



Hopewell Elementary School

ORGANICS IN FARM TO SCHOOL

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GROWING STRONGER TOGETHER

National Farm to School Network is an information, advocacy and networking hub for communities working to bring local food sourcing, school gardens, and food and agriculture education into school systems and early care and education settings.

Integrating organic practices and products in farm to school initiatives allows children to see the benefits of growing and eating organic products first-hand. It can also provide children the nutritionally-sound foods they need to thrive. Organic growing practices restrict the use of synthetic fertilizers, antibiotics, or chemical pesticides. “Certified” organic products require approval by a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) accredited certifying agency, which inspects the farm to ensure its practices align with federal organic standards.

Organic practices can be applied to the three core elements of farm to school - **local food procurement, school gardens, and food and agriculture education** - in a number of ways. For example, schools can source from local farmers that grow organically, students can grow their own school gardens using organic practices, and educators can integrate learning about organic foods and growing practices into the classroom. Schools utilizing organics in farm to school practices may maintain their own organic school gardens and then showcase the foods grown in those gardens in school meals served in the cafeteria.

Many schools across the country currently integrate organic foods in their farm to school activities.¹ According to many farm to school practitioners using organic practices, the top motivation for integrating organics into school meals is a **concern for student health**. Other key motivators include the **quality of the product**, a **demand from both students and parents**, and a **concern for the environment**.

Organics may have a higher price point than conventionally-grown foods (though this is not always the case), which can present a barrier to schools purchasing organic products. However, schools can take action to overcome that barrier, such as **forming relationships with farmers** that could potentially lead to negotiable price points, or pairing organic products with less expensive options for a school meal. Another barrier in using organics is a lack of availability of locally-grown organic products. Many schools see **teaching about organic farming** as an opportunity to grow the next generation of organic farmers who can meet this market demand for organic products. Additionally, for many schools, purchasing and serving organic products is part of a **larger shift towards more whole foods and scratch cooking** in the cafeteria. In this case, motivating children to try new foods that they have not been exposed to previously can present a challenge, but engaging **activities such as taste tests and gardening** can encourage students to try and enjoy new foods.



Minneapolis Public Schools

¹ Information obtained through surveys and interviews with National Farm to School Network Core and Supporting Partners and identified farm to school practitioners conducted in the Summer/Fall of 2018.

KEYS TO SUCCESS FOR ORGANICS IN FARM TO SCHOOL

School districts that have been successful in integrating organics into the three core elements of farm to school tend to have several unifying keys to success.

Gain internal and external buy-in from diverse stakeholders.

- Educate **children** on the benefits² of organic foods, involve them in the growing process, and offer cafeteria taste tests to encourage student buy-in.
- Identify **key staff and community members** who are invested in organics in farm to school.
- Develop relationships with **community organizations** that can support initiatives.
- Collaborate with **organic farmers** (certified organic and those using organic practices) and find ways to show support and grow their businesses, like offering training or incentives.

Start small but plan for growth.

- Start with research on your local agricultural market and availability of organic products.
- Develop a three to five year plan to guide your work and goals around integrating organics into the three core elements of farm to school.
- Identify small, attainable steps to get started.

Use creative strategies to manage price points of organic foods.

- Purchase organic products in bulk.
- Plan your menu with a balance of higher price point and less expensive items.
- Develop relationships with local, organic farmers to get the best price.

Promote your work and share your success.

- Use signage and marketing tools in the cafeteria to indicate foods that are organically grown.
- Promote organic foods and education initiatives to parents and staff through newsletters and other communications channels.
- Share stories of success through social media and local media outlets.

² Hurtado-Barroso, Tresserra-Rimbau, Vallverdú-Queralt, & Lamuela-Raventós. (2017). Organic food and the impact on human health. *Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition*, 1-11. Available at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/581922/EPRS_STU%282016%29581922_EN.pdf.

CASE STUDIES: ORGANICS IN FARM TO SCHOOL

Hands-On Learning Leads to Healthy Eating

Warren County Consolidated Schools | Warren County, Georgia

Located in rural Georgia, Warren County Consolidated Schools serves 610 children, from pre-K through high school. All students in the district are under the Community Eligibility Program (CEP) and are eligible for free breakfast and lunch. Warren County's student body is approximately 97 percent African American students and 3 percent White students. Warren County Schools strategically integrate organic practices into all elements of their farm to school program, including procurement, gardening, and food and agriculture education. Scott Richardson, Warren County Vocational and Food Services Director, estimates the 20-30 percent of food program purchases are organic. Warren County Schools also serve produce grown by students with organic practices in the district's greenhouse and farm. Warren County Schools is in the process of obtaining organic certification for their production farm. According to Richardson, the higher quality of foods, concern for student health, and increased meal participation are very important motivations for growing, purchasing, and serving organic foods.



Warren County Consolidated Schools

In Warren County, students are fully immersed in integrating organics in the district's farm to school initiatives. Organic gardening and farming are frequent components of classroom curriculum: science lessons include examining different types of soils and performing plant classification studies, and English class lessons include observational writing activities in the garden. AP Calculus students even performed a month-long study on how to most productively use the school's available land for organic growing. Students engage in hands-on learning by planting, maintaining, and harvesting food with organic practices in their school gardens and farm. Educators use these opportunities to emphasize the benefits of organic foods, including how the lack of synthetic products in organic products is healthier not only for the plants, but the land and the consumers.

Before integrating organics into their program, Warren County Schools conducted thorough research to ensure a sound understanding of the market. Richardson states, “Everything is in the planning. The better you plan, the better your outcome will be.” Community partnerships have been vital to starting and maintaining the district’s organics and farm to school initiatives. The school works closely with the local 4-H Program, Cooperative Extension, the local Warren Garden Club, and the Georgia Soil and Water Conservation Commission. Support and recommendations from other food service directors in the area have helped identify growers and purchasing opportunities. Additionally, partnerships with farmers in the area have often allowed for lower price points for the district’s organic purchases.

When Richardson came on board as Food Service Director and began integrating farm to school and organics in the district meal program and education practices, school meal participation rates increased from 65 to 90 percent. Richardson made sure the foods that were grown and served reflected foods that students were eating and enjoying at home, like collard greens and leafy greens. When they started growing lettuce and have the students help in the harvest, student salad purchases rose 300 percent the following year.

The innovative organic and farm to school approaches in the district have also garnered community attention and accolades. The school system was awarded one of only 22 Gold Level USDA Turnip the Beet awards in the summer of 2017 for its innovation in adding garden fresh, locally grown items to its summer feeding program. In 2018, the district received the first ever [Organic Golden Radish Award](#) for their efforts in preparing future farmers to meet the growing market demand for organic products, the Outstanding Extension Farm to School Award from the University of Georgia (UGA) Extension, and the Conservationist of the Year award from the Georgia Soil and Water Conservation Commission.

Growing Opportunities for Farmers and Community Food Systems

Minneapolis Public Schools | Minneapolis, Minnesota

Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) serves 36,000 students with a 60 percent free and reduced-price meal eligibility rate. MPS serves a diverse student population with 38.1 percent Black or African American Students, 34.7 percent White, 17.7 percent Hispanic, 5.8 percent Asian, and 3.5 percent Native American. All of the farmers the district works with through the farm to school program use organic growing practices, and several farms maintain organic certification. Kate Seybold, Farm to School Coordinator for MPS, emphasizes that using organics in school meals is an opportunity to benefit not only the school, but the local community and the environment.

MPS leverages their farm to school purchasing program to support development of local, organic farmers and the community food system. They place a large emphasis on farm to school’s role in

community-building, often partnering with smaller farms owned by women or people of color that represent the diverse community. As Seybold says, “You want your program to not only benefit you but benefit your farmers for it to be sustainable and successful.” MPS partners with the University of Minnesota Extension to offer training for farmers they work with. This allows more small farmers, who may face financial or language barriers to other training opportunities, to be a part of the farm to school program, increasing the amount of organic product MPS can access.



Minneapolis Public Schools

Local purchasing at MPS started small, first partnering with just a few farms for a select number of products. With success and positive feedback following these initial steps, MPS worked with local farmers and community partners to grow the program further. MPS currently uses about 150,000 pounds of locally produced, organic produce per year. For meats, the district serves local free-range turkey and grass-fed beef, in addition to a variety of other locally sourced and produced foods. MPS is part of the [Good Food Purchasing Program](#) which, according to Seybold, provides program data and reports that allow MPS to see its successes and also opportunities for growth, including increasing purchasing of organically grown and raised products.

MPS partners with local organizations, including [Spark-Y](#), [Youth Farm](#), Midwest Food Connection, and University of Minnesota Extension SNAP Educators, to provide in-classroom education and organic gardening education opportunities. Some schools have indoor aquaponics systems and others have on-site farms. Nine of the district’s schools participate in the Garden to Cafeteria Program, bringing produce grown by students with organic practices into the meal program. While the logistics and coordination can be a challenge, according to Seybold, allowing students to see what they’ve grown in the meal is well worth any extra effort.

To build on and share their organics in farm to school experience, MPS had developed marketing tools to get the word out to students, families, and the community. On menus, farm to school products (all grown with organic practices) are marked with a special symbol. “Minnesota Thursdays” are monthly opportunities to highlight and promote the farm to school program and local food producers.

The district's farm to school website provides information on the farmers and their growing practices, and the site houses MPS's [Farm to School Toolkit](#). Farm to school producers and meals are frequently featured on the district's social media posts. The school has also invited legislators to enjoy lunch and talk about farm to school in the district, so that policymakers can see the reason to invest in farm to school and local, organic food production. According to Seybold, reactions to the program are consistently positive. "We hear students and staff saying that farm to school items taste better, taste more fresh, look better." Seybold notes that the cause is easy to get behind and something that community members want to see grow.

Engaging Students, Families, and Communities for Program Success

Hopewell Elementary School | Hopewell, New Jersey

Hopewell Elementary School, located in suburban New Jersey, serves 440 children in grades preschool through 5. David Friedrich, Principal of Hopewell Elementary, says the school prioritizes meeting the needs of the whole child, including academically, socially, emotionally, and physically. Serving organic, local, scratch-made foods and engaging students, families, and communities in healthy food activities supports healthy children and healthy communities.

At Hopewell Elementary School, lunch time is more than just a time to eat. It is an important opportunity for learning about and accepting healthy food and developing meaningful relationships. Changing the lunch room set up, focusing on environmental sustainability (including eliminating disposable straws and single-use plastic water bottles), and increasing the quality of the meals with local, organic ingredients whenever possible, has changed the atmosphere of the cafeteria. The menu is designed to appeal to young eaters without sacrificing nutrition. Food service staff start with familiar meal concepts and then integrate organic, locally grown ingredients. Students take part in taste tests and sampling to help determine new meal items, increasing student buy-in and willingness to try new foods.

Classroom activities reinforce the importance of healthy, organic foods and environmental sustainability. Hopewell is home to 14 raised garden beds and features an entire vertical garden room thanks to a partnership with Princeton University. Students engage in hands-on learning with the vertical gardens and raised beds and grow and harvest their own food using organic growing practices. Indoor and outdoor gardening offers student-driven opportunities for garden design, planting, water chemistry management, harvesting and consumption. Friedrich says these gardening opportunities are an important step in increasing student food acceptance. "Children are much more likely to experiment with and embrace new foods. We want to provide kids with meals they will be excited about."



Hopewell Elementary School

Student, family, and community engagement has been important to the success of the initiative. Students are part of a Student Nutrition Committee, offering recipe suggestions, providing constructive feedback, and communicating with the district food service director. "Take Your Parents to Lunch Day" gives parents the opportunity to sample a meal made with school grown produce and other organic ingredients, dining outside in the outdoor garden area. Friedrich says parents have responded to the focus on organic and local foods in the meals. He notes, "It's one less thing for parents to worry about. They can spend more time with their kids instead of packing lunches." Students, families, and local chefs came together for a popular "Top Chef Class." Local farmers are frequent visitors to classrooms, sharing their growing practices and teaching students about where their food is coming from. The school even has [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) feed dedicated to sharing out their food and agriculture initiatives.

Internal collaboration and alignment of goals have been vital to the success of Hopewell's initiative. Friedrich works closely with the school food service director and school's STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) educator to develop monthly menus and integrate healthy foods messaging in the cafeteria and through classroom science standards. Community partnerships with Princeton University, local growers, and local restaurants have bolstered organic procurement and education opportunities. These collaborative efforts earned Hopewell the [2018 Best in New Jersey Farm to School Award](#). Looking to the future, Hopewell hopes to use their experience, particularly with vertical gardening, to help other schools and districts develop their own organic initiatives. Friedrich sees abundant opportunity for growth in Hopewell, too, while keeping focus on the ultimate goal. "We can't expect students to be engaged and successful academically unless we meet their nutrition needs. It's really a win-win for all."

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