

CNE09-061: Recipes for success: Empowering farmers, leveraging resources, building community 2010 Final Report

Summary

The Recipes for Success project succeeded in bringing together key partners to explore the potential for increasing the amount of local foods procured, processed and served by Portland Public Schools, the largest school district in the state of Maine with 17 schools and 7,071 students. With a core advisory group that included the school district's Nutrition Services Director, the local Cooperative Extension office, our Healthy Maine Partnership (public health entity) a cooperative teaching and catering kitchen and Cultivating Community staff, we were able to explore innovative solutions to existing challenges that face school food service (SFS) programs and personnel throughout Maine. During the course of our NESARE grant, we created new linkages between five local farmers and the Portland Nutrition Services program. We also increased knowledge and capacity for SFS staff within the Portland Public School's school nutrition program to work with local, fresh foods in season (during the summer) and published case studies for four main products: rhubarb, strawberries, zucchini and carrots. We also involved 24 youth in the growing and preparation of these foods through Cultivating Community's summer Youth Growers program as well as approximately 800 Portland Schools students through multiple school garden partnerships, forging a cadre of students passionate about seeing these changes continue in their school cafeteria. In the fall, we evaluated overall student responses to recipes that incorporated these produce items, and also conducted a multi-district case study that surveyed SFS programs in a total of five school districts, highlighting other challenges and opportunities to increase local foods in schools. Finally, we constructed a web-based Recipes for Success toolkit, with input from school nutrition directors from four advisory schools, which is free and available to any SFS program, which documents the work we accomplished and provides numerous Maine-specific resources for other schools looking to make similar strides forward in local food utilization. (See: <http://recipesforsuccessmaine.wikispaces.com/>)

Introduction

Following is the project introduction submitted with the original application: Recipes for Success: Empowering Farmers, Leveraging Resources, Building Community, creates a framework for sustainable collaboration in communities throughout the northeast. Building upon the already existing resources of school kitchens, farmers will be able to increase revenue through value added products, schools will be able to defray the cost of adding healthful local foods to their menus and job training will help to create future farmers and food business entrepreneurs.

School kitchens are an underutilized community resource. Well equipped and certified for commercial food production, they sit idle during most of the growing season and during many hours during the rest of the year. This despite the fact that 1) producers cite lack of access to processing facilities as a key barrier to selling to institutional buyers and to selling outside the growing season and 2) schools themselves tend to require a more processed product than what leaves the farm.

As part of Recipes for Success: Empowering Farmers, Leveraging Resources, Building Community, long-time collaborator and Portland Food Service Director Ron Adams has agreed to pilot a program in which school food service directors are trained in allowing underutilized school kitchens to become shared use kitchens. Growers and food entrepreneurs would gain access to the space to preserve food or create value-added or processed foods. Schools could utilize revenue from kitchen rentals to support the purchase of local foods.

Along with kitchen access, farmers would have access to trainings in recipe development, preserving, and other important product development know-how through project partners University of Maine Cooperative Extension, the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA), First Course, and Local Sprouts.

Importantly, this project builds on extensive research and networking already conducted by several of the project partners, most especially MOFGA and PROP. These partners have already brought together producers and SFS professionals to assess barriers and to identify the products most easily packaged in a form accessible to school food services. This information—published as “The MOFGA 20”—identifies for producers those products with demonstrated demand.

To meet the immediate needs of schools wanting pre-processed local foods, and to prepare for a second season when farmers will be ready to increase production on their value added products, Cultivating Community will incorporate a youth job skills training program at the pilot kitchens. Youth will receive culinary training creating even greater potential for economic opportunities and future businesses.

Objectives/Performance Targets

Farmers will be surveyed to see how well Recipes for Success met their needs for creating value added products, including training opportunities, availability of equipment, kitchen scheduling, and support by youth workers if applicable. They will also be asked to report on additional revenue gained from value added products and plans for the following season.

Schools will be asked to report on revenue generated from kitchen rentals, percentage increase of local foods in school menu and any increased sales of school lunches.

Input will also be solicited from community members on how the project has affected local foods availability and the food economy.

Any youth workers will be surveyed about their work experience and the influence it has had on their view of the Maine food system.

All feedback will be analyzed for trends, and incorporated into the toolkit in the form of recommendations, guidelines and case studies.

Methods

Need/Problem	Method	Partner/Time Frame	Successes/Challenges
Access to markets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Networking opportunities among growers and food service staff. ▪ Outreach and information support around available foods 	Cultivating Community, MOFGA. Spring 2009	Facilitating personal connections between farmers and SFS personnel has emerged as a key component of success and pivotal for overcoming other barriers. Creating regular opportunities for SFS and farmers to meet leads to good outcomes.
Reconciling desire for year-round product with seasonal availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Summer processing and preservation of harvest for farmers and food entrepreneurs 	Portland School Department, Cooperative Extension, Local Sprouts, Cultivating Community. Summer 2009	The most successful strategy was freezing and storing product. Adequate freezer space is a challenge for some districts, and farms seem disinclined to add freezer capacity themselves.
Increased availability and consumption of high-quality, local foods for school populations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Facilitated sales of preserved/processed foods to schools ▪ Support for school garden and farm-to-school initiatives that support food literacy and drive local food demand 	Cultivating Community, MOFGA, Portland School Department. Fall 2009/Spring 2010.	The methods were successful in driving demand and consumption and in overcoming objections from SFS personnel. With school budgets permanently stressed, “facilitation” is unlikely to take the form of subsidies. But driving demand is welcomed by SFS directors who want to add local foods and must respond to the demands of their communities.
Higher costs for locally sourced foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Technical assistance for adding revenue stream for food service departments through kitchen rentals and workshop offerings 	Portland School Department, Cultivating Community. Toolkit available Winter 2010.	More successful than adding revenue streams were good models helping SFS see that “baby steps”—e.g., adding one or two local items per week—does not have to have major cost impacts. And that if SFS directors can stress other victories—e.g., higher acceptance rates, ease in meeting nutrition targets—they can justify slightly higher expenses if they occur.
Food-based economic opportunities for small- and medium-scale producers and for youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Microenterprise training. ▪ Linkages with MOFGA’s “Maine’s 20” project to identify best business opportunities 	Cultivating Community, MOFGA, Local Sprouts, Portland School Department. Toolkit available Winter 2010.	This part of the project got hung up on overcoming liability issues. As the project wound down we did get key questions answered and developed workable models. Piloting these is an opportunity for further study.
Skilled labor force and local-savvy consumer base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Culinary workshops and food literacy offerings for youth and community members 	Cultivating Community, Local Sprouts. Ongoing	Youth culinary programs and school gardens increased job skills as well as desire for and acceptance of local foods.
Dissemination of results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Production of digital toolkit. (CD and online) ▪ Workshop for farmers and school food service personnel 	Spring 2010	Results are primarily available through the web wiki, an inexpensive and convenient way to share the information. Conference presentations and paper and electronic reminders are critical for driving traffic to the wiki.

Outcomes and Impacts

The Recipes for Success project has certainly drawn representatives from some key organizations who have the ability to bring on-going resources to the work of supporting institutional food service programs in making connections with local producers and building capacity to purchase and process food when it's in season, abundant and more affordable. Since this project began, one of our partners, PROP, applied for and received a major grant that allowed them to establish positions that are dedicated to helping connect schools with local food producers. They are also able to provide more general assistance around nutrition, and are a strong champion for school gardens and other supportive farm to school efforts.

The knowledge and capacity building within Portland Public School's central kitchen has only served to increase their interest in working with more local foods, and trying to process and store them in-house. This is knowledge that can be built upon, and is very likely to continue.

We were unable to measure many of the promised results because actually testing the use of school kitchens as community kitchens never came to pass. Therefore, some of the chief indicators we promised--including surveying farmers, tracking income for schools, and evaluating any increase in the availability of local foods--we cannot deliver because the kitchens did not become available during the grant period. Instead, what we discovered was that schools--particularly those charged with managing risks for school systems--needed models for how they could open their doors to use by those not employed by the school system. Helping Portland Schools research and develop those tools became our focus, and sample documents are included in the tool kit.

Accomplishments

During the July-September timeframe, Portland Public Schools Food Services (PPSFS) program worked to process and preserve four seasonal crops: rhubarb, strawberries, zucchini and carrots. (Note: Originally we planned to process tomatoes, but the widespread blight reduced availability, so we chose rhubarb in its place which ended up being a great early season crop to work with). Some of these products were served at the beginning of the school year, and the rest were utilized throughout the year. Over the course of these months, PPSFS staff documented each processing session, noting improvements for future sessions and tracking labor time. Improvements in efficiency were made along the way, to increase the cost effectiveness of each session. Perhaps the most remarkable success is the increased nutritional quality achieved in the strawberry processing segment of this project, where the sugar content was decreased by more than 50% compared to the frozen strawberry-products that are generally available to the school for purchase.

Cultivating Community's Summer Youth Growers were engaged in the growing, harvesting and processing of rhubarb and zucchini, receiving training and supervision in the kitchen from Ron Adams and Local Sprouts Cooperative. This was a notable success, as the youth enjoyed seeing the food go from soil to freezer.

Interest in local food--fueled in part by the Recipes for Success project--resulted in collaborations by Cultivating Community with eight area schools to create on-site school gardens. For those schools that are Portland Public Schools--including East End Community School, Presumpscot School, and Longfellow School--Portland Nutrition Director and project collaborator Ron Adams, eagerly incorporated garden produce into school lunches. This has continued beyond the grant calendar.

Along with the kitchen-based activities of the Recipes for Success project, we also took the time to build a "dashboard" for the project that engaged participating schools and other stakeholders in the assembly of the current Recipes for Success toolkit. As a result, time was spent meeting with prospective school food service directors and their local Healthy Maine Partnership directors, meeting and interviewing various RFS partners, gathering additional information for the dashboard - the RFS Wiki, and building the actual

RFS Wiki site, which shares the lessons learned from the RFS project itself and links to many resources that will support other schools that would like to increase local foods procurement, processing and use. One such resource is the Cumberland County Local Foods Resource Directory, which exists as a multi-page document that is updated annually. Through the process of updating it for the RFS Wiki, we began discussions with the Eat Local Foods Coalition (ELFC) of Maine aimed at exploring the capability for their Maine Food Map, which is an exciting tool that is helping consumers and producers connect all over the state, to include a search function so producers can designate their interest in selling wholesale to schools and institutions, and institutional buyers can easily find those in their region who are willing to do so. ELFC is in the process of re-conceptualizing this map and looking for ways to improve the technological platform so that it may provide this type of function in the future on a statewide scale, and be readily accessible to Food Service Directors throughout the state.

Contributions

We see the contributions of this project being 1) providing templates to establish critical farmer/SFS personnel connections; 2) providing model recipes for using seasonal and stored produce; 3) modeling activities that increase demand for local produce and increase the culinary skill of the SFS workforce; 4) providing model agreements and coverages to facilitate the use of school kitchens as community kitchens.

Publications/Outreach

The Recipes for Success Toolkit is available at recipesforsuccessmaine.wikispaces.com.

The Recipes for Success project was presented at the Maine School Food Service Association's annual conference in Bethel and the statewide online food services survey at the Maine College Dining Services Summit at St. Joseph's College in Standish, ME in early August 2009. On August 7, 2009 Craig Lapine presented information about the RFS program and promoted the statewide online food services survey at the Connecting Classrooms to Cafeteria conference in Gorham. It was also presented at the Agricultural Trades Show in January 2010 and per invitation, presented to the regional Food Security Group at USM's Muskie School of Public Service. In April 2010, RFS and the toolkit were presented at the National Farm to School Conference, Taking Root, in April 2010, and in November 2010 it was presented at the Maine Organic Farmer's and Gardeners Association's Farmer to Farmer conference in Lincolnville, ME during a Farm to School Panel featuring food service directors, farm to school coordinators and others.

Recommendations

As noted in the materials and methods grid, delving into the economic impact of transforming school kitchens into community kitchens got delayed by liability concerns from school departments. Therefore, instead of investigating the economic impact we focused our efforts on developing models and tools that addressed those liability concerns. Those models and tools are available through the wiki, and we will continue to update that section. However, we believe it remains useful for someone to see if—once kitchen use agreements are executed—there can be a positive economic impact for farms, school departments, or both.

We feel there is more potential for developing sample recipes for fruit and vegetable processing.

There is a growing interest in our community in "Boat to School" programs that incorporate fisheries into the local foods conversation. This may be outside SARE's purview, but we are interested in exploring all aspects of a sustainable food shed and food system.

Finally we're curious about the impact of buyer cooperatives and the question of whether there is a way to form simultaneously institutional buyer coops and producer coops, so scale and mechanism for delivery develop in synch.