How We Started A Farm-To-Cafeteria Program and How You Can Start One, Too

OCTOBER | 2009
Introduction

This “How To” summarizes our recent success in establishing a sustainable Farm to Cafeteria effort. Its intent is to help you do the same. By sustainable, we mean an ongoing use of local farm products in local cafeterias without outside assistance, funding or guidance from a formal program.

After starting and several years growing our local Farm to Cafeteria effort, our core belief is that “doing it” is the key to success rather than laboring over developing a formal Farm to Cafeteria program. Our program began as above with a forward looking school foodservice director and a concerned mother with school children. However, in this “How To” we describe both the informal and formal approaches that we used.
Quick Summary of Our Findings

We found most barriers to getting local produce to local cafeterias are perceived rather than real; most barriers can be overcome with a little effort.
- Foodservice directors can usually buy local products without bidding, or special contracts.
- There are usually at least 2-3 farms in close proximity to each cafeteria that are able to deliver produce.
- Most cafeterias have the cooler capacity to store short-term supplies of fresh produce.
- Cafeterias are a good resource for farmers because they can often use large quantities of in-season produce.

Connecting farmers and Food Service Directors will increase the use of local produce.
- Farmers are good at growing, Food Service Directors are good at preparing food for hungry folks; both are extremely busy. A successful Farm to Cafeteria effort grooms this connection.

Raising awareness about Farm to Cafeteria efforts can increase participation.
- Repetition and multiple events of different types are important.

Because all the children, senior citizens, infirm, and others using cafeterias have concerned loved ones, there are endless opportunities to create community support and make Farm to Cafeteria a local, grass-roots success.

Quick Summary of an Informal Farm to Cafeteria Effort

- Find a Food Service Director who is interested in local food.
- Find a farmer who can provide produce for that cafeteria.
- Help the Food Service Director make the purchase from that farmer.
- Serve the produce and identify where it came from.
- Keep repeating and expanding the process each week.
- Identify the positive feedback and use it to grow the project and recruit others that are interested in helping.

Farm to Cafeteria only takes a few interested people to start. There are so many positive benefits that recruiting and continuing the program is relatively easy.

Realize That

- There are virtually no barriers to getting some local produce in local cafeterias.
- Most barriers are perceived and can be worked around.

Farm to Cafeteria is a lot about breaking old buying habits and expanding what some cafeterias are already doing or thinking about.
- Recruiting people is easy since so many people have a vested interested in getting healthy, local produce into local cafeterias for their children or loved ones.
Establishing A Formal Farm To Cafeteria Program

The following describes a more detailed approach that worked for us. None of the steps described should be perceived as a barrier. A key to success is to create a core group to keep the Farm to Cafeteria energy moving ahead.

The Beginning
✦ Identify several interested, vested people. Include at least one food service director, a farmer, or a concerned or interested parent.
✦ Construct a list of local players. Food service directors from schools, nursing homes, colleges, hospitals, jails, and other local cafeterias. With a little effort this usually becomes a substantial list.
✦ Locate your local farmers. Be sure to include large farms and small burgeoning growers.

Farmers markets are a good place to start.

Enlist additional support from Cooperative Extension specialists, parents of school age children or other partners. Your local Cooperative Extension office may already have lists of food service directors and farmers well documented.

✦ Name the effort and create a logo.

Bringing Folks Together – Host An Event
✦ Invite farmers, food service directors and cafeteria managers, local politicians, and other interested parties. Invite a media source. Use the logo and name for invitations and launching the effort.
✦ We used a catered breakfast/brunch featuring local produce to identify interested farmers and food service directors.

Have interested parties give brief, pointed presentations.
✦ Obtain follow-up information from participants and use for initial interviews and to identify interested parties who are ready and willing to buy/sell.

Start Communications and Fact Finding
✦ We surveyed and interviewed local schools and institutions and farmers using the surveys located in Cornell’s Farm to School in the Northeast Toolkit.
✦ The interview and survey also was used as a tool to create awareness about our efforts.
✦ Summarize What You Found using the survey results and interviews.
   Get the word out with using media outlets and PTA newsletters, presentations and the like.
✦ Create a list of contact info for all farmers and cafeterias that are willing to participate, and distribute to the group so they can make contacts.

Keep the Momentum Going
✦ Continue interviews and identifying interested parties.
✦ Plan another Farm to Cafeteria event.
   We used farm tours and a lunch event with local farm products and logo giveaways such as pot holders and mugs.
   Report results of the interviews and your research.

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Highlight local produce availability with targeted events at different times of year. We used fruits and berry events and deliveries to local cafeterias in the spring – strawberries and blueberries. We also used a fall farm tour and luncheon to stimulate deliveries in the fall.

Continue to communicate this information with food service directors. Monitor the institutions’ local purchasing to track progress. We gave the farmers and the institutions a simple MS Excel spreadsheet to track their local foods sales/purchases on a monthly basis and then summarized the data monthly.

Stay in contact with farmers and food service directors via email highlighting success. Send seasonal emails with produce availability lists and farmer contacts.

Keep farmer/produce availability updated on a webpage on your local Cooperative Extension website.

Apply For Grants and Outside Support

Granting opportunities seem to abound for Farm to Cafeteria.

We used a local grant for Farm to Cafeteria promotional items and to fund events.

Identify philanthropic support from the local community may be available to promote Farm to Cafeteria. The idea is so strong it sells itself. Many people are willing to support even if they do not have children or use cafeterias.

Work with Cafeterias and Farmers

Engage cafeterias through focus events. Have a local produce day at a cafeteria. This is a good time to have several parents and students involved. We did this successfully for several years at a local school.

Set up a “Fresh Bar” featuring local produce. This became an established feature at one local school.

Make a concerted effort to get produce with high desirability into cafeterias. A local table grape farmer was a huge hit at a local school. Make and foster these connections to help promote the effort. One event with blueberries at a local hospital was a great success.

Finding New Ways to Promote Local Produce

Contact more local university and college institutional cafeterias to expand participation—students have great energy and interest.

Table at various events/conferences.

Coordinate a Spring Harvest Day at end of school year. Highlight local, seasonal produce – strawberries and dairy. Find more farms growing strawberries. Provide posters, fliers, “vouchers” for strawberry purchase. Request feedback on the event.

Try to generate publicity.

Coordinate an Autumn Harvest Day.

Contact more cafeterias and farms. Attend farmers markets to meet more farmers.

Provide information for all produce availability by season in the area.

Provide thank-you gifts to participating institutions – local product gift bags.

Assist cafeterias in obtaining all produce for Harvest Meals.

Create a buzz among food service directors. Circulate success stories/anecdotes.

Speak to parent organizations, teachers, etc.

Put out a press release/article/advertisement.

Keep Innovating

We are looking at preserving local foods to extend the harvest.

Any ideas to keep the Farm to Cafeteria effort going should be considered.

Based on the work of the Finger Lakes Farm to Cafeteria Program Effort a partnership of the not-for-profit organization Seeking Common Ground and the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ontario County. This effort is funded through a NESARE grant, a F.F. Thompson Community Health Grant, and a contribution from John and Jo Ingle. Local farmers and foodservice directors: Chris Luley Happy, Goat Farm; Mindy Kinear, Rosecrest Farm; and Todd Fowler, Bloomfield Central Schools Food Service Director.