



# Farm to School Routes

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FEATURED PROFILE

## Start Small, Simple, and Somewhere

Interview with Mikey Azzara by Debra Eschmeyer

**Mikey Azzara** is the Outreach Director for the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Jersey (NOFA-NJ), where he oversees state-wide educational programs for organic farmers, gardeners, consumers, and youth. Through NOFA-NJ's Community Food Education Program, he implements school gardens and works to connect New Jersey's farms with restaurants, schools, and institutional dining facilities.

As a devoted native of Lawrenceville, NJ, he also started and currently manages the 3-year old Lawrenceville Farmers Market.

### Q. When did you first learn of the farm to school concept?

A. I became familiar with the concept of farm to school on my own by directly growing with kids. After going to Middlebury College in Vermont and farming in both Italy and Vermont, I returned to my home town of Lawrenceville, New Jersey (for good) to create a sustainable, community-based food system.

I believed I could start here in New Jersey with the greatest chance of success because people know me here. The principal at the high school is my 6th grade art teacher. The director of the Community Center is my old baseball coach. They trust me and they are open to my new/old ideas regarding food.

A five minute conversation and the community food system starts growing roots. For example, on my day off when I was farming full time, I started going to the community center, and as a result of a chat with my old baseball coach, we incorporated a garden into their day camp, educating low-income youth through gardening and cooking education. This is when I learned first hand that if you involve children in the process of cooking and growing, they will eat it.

### Q. How did you engage the Northeast Organic Farming Association- New Jersey (NOFA-NJ) into farm to school?



A. It goes back to November of 2003 when I felt I needed to do more than farm. I wanted to create an educational component like what we did at the community center, so I researched what grants I could apply for to do school gardens, happened to learn of NOFA-NJ, and they were fortunately looking for an Outreach Coordinator.

Thus the school gardens were born; we decided to start whenever and however, just so we could get started. A local CSA [community supported agriculture] shareholder wanted to start a school garden, so we met with the principal of Lawrenceville Elementary School, and that was our first school garden.

As NOFA's Outreach Director, I handle all the educational programs. My job is amazing because it involves so many levels of a community food system, from farmer education—our winter conference in January and in-season workshops on various aspects of production—to school gardens and farm to school. Education and actual implementation with farm to school procurement and school gardens. It's great.

### Q. Did you acquire special funding for your position?

A. Absolutely. The first spring at Lawrenceville Elementary School, I volunteered; you need to start somewhere and demonstrate the value of the program with the goal of securing the funding. We pieced together a bunch of

grants for school garden and farm to school programs. Then the necessary community stakeholders became invested, the Lawrenceville school fundraised, and now the school pays NOFA for my position.

**Q. What have you been surprised to learn in your job with NOFA?**

A. The demand for organic surpasses the supply. We don't have enough organic product to go to farmers' markets let alone schools, restaurants, etc. By necessity, we work with all the farms in NJ because we want community based food systems.

**Q. What is your job like on a daily basis?**

A. During the winter, it's lots of planning in the office. During the growing season, I am spending about 50% of my time in the office and 50% either out at a school garden or on a farm for one of our educational programs. For each school, I spend one or two half-days a week providing 25 minute garden classes. I present a range of agricultural education curriculum covering seeds, soil, insects, pollination, weeds, roots, different kinds of plants (flowers & herbs), plants parts—which part do we eat, and I tie all of this in with the grade level, i.e. kindergarten learns about living things.

Every class has a chance at least once every two weeks to be in the garden. Six out of 10 months of the school year, kids are tasting fresh produce from the school garden once a week.

The “Garden to Table” philosophy is the foundation of our program. This is garden and nutrition education all in one; we harvest on Fresh Friday, and everyone has the opportunity to eat what we reap. Now that we have more school gardens, we now have Fresh Thursday, Fresh Monday too.

**Q. How many school gardens do you manage and how large are they?**

A. I am directly working with four schools with the largest school garden measuring 60 x 90 feet and the smallest one is four raised beds, each 6 x 10.

**Q. How did you get more schools interested?**

A. I held an open house at the Lawrenceville School highlighting the school garden and invited everybody but

specifically principals and superintendents from neighboring schools. Thus, now I am in the process of starting a school garden in every school in Lawrenceville Township: four elementary schools, one intermediate school, one middle school, and one high school, reaching approximately 5,000 students.

**Q. How does the growing season coincide with the school year?**

A. The growing season for the school gardens in New Jersey is March to mid June and September through the end of November. To prepare for the summer break, we send a flyer home two weeks prior to the end of the school year, and one family signs up for one week to water, weed, and harvest. There is then a training before the school year is over on garden maintenance. The only months off in regards to growing are December to February. A helpful hint I picked up is to not plant summer crops until the last week of school so the children can harvest their first week of school.

**Q. What is your favorite farming chore?**

A. I love planting because I am always amazed with the miracle that happens when the seeds actually grow. I am truly amazed every time. And harvesting is an obvious pleasure as I love to eat good food. Food is a beautiful thing.

**Q. What seed is the most enjoyable to watch grow?**

A. Salad greens...you can direct seed, have amazing greens in 30 days, cut, enjoy, and they continue to grow back for your next meal. And the product is so much better when you eat it freshly harvested minutes earlier.

**Q. Have you met with any resistance in encouraging buying local?**

A. Yes and no. I know that a lot of the foodservice is concerned that the students may not eat it, but that's why we start with the gardens. Build the demand (among the students) first, and then work on local sourcing.

On the local sourcing end, one of our success stories is Beth Feehan in West Windsor. Beth is a volunteer extension of NOFA and an amazing leader. She started a farmers' market in her town. She focused on farm to school specifically so when Sodexo's contract was up, and the

school decided to renew with them, she was able to integrate specific language in the contract that required So-dexho to purchase from at least five local growers. This is a great way to start.

### **Q. What is your advice to farmers wanting to begin selling to schools?**

A. I always say start small and simple and somewhere. Don't try to do everything in the first year. I have a Fortune cookie to live by: "Genius is nothing but a great aptitude for patience."

Other suggestions are highlighting a different vegetable every month to drive home the point of the seasonality of food, i.e tomatoes in September, apples in October, squash in November, etc. depending where you are in the country to highlight your unique place.

I am also a fan of a special event, i.e. a harvest week so that food service and the farmer can both get their feet wet. In New Jersey, apples are great to start with because they are available for most of the year. If I was trying to get 10 schools to start programs, then I'd scale up to a harvest week, otherwise start with one day, because you want to work out the kinks with the delivery, cutting, serving, etc. And you want to be able to market it, educate the children, involve the teachers, let the kids know it is fresh from the farm.

### **Q. What is your advice to school food service directors?**

A. Same for food service...start small and simple. Just make sure they know that if we sufficiently educate the children about fresh food, they will eat it. So prove it. Their food sales will go up. And you have to meet the administrators wherever they are, for example, we did raised beds since the principal was nervous about weeds, and each year we expand: outdoor classrooms, compost piles, bushes of blueberries and raspberries. Just get started, and then grow.

### **Q. If you could institute one farm to school reform, what would it be?**

A. Physical education and nutrition education: school gardens at every school! Viewing nutrition /food education as part of the curriculum. A slightly further fetched idea is moving the National School Lunch Program to the Department of Education instead of the Department of

Agriculture, where it currently resides.

We are at a critical point in order to grow this program. We ultimately want to supply schools with school garden teachers; we want to fully integrate into the standard curriculum. This can be accomplished by slightly decreasing the money they are spending on the curriculum to fund a full time school garden salary. We are currently aiming for one school garden teacher for a school district, essentially a point person for the district.

### **Q. Any future events you would like to share?**

A. On the last Saturday in January, NOFA holds its Winter Conference: Greener Fields Greener Pastures: Growing for Good Health. Learn more at [www.nofanj.org](http://www.nofanj.org).

To learn more about Mikey, you can watch his YouTube video from the Farm Aid 2006 concert here (LINK): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q80kMToq-ww>