

Focus on Agriculture in Rural Maine Schools (FARMS): A Farm-to-School Project  
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### **Mission:**

Focus on Agriculture in Rural Maine Schools (FARMS) connects classrooms, cafeterias, local farms, and communities. Our mission is 1) to educate students about good nutrition and the role of local farms in promoting healthy, sustainable communities and 2) to promote and facilitate farm-to-institution purchasing. We are dedicated to food security and to rebuilding a healthy food system.

### **Purpose/Rationale:**

- Improve educational performance/academic achievement, reduce discipline and emotional problems; meet schools' goals of producing healthy, productive citizens—healthy eating habits and physical activity patterns are critical.
- Buying food locally, to be prepared and served fresh, helps local farmers, which creates jobs and preserves working farms and productive farmland. Farmland preservation promotes community food security. Schools represent a reliable, steady demand for produce that farmers can plan for. Buying locally reduces transportation costs, packaging (up to 50% of school food service costs), fossil fuel use, and exhaust emissions due to long distance shipping.
- National health crisis, largely due to diet-related illnesses (obesity, type II diabetes, cardiovascular, malnutrition) and sedentary lifestyle (physical inactivity)
  - Child overweight and obesity have doubled in last 20 years due to:
    - Switch to corn sweeteners in the 1980s, larger portions (supersize), increased marketing of soft drinks and sweetened snack foods (Lewis and Moore 2006; Pollan 2002)
    - Recent research (Schanzenbach in Lewis and Moore 2006) establishes a causal relationship between school lunch and child overweight and obesity.

### **Goals:**

Like Vermont's FEED (Food Education Every Day), Berkeley's Edible Schoolyard School Lunch Initiative, Wisconsin's Homegrown Lunch Project, Washington Youth Harvest, and other successful, innovative Farm2School models, FARMS' goals are to:

- Improve direct marketing opportunities for locally produced foods and improve the diets and eating habits of school aged children through the development of local purchasing patterns/contracts;

- Increase students' knowledge of sustainable farming systems through development and testing of a replicable, integrated farm and food curriculum that meets the Maine Learning Standards.
- Create nutritious school meals that are delicious, appealing, and attractive to students.
- Increase student participation in school nutrition (meal) program.
- Increase value and respect accorded to food service work and build skills needed to convert from thaw-and-serve to fresh food through professional development for food service directors and staff
- Coalesce related efforts to promote local distribution and curriculum development and create the basis for a replicable, testable, outcome-based **statewide farm-to-school** program.

### **Strategies (Activities):**

The strategies we will use to carry out these goals include:

- Find a home in a mission compatible agency or organization and develop an effective organizational structure with capacity and flexibility to achieve these goals. The project is currently housed at Coastal Enterprises, Inc.'s Lincoln County Economic Development Office, by contract with the Lincoln County Commissioners.
  - Achieve organizational efficacy. FARMS is currently organized as a collaborative working group comprised of health care professionals, educators, farmers, and community developers. A core planning group oversees subcommittees dedicated to specific school and community based projects.
- Provide technical assistance to existing and additional farm2school committees to make the cafeteria a classroom and school meals part of nutrition education. To do this, we will continue to work with teachers and administrators, food service personnel, the Union 74 school health coordinator, local health care providers, community developers, and farmers. We feel that by building active relationships within and between agriculture and education, and classroom curriculum and cafeteria, the benefits of this program to farmers, educators, students, and food service programs will be evident (and measurable in assessments).
- Union 74 and Boothbay Region District Food Policies that expand access to fresh food through direct purchase.
- Collaborate with parallel efforts in other counties to promote direct purchase and expand the farm2school movement.
- Participate in forums that link agriculture with nutrition education and school food service with direct purchasing opportunities (farmers).

### **Accomplishments**

To date, we have:

- Established a working group dedicated to agriculture related education (November 2004-January 2005)
- In 2005, we worked with administrators (principal, business director), food service, parents, and teachers at Great Salt Bay community School (GSB) to make menu changes and establish an annual Harvest Lunch (September 2005) to feature local food. (The Second Annual Harvest Lunch will take place on September 20, 2006.)

- Received funding (Irving Foundation) to pilot a local farm2school project that consists of classroom taste tests with associated curriculum and recipe development for school wide tastings.
- In Spring 2006, we worked with GSB administrators (the principal), teachers, students (Grades 2,3), and food service personnel to carry out 2 taste tests designed to introduce students to and teach the health and community benefits of eating fresh, local food. One result of this activity is the introduction of a monthly smoothie day (forthcoming), in response to student demand.
- In addition, we conducted taste tests with two Nobleboro Central School second- and third-grade classrooms.
- Participated in the K-2 Union 74 Health Fair at CLC YMCA, Damariscotta (June 2006).
- To date this fall, we have carried out the first of a minimum of 2 additional taste tests at GSB, with a fourth grade classroom and special education students.
- Wednesday, September 20, we worked with food service, the coordinated school health program, Mrs. Zoller's class, and Ms. McMillan's Phoenix students to sponsor the Second Annual GSB Harvest Lunch, featuring an array of farm fresh foods grown/made in Lincoln County or adjacent.
  - As a result (by student demand), the 4th graders' homemade honey mustard dressing has become a menu mainstay.
  - Team Leader Lisa Mondor introduced to Spear and to Biscay Orchards to buy apples and corn.
- Been asked to help facilitate the planning and coordination of a school garden project at Boothbay Region Elementary and High Schools (2006-07). After our initial school visit, students at the high school conducted taste tests.
- Been asked to support Boothbay Region High School and Edgecomb Eddy School's seedling and greenhouse projects. After one meeting with food service, administration, and students, a committee was formed and students worked with food service director Darlene French to taste test whole wheat and pesto pizza which were restored to the menu due to student support.
- FARMS has been incorporated into the Union 74 and Boothbay Region Schools' Wellness Policy, and the Union 74 Coordinated School Health Program Work Plan (2006)
- FARMS is participating in an American Academy of Pediatrics funded childhood obesity project with St. Andrew's Hospital and the Boothbay Harbor YMCA, "Fit for Kids."
- Formed a partnership with Rising Tide Market to create a distribution and delivery project to facilitate direct purchase.
  - FARMS has been incorporated into the USDA RC&D Time and Tide Council Work Plan (2006-07) to receive technical assistance for this organizing effort.
  - November 2 we co-hosted and moderated a community gathering (FARMS-Rising Tide Farm 2 School Forum) at GSB to profile the farm-to-school connection. The First Lady--educator, dietician, and proponent of sustainable agriculture--served as keynote. Agriculture Commissioner Seth Bradstreet and Maine School Food Service Association President Ron Adams, were guest speakers. A panel of 9 experts – farmers, educators, PTO, health care providers – discussed the benefits and challenges of direct purchase.
    - >160 attended – farmers, educators, health care providers, parents, policymakers.
    - Outcomes:

- Formal board support for direct purchase if a sound economic approach can be devised.
- Local commercial and established family farmer Dick Spear guaranteed wholesale price for corn to school.
- Negotiating with U74 food service director for minimum purchasing guidelines, combining indirect with direct
  - Food service survey – collaborative effort of PTO, Food Service, LCEDO-FARMS.
  - A follow-up workshop, the FARMS Roundtable, will take place January 18, 2007, at Nobleboro Central School.
- Worked with Image Building Concepts (September-October 2006) to develop a logo and brochure to create a brand, with educational outreach materials marketing our concept and service regionally and statewide.

## References

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