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It Takes a Team for Farm to School

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It takes a team to implement a robust Farm to School program. That is the overarching message from the three-state 2011 Farm to School Extension Conference that was held in Asheville, NC, on August 25. Organized by Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) with funding from the USDA SARE/Professional Development Program, the conference focused on ways that Cooperative Extension Service personnel can fulfill their mandates through participation in Farm to School programs.

“Farm to School means more than putting local food into the school cafeteria serving line,” said Emily Jackson, ASAP Director of *Growing Minds Program*. “The kids need to actually eat it.”



Changing the way that kids think about and interact with food is a big part of Farm to School. “We need to get the teachers involved. Use teaching gardens at schools, incorporate garden lessons in the classroom, give kids a cooking experience, and make class trips to local farms,” says Jackson.

For Extension personnel, working in a multi-faceted program like Farm to School requires teamwork across disciplines and across job descriptions. “You may need to form partnerships with other agencies, and perhaps with other people in your own office,” cautioned John O’Sullivan, Sustainable Agriculture Coordinator at North Carolina A&T University.



Simply organizing the conference was an exercise in teamwork according to Molly Nicholie, Program Coordinator with ASAP. “Pulling this conference together was very much a collaborative effort across three states,” said Nicholie, “with folks from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia all contributing to the process. Seeing it all come together was great.”

Workshops during the conference covered a wide variety of issues, primarily by sharing success stories from around the three-state region. Topics included how school nutrition programs and school food budgets work; models for procuring food from local farmers; starting a teaching garden, and pulling in community support to help maintain it; designing classroom lessons that meet state education standard and use food and a garden as teaching aides; and



planning safe and educational field trips to farms.

Addressing poor nutrition and childhood obesity are driving increased interest in putting more fresh, locally grown food into the school lunchrooms, but children's health is not the only factor that must be addressed. "A health benefit to children gets the most attention when people look at Farm to School programs, and it is very important. But we must not forget the health of the farms. If local farmers go out of business we won't have any fresh, locally grown food," said Jackson.

The 2011 Farm to School Extension Conference was attended by about 100 people. Most participants were from the three target states, but a few individuals from Florida and Mississippi Extension Services also attended. The National Farm to School Network and Southern SAWG contributed national and regional perspectives to the development and implementation of this project.

"We often find that Cooperative Extension agents and others in the communities are working in these very areas already, but the pieces are kept separate because they involve such different disciplines," says Molly Nicholie. "Farm to School provides a framework to pull these issues and these people – farmers, parents, and educators – together with a focus on the food system for the kids."

It takes a team.