

CASE STUDY

New Mexico

Movers and Shakers

The primary organizer behind the Farm to School project in Santa Fe is Lynn Walters. Lynn is a chef and previous restaurant owner as well as a concerned mother of two school-aged children. She is Program Coordinator of Cooking with Kids, a multicultural food education program. Lynn arranged a visit to the Santa Monica Farmers' Market Salad Bar for several school food service staff members and New Mexico Department of Agriculture Marketing Specialist Craig Mapel. The Director of Student Nutrition Services, Judi Jaquez, fondly calls Lynn "the thorn in her side" that moved her to support and develop a farm to school program in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Judi is a self-described "convert" who touts the flavor and quality of locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables.

Farm to School Project and Components

Three Santa Fe public schools are participating in this project, two elementary and one high school. One of the elementary schools has a salad bar every day. The meal at this site includes a meat entree three times a week and a vegetarian item twice a week. The other elementary school offers a side salad of mixed greens, sunflower sprouts, and other seasonal items with lunch. The high school has a separate salad bar; students have the choice of the salad bar or a hot lunch.

Nutrition education in the classroom has had a big impact on the salad bar line. The first session conducted by Farms to Schools Coordinator Betsy Cull discussed proper salad bar etiquette as well as what is required for a reimbursable meal. Betsy followed the hands-on model of the Santa Monica Farmers' Market Salad Bar Program and brought the salad bar into the classroom for a lesson about food groups and portion sizes. The students were then able to prepare a tray to eat, practicing what they just learned.

Student Comments

"I've never tasted this stuff before; it's good"

"I love fruits and vegetables."

"I didn't use to like this kind of lettuce much, but I'm starting to like it more now that I've tasted it"

Funding

Three grants have provided start-up funds for this project: a USDA Community Food Projects grant will be providing \$30,750 over three years and the New Mexico Department of Agriculture (NMDA) is contributing \$30,000 to this project this year. In addition, USDA's Federal State Marketing and Improvement Program awarded NMDA \$27,000 to further develop the program into next year.

Labor

Collaboration got this program going. A group of folks, including Lynn Walters, Craig Mapel, and Judi Jaquez, worked with the support of members of the Student Nutrition Advisory Council, including Registered Dietician and former NET Coordinator Blanche Harrison, to organize this project. Betsy Cull was hired as the Farms to Schools Coordinator, a newly created school district position. School food service staff prepare the fruits and vegetables for the salad bars.

Farmers/Crops

Organizers worked with the NM Department of Agriculture and the state Farmers' Marketing Association to locate farmers. Approximately forty farmers sell to the school district, primarily through a farmers' coop, during the fall and spring months. Farmers see a tremendous potential to sell more crops if they can extend their season, and they are working to develop hothouse techniques to do just that. The crops that the children see seasonally include salad greens, sunflower sprouts, apples, pears, watermelons, tomatoes, corn, cucumbers, peppers, squash, potatoes, onions, carrots, broccoli, and radishes.

Product Delivery

The school district is working with the New Mexico Farmers' Market Association to coordinate deliveries through a cooperative distribution system. Deliveries are made either directly to the school sites or to the central warehouse.

Price

There are price barriers that are not easily overcome in New Mexico and are quite likely the greatest hurdle facing the pilot project. New Mexico procurement law requires most state agencies (including school districts) to go out to bid on virtually any item, including produce, that will be over \$10,000. In addition, to insure that the public dollar is being wisely spent, the agency requesting the bid must accept the lowest bid submitted. No real weight is assigned to what in reality is a higher quality, fresher, locally grown product.

This problem is further complicated by the size of the average farm (particularly those in north central New Mexico), which tends to be around 10 to 15 acres. It is difficult to compete with larger, out of state producers, submitting bids on the same type of produce.

The pilot program with the three Santa Fe schools selected by the coordinators has been able to circumvent these problems to a great extent. The coordinators designed bid requests to specify the freshness of the product, i.e. picked and delivered within 2 days, and by using monies from grants to ensure that no state monies were involved in the project to purchase food.

School Food Service Support

School food service personnel have been overwhelmingly supportive, as has been the District Administration. They were brought into this program fairly early in its conception, and were active in helping to design the program.

Kitchen Facilities

The three schools participating in the program had the equipment and facilities necessary to prepare and store the product. The high school kitchen had just gone through a renovation and was well-equipped for a salad bar.

Sustainability

When this program started, all of the collaborators knew it would be difficult to sustain in its present form. The organizers have been working at a state and national level to pass legislation that would allow schools to give preference to local growers and to make it easier for area farmers to participate in the program. There is consensus among the collaborators that by working closely with District purchasing personnel to create very specific purchasing requests, that local farmers will have a greater opportunity to participate in the program.

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