



FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAM EVALUATION:

Union 74 School District, ME (now AOS #93)

Schools: 5 elementary, 1 private secondary

INTRODUCTION:

Focus on Agriculture in Rural Maine Schools (FARMS) is a Farm to School program that connects classrooms, cafeterias, local farms, and communities. FARMS' primary strategy is to increase access to fresh, local food in schools through direct purchase from local farmers. Initiated by a parent and a staffer from the Lincoln County Economic Development office, the Farm to School program at FARMS began in one Union 74 district school and included classroom taste tests and a Harvest Day Lunch. The program expanded to include additional schools, more regular activities, and the direct purchase of foods from local farmers by individual schools.

EVALUATION FOCUS:

- Grassroots processes involved in initiating, supporting, and implementing the FARMS program during its early development
- FARMS' early impact on farmers, school food service, students, and the community

DESIGN:

FARMS was four years into its development and programming when this evaluation of its Farm to School project began [2008-09]. All 1,576 K-8 students have access to FARMS, which includes direct purchase of local foods for use in cafeterias, classroom taste tests, and Harvest Day lunch. Key informant interviews were used to retrospectively document the development of FARMS.

OUTCOMES:

Factors characterizing FARMS early growth and development:

- Commitment to open and inclusive participation
- Contributions of different skills by stakeholders who pursued varied but compatible outcomes
- Early and ongoing support of school district decision makers
- Early and ongoing funding, including support from the county economic development office
- Attention to the needs of all stakeholders, particularly school food service
- Small first steps in implementation that expanded as skills and resources increased.

Highlights of FARMS success in Union 74:

- FARMS now reaches all Union 74 students, providing access to locally grown foods in school cafeterias.
- More scratch cooking in kitchens; school food service recognized and proud of their jobs.
- Increase in school meal participation (both students and teachers, as indicated through interviews).

Other successes:

- State and national recognition for FARMS, influencing Farm to School policies in Maine. FARMS co-directors have become spokespeople for FARMS and the Farm to School movement at state, regional and eventually national levels.

LESSONS:

Although the impetus for FARMS did not come from school food service, recognition of their pivotal role as potential promoter and supporter or naysayer was critical to FARMS success. Throughout the account of FARMS' history, a common theme is the necessity of including school food service in discussions and the decision-making process. Attention was given to making early participation by school food service convenient and inexpensive and also to the value and importance of the role of the school food service in the community.

FARMS started small, e.g., with four taste tests and a Harvest Lunch in one school, and built on those successful events by expanding and seeking funding for additional events. FARMS developers recognized the importance of having start-up funds, as it allowed the school food service staff most affected by the program to participate initially at no cost. Securing endorsements from stakeholders with decision-making power in the schools (i.e. superintendent, principals, and school board members) and from other influential people in the community was a key strategy in the development process.

“ I DON'T HAVE TO GIVE AS MUCH ATTENTION TO THESE FARMS AND LOCAL FOODS AS I DID BEFORE BECAUSE THE KEY PEOPLE, THE FOOD SERVICE PEOPLE AND THE PARENTS, THEY ARE INVOLVED. THEY KNOW WHAT THEY WANT. THEY ARE WORKING TOGETHER. YES, WE ARE DOING THIS, AND IT'S IMPORTANT. —SCHOOL HEALTH COORDINATOR ”

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Logic Model

