targeted at helping the county’s districts procure more local products. Their project, entitled From Carrots to Curriculum: Implementing Farm to School in Allegany County, commenced in March of 2018 and was refunded in 2020 for a second iteration of their project.

BACKGROUND

• 6,106 students are enrolled in Allegany County public schools (K-12). Those receiving a free and/or reduced lunch totals 3,996.
• In the 2015 Farm to School Census, four out of the 12 public school districts in the county had either implemented or planned Farm to School activities.
• Increasing the availability of fresh produce can play a significant role in improving health and decreasing the prevalence of diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and obesity.
• Including Farm to School concepts in school curriculum are unique ways to diversify math, reading and language arts.
• The increase in local horticultural/specialty crops in the Allegany County public schools can increase the overall health of the students, increase the awareness of healthier food choices, and foster concepts which can also be brought home.

PROGRAM GOALS

• This project aims to both determine the existing annual local food budgets in public Allegany County Public Schools, and increase that amount of local procurement by 7%.
• Estimates suggest that this project annually invests a range of $171,400 - 367,300 back into the hands of the regional farming community.
• This project estimates that 90% of the enrolled K-12 public school students will increase their awareness of local food production.

PROPOSED PROJECT TASKS

YEAR ONE: PLANNING
1) Hire the Carrots to Curriculum Project Coordinator
2) Establish the Advisory Board to guide the needs assessment
3) Determine the school’s needs and budgets, farmer capacity and profit margin, and food distribution and bid process for increasing the amount of local foods in Allegany County’s Public Schools

YEAR TWO: IMPLEMENTATION
4) Implement a Harvest of the Month Program and to introduce local foods and healthier meals into students’ diets. Educate students about local food and agriculture by providing resources to teachers that will incorporate garden-based learning in to the classroom. Includes hands-on-learning centers provided to all of the schools to facilitate the agricultural curriculum.
5) Compile a collection of best practices for assisting other schools to develop Farm to Cafeteria Programs.
CORNELL COOPERATIVE EXTENSION OF ALLEGANY COUNTY

Cornell Cooperative Extension puts knowledge to work in pursuit of economic vitality, ecological sustainability and social well-being. They bring local experience and research-based solutions together, helping New York State families and communities thrive in our rapidly changing world. Cornell Cooperative Extension is a dynamic educational system by which research at Cornell University is translated and placed into the hands of New York State citizens in order to enhance their lives and well-being. Highly committed campus faculty and extension associates, agriculture teams, and local educators in a variety of fields, working together with community partners, are uniquely positioned to help apply Cornell’s world class research to meaningful programming. CCE-Allegany is an association that is overseen by the statewide entity as they develop the guidelines which drive local programs, and provides organizational oversight. CCE-Allegany’s programs offered within the county fall under two primary issues: Family, Youth and Communities and Agriculture and Food Systems.

CCE IS AN EMPLOYER AND EDUCATOR RECOGNIZED FOR VALUING AA/EEO, PROVIDING EQUAL PROGRAM AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES.

BIOGRAPHY OF PERSONNEL

This project was a shared goal of Executive Director Laura Hunsberger and Cassandra Bull, and the two collaborated on grant applications to leverage funding for their cause. At that time, Cassandra Bull was employed as an AmeriCorps VISTA at Alfred State College and CCE-Allegany as their School and Community Garden Coordinator. When CCE-Allegany was awarded the recent Farm to School grant by New York State, they were also awarded the opportunity to hire a new employee to execute their proposal. Bull continued with the program as the Farm to School Coordinator to help administer this project.

Cassandra Bull is the Farm to School Coordinator and Ag in the Classroom Educator for Cornell Cooperative Extension of Allegany County. Bull graduated in 2016 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Alfred University and an Associates in Agricultural Technology from Alfred State College. While attending both institutions simultaneously, she gained a passion for community and local food, and joined the board of the Alfred Farmers Market. Now President of the Board, Bull continues to stay involved in other local organizations by serving as president of Art for Rural America and on the board of Concerned Citizens of Allegany County, the Hornell Community Garden, and the Alfred Community Garden.

With a distinct passion for local food systems, Cassandra is involved in her region’s community projects and other rural sustainability initiatives. She has leveraged over $320,000 into Allegany County through her grant writing abilities, and continues to seek funding for community projects throughout her county. Bull is most determined to forge links between farms and institutions, and has been working with ten school districts in Allegany and Cattaraugus counties to facilitate increased levels local food purchasing. Bull brings her experience in art, agriculture, and grant writing to the table, all to help further the Cornell Cooperative Extension’s mission to promote a culture that nourishes healthy communities.
The From Carrots to Curriculum Advisory Board was assembled to represent the different organizations that are involved in the region’s food system. School administrators, cafeteria managers, farmers, county economic development representatives and nutrition educators will guide the implementation of a county-wide Farm to School initiative. Through this approach, long-term activities and interagency relationships will be formed with collaborations from multiple stakeholders that build the long-term capacity of communities to address the food-service/local food distribution issues within the local system. The board meets quarterly and members are individually contacted as needed.

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Over two decades ago, a grassroots movement emerged in California. This was in 1996, and within a year the National Farm to School Network was established. This small shift in the way schools function had been given a name, a mission, and a following. The network became a hub of resources for any person interested in learning about how Farm to School works, and how to integrate the philosophy within their institution. Now, in 2019, Farm to School practices have proliferated into 42,587 schools, engaged millions of students, and is even supported by legislation. Cornell Cooperative Extension’s research demonstrates a broad overview of this niche in Allegany County sustainable agriculture. Farm to School programs extend many facets of the larger socio economic, political, monetary, and curricular issues of American culture that have overarching benefits to areas supporting these programs.

There are three pillars of Farm to School:

- **CURRICULA:** Integrating garden based learning in the classroom
- **CAFETERIA:** Serving local food in school meals
- **COMMUNITY:** Working with farmers and other stakeholders in the community.
FARM TO SCHOOL: THE 30% NYS REIMBURSEMENT

In December 2018, The New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets in collaboration with the New York State Department of Education announced a new initiative to support local agriculture. This new initiative occurred in tandem, but in a large sense, unrelated to CCE-Allegany’s grant funded project. Nicknamed the “30% NYS Initiative”, an additional budget was created to support schools that purchase 30% of their lunch ingredients (measured in dollars) from New York State farms.

Schools that meet this new requirement will have their reimbursement increased from 5.9 to 25 cents (an additional 20.1 cents) per reimbursable lunch. This means, that for every student eating a lunch at their cafeteria, they would originally receive 5.9 cents from the state government, but now they would get 25 cents for their cafeteria. New York products purchased outside of a reimbursable lunch, either by teachers, for a la carte, or through catering, do not count towards the 30% threshold. Only items from New York State that are actually purchased count towards the 30%, and New York products procured by schools through other government programs like OGS or the Pilot Program do not count towards the 30%.

These ingredients can be raw agricultural products, such as broccoli or tomatoes, or processed products like juice and cheese. Any processed product, however, must be comprised of 51% ingredients (by weight or volume) of products grown in New York State. If a product, such as bread or pasta, is manufactured in New York State, but 51% of the wheat that goes into making the pasta is not actually grown in New York, this product does not count towards the reimbursement. NYSED has provided a Product Formulation Sheet document for these companies to fill out and sign regarding their processed product’s formulas.

All procurement regulations still apply to schools when purchasing local foods. The state provided a tool to help schools figure out what their 30% lunch purchasing threshold is. A school food association must exceed 30% NYS procurement for one school year before applying for reimbursement. Each year in July, the school food association applies for the reimbursement and the district superintendent signs documentation supporting the district’s claims. Schools are mandated to keep invoices and other tracking items on record for NYS Department of Education officials to audit as need be. The reimbursement will be processed in the summer and claimed each month the following year starting that September.
In the 2015 Farm to School Census, four schools in the county had either implemented or planned activities in the 2015-16 school year. These activities ranged from holding taste tests, conducting field trips to local farms and promoting local foods at the school in general. In 2013, the CCE-Allegany staff conducted a program linking producers and public school cafeteria staff in recognition of Harvest Week, in which Allegany, Cattaraugus and Chautauqua County schools were invited. The questionnaires completed at the program indicated that 90% of schools attending were interested in resources on how to use fresh produce and create healthy menus that their students will eat. When indicating what barriers existed to prevent them from using local foods in their school meals programs: 20% indicated a lack of skills; 60% indicated they were unsure how to purchase local foods; 30% indicated distribution/transportation concerns, a lack of time to prepare fresh foods and not enough money in the budget; 10% indicated lack of available coordination time, and restrictions from their food supplier.

Increasing the availability of fresh produce can play a significant role in improving health and decreasing the prevalence of diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and obesity. Including Farm to School concepts in school curricula provide unique ways to diversify math, reading and language arts.

The increase in local horticultural/specialty crops in the Allegany County public schools can enhance the overall health of the students and increase the awareness of healthier food choices. According to Illinois State University Assistant Professor of Agriculture Tina Waliczek, academic achievement, self-esteem, and social skills are frequently improved when the fruit and vegetable consumption in increased from 0.99 to 1.3 servings a day. Schools also frequently experience improved morale within the food service staff, and improved diet and lifestyle changes in teachers.

Increasing the amount of local foods in the county school system can boost producers available markets, expand product diversity and increase the income of farmers and producers by an average of 5%. Within the community, this type of program can increase employment opportunities through the multiplier of every job in school districts purchasing local foods, another 1.67 jobs are created. Additionally, every dollar invested in Farm to School activities, another $2.16 is generated through local economic activity.

Apart from the holistic elements of increasing Farm to School activities such as improved diversity of education in the cafeteria and supporting the local economy, the new 30% NYS initiative creates even more of an incentive for schools to purchase local. By quadrupling their reimbursement, schools can now afford more local food and employ additional staff hours to handle fresh, unprocessed products.