

# Next Steps: Creating a Sustainable Farm to School Program

## Final Report for CS12-089

Project Type: Sustainable Community Innovation

Funds awarded in 2012: \$10,000.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2013

Region: Southern

State: Arkansas

Principal Investigator:

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Fayetteville Public Schools

## Project Information

### Abstract:

Fayetteville Public Schools and the University of Arkansas continue to work in partnership developing a successful Farm to School (F2S) program in Fayetteville, Arkansas, in coordination with Apple Seeds, Inc. and the Fayetteville Farmers' Market. With support from a 2012 SARE grant, Fayetteville Public Schools was able to run a pilot summer program that included identifying and working with local producers, procuring over 2,000 lbs. of local meat and produce (over \$2000) for a summer lunch program, providing educational programming, and community outreach. The continuation of the program included expanding F2S procurement; identifying additional producers and providing training; providing a relevant educational program for elementary and middle school students; and identifying challenges and solutions for establishing a farm to school program in Northwest Arkansas. Community outreach occurred through a community lunch, newspaper articles, partner newsletters, websites, and social media sites.

## Introduction

The purpose of this project was to continue developing a model Farm to School (F2S) program for Northwest Arkansas at Fayetteville Public Schools in collaboration with the University of Arkansas, Apple Seeds, Inc., Fayetteville Farmers' Market, and other community partners. This program leverages local resources and previous experience to develop a model program for other schools in the region and state. The program expanded upon previous work to identify and support additional local growers to produce fruits, vegetables, and meat to incorporate in school menus on a regular basis. The program also built upon previous experience demonstrating the need for an integrated and relevant educational program for students to understand the importance of supporting local economies and making healthy food choices.

The F2S program helps address market diversification and thus increased production potential and economic sustainability for local producers. The majority of farms in NWA are small, primarily from 1-5 acres in size with a few larger scale

growers with 10 or more acres in production (Garcia and Friedrich, 2008 unpublished survey). Farmers depend primarily on selling their products at farmers' markets. There are a limited number of restaurants and grocery stores that currently purchase from local growers and institutional markets have not been developed. Growers are challenged in their production and marketing system by relying entirely on direct-to-consumer or farmers market sales, which can be prone to interruption by weather or other community events that may interfere with sales. Production is constrained because of lack of markets, and ability to expand is limited. The F2S purchasing program provides an economic base of sales and income, and it allows growers to expand operation due to the quantity of product being purchased. Five of the six growers who participated in the summer program have expressed interest in continuing a relationship with the school district as an additional outlet for their products.

The F2S program also addresses child nutrition and agricultural education. Previous experience in the district has shown students are more likely to eat nutritious lunches sourced from local ingredients when a relevant educational component is also included. Educational lunches featuring guest farmers and intentional programming to highlight the benefits of purchasing locally encourage greater participation and excitement among students and staff. While Northwest Arkansas is still a fairly agricultural region, a large number of students in the school district have never visited a farm or met the farmer who grows their food. By providing this experience through farmer visits to schools and student visits to farms, the F2S program encourages healthier eating while also promoting agriculture as a viable and attractive future profession.

The F2S program provides additional opportunities for food service staff training in the district to ensure staff have the skills and knowledge to prepare whole, unprocessed foods. Training includes menu development and review of skills to ensure safe and efficient produce processing. During the summer pilot program, new opportunities for food preservation including pickling, dehydrating, and freezing were identified. Minimal produce was processed and preserved during the pilot summer program in 2012. Summer 2013 provided the opportunity to pilot new food preservation projects and begin establishing best practices for the program.

Farmers participating in the F2S program also receive horticultural and economic training relevant to F2S production. Growers who previously participated in the F2S program received training on good agricultural practices, food safety in production and handling, and business planning. Increased training opportunities for producers included farm tours, marketing guidance, and a full-day workshop on business planning and record keeping. Fayetteville is home to numerous sustainable agriculture resources including the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group main office and the Southeast regional office of the National Center for Appropriate Technology. The F2S program helps connect local growers with these valuable resources by organizing training sessions and guided farm visits.

Previous Farm to School work provided valuable lessons to inform expansion of the program during the academic year. Lessons are shared with local school districts and the state Farm to School coordinators. Arkansas is seeing an increased interest in Farm to School programming, and Fayetteville is positioned well to continue work in this field with many community partners to create a model and spread lessons learned to encourage greater participation statewide.

#### Project Objectives:

1. Expand F2S procurement during the academic year by: incorporating local produce on salad bars at two schools and hosting educational local lunches at all

elementary and middle schools; identifying more potential growers; providing grower trainings to focus on desired products and business practices; providing training and resources to cafeteria staff district wide to prepare for future expansion of local purchasing (trainings and equipment) and processing.

2. Provide a relevant educational program for all elementary and middle school students through educational lunches featuring local producers and guest appearances by local farmers as well as two farm field trips.

3. Identify challenges and solutions associated with establishing a farm to school program in Northwest Arkansas.

## Cooperators

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## Research

### Materials and methods:

Objective 1: Expand F2S procurement during the academic year by: incorporating local produce on salad bars at two schools and hosting educational local lunches at all elementary and middle schools; identifying more potential growers; providing grower trainings to focus on desired products and business practices; providing training and resources to cafeteria staff district wide to prepare for future expansion of local purchasing (trainings and equipment) and processing.

Farm to School programming during the summer 2012 lunch program provided valuable lessons for increasing local procurement and integration into the academic year. During fall 2012, the district began incorporating local produce on salad bars at two schools in the district. Salad bar items are more flexible than hot menu items during the year and provided a good opportunity to start incorporating local produce on a small scale and to identify and address potential obstacles to further expansion of the program. The program was further expanded to a total of 4 schools (3 middle schools and the high school) in spring 2013 and fall 2013. In fall 2013, local apples and butternut squash were also purchased for use across the district.

FPS continues to develop a procurement process that works effectively for the district and growers. Project partners from the school district coordinate with growers in advance to identify locally produced crops that meet the district needs. Ordering procedures, scheduling, and product delivery were revised and formalized in spring 2013 and continue to develop to increase efficiency, based on feedback from participating farmers and FPS staff. In fall 2013, procedure was changed to allow local producers to deliver product to the warehouse instead of individual

schools in an effort to reduce the travel time for local growers and accommodate their needs.

The district has primarily worked with 5 local producers that became partner producers in summer 2012. Additional producers have sold to the district for special events and projects. The district continually works to identify other interested growers with the capacity to meet demand. Fayetteville Farmers Market and University of Arkansas Horticulture Department assist with grower identification. The UA is also a resource for farmers and organized training for partner producers. During spring 2013, a representative from the horticulture department visited each partner producer farm to learn more about training needs and take pictures of the farmers for promotional purposes. UA organized farm field trips in fall 2013 to provide an opportunity for networking between producers and information sharing. These farm visits were very well received by F2S growers, who enjoyed the opportunity to see each other's operations and learn from other farmers' practices. The University also provided marketing guidance and logo development for partner producers in fall 2013 by utilizing the services of the Agricultural Communications Department. The F2S growers were able to work with an employed student in Agricultural Communications to design a farm logo and business cards that they will be able to use for promotion at the Farmers' Market and will be used to recognize the farmers in the schools.

Food service staff received minimal training during the granting period due to unforeseeable changes in food service leadership. The emphasis became a pilot food preservation project that will later be integrated into work flows in the kitchen and include a staff training component.

Objective 2: Provide a relevant educational program for all elementary and middle school students through educational lunches featuring local producers and guest appearances by local farmers as well as two farm field trips.

Educational lunches were organized and hosted at each elementary and middle school during the spring 2013 semester. Similar lunches have been successfully hosted in the past at all elementary schools. Each lunch featured a menu of locally sourced produce and meat. Prior to the lunches, Apple Seeds, Inc., organized a school wide assembly to provide education about the benefits of local foods and increase excitement about the meal. Farmers were invited to attend the lunches to meet students and talk about their farms. The connection between students and farmers increased student excitement and helped make important community connections to encourage local purchasing outside of the school lunches.

Apple Seeds, Inc., also worked with the Boys and Girls Club and local producers to organize field trips to farms during summer 2013. The field trips allowed students to see where food on the salad bar comes from while also learning about sustainable agriculture and healthy foods. These experiential learning activities helped students understand the benefits of eating local produce and encourage healthy food choices in the future.

Objective 3: Identify challenges and solutions associated with establishing a farm to school program in Northwest Arkansas.

Several challenges to the F2S program including identifying growers, coordinating ordering and deliveries, and identifying crops that fit into planned meals have been identified. The program continues to address these challenges through creative solutions - such as initially purchasing for salad bars instead of hot meals where there is less flexibility for incorporating local products. The school district continues to meet with growers and community partners to assess progress and share results with the state and regional Farm to School network contacts.

## Research results and discussion:

- FPS continued to purchase product from 5 local producers for the summer 2013 lunch program and throughout the academic year
- Local produce was purchased for salad bars at 4 schools during the academic year
- Local beef, apples, and butternut squash were purchased for district-wide incorporation in Fall 2014
- Local food purchases totaled over \$19,000 for the 2012/13 academic year
- Procurement processes and procedures have been refined and documented to reflect changes that are more conducive to both the school district food service program and local producers
- All 5 partner producers received training on good agricultural practices, food safety, business planning, record keeping, production planning, and marketing.
- Four partner producers were provided with farm logos and business cards to assist with promotion and marketing
- Farm visits were facilitated on 2 partner farms with 4F2S producers in attendance, which allowed an opportunity for networking and peer-to-peer education
- Over 4,500 students participated in Farm to School educational lunches and programming during the spring 2013 semester and fall 2013 semester
- 118 students attended farm field trips organized by Apple Seeds, Inc. during summer 2013
- 112 students attended healthy snack classes organized by Apple Seeds, Inc., that utilized local product and encouraged healthy eating skills during summer 2013

## Participation Summary

## Educational & Outreach Activities

### **PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:**

#### Education/outreach description:

FPS hosted a Seed to Student Community Lunch in October 2013 to share progress of the Farm to School program, introduce new staff members, and discuss future goals of the program. Over 60 community members and partners attended the lunch, which also highlighted product from local partner producers.

Fayetteville Public Schools created the following video about the Farm to School Program - All of the community organizations involved in this project are represented in the video: <https://webapps.fayar.net/fps/FPSVideos.jsp?file=FarmtoSchoolVideo.mp4>

The video was shared at the Arkansas state child nutrition directors' conference in summer 2013 where all Arkansas school districts were represented. FPS staff also shared a brief presentation during the conference.

The video was also shared at an event at the Shiloh Historical museum in summer 2013, as well as the Seed to Student lunch, a farmer workshop in Jan. 2014, and as part of a presentation on Farm to School marketing at the Southern SAWG conference in Jan. 2014.

The video was also featured on a USDA Blog post in November 2013:  
<http://blogs.usda.gov/2013/10/28/farm-to-school-programs-come-to-life-on-video/>

A poster was displayed at the SSAWG annual conference, January 2013.  
<http://ssawg.org/poster-abstracts-2013-conferen>

A poster was displayed at the American Society of Horticultural Sciences, July 2013, <http://ashs.confex.com/ashs/2013/webprogram/Paper15808.html>

A poster will be displayed at the Farm to Cafeteria Conference, April 2014

The Seed to Student program has a new webpage on the FPS site:  
[http://district.fayar.net/pages/Fayetteville\\_SD/Departments\\_Programs/Sustainability/Seed\\_to\\_Student](http://district.fayar.net/pages/Fayetteville_SD/Departments_Programs/Sustainability/Seed_to_Student)

## Project Outcomes

### Success stories:

The initial project laid the framework for a USDA Farm to School Implementation grant and continued growth. Fayetteville has become a model for other school districts in the state and region. The Farm to School video has been shared extensively and even featured on a USDA national blog. Surrounding districts have expressed interest in beginning Farm to School programs and learning more about local procurement. With the support of these grants we have been able to pilot some innovative ideas and share results and recommendations with other school districts.



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