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Farm-to-school programs motivate school food service professionals

Potential to improve children's diets without burdening school finances while helping local farmers

St. Louis, MO, March 8, 2010 – During the school day, children eat roughly one-third of their nutritional needs while at school. Besides lunch, breakfast and snacks may be served, providing ample opportunities for obesity-prevention strategies by offering more nutritious food. With economical constraints interfering with schools to provide children with increased amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables, a study in the March/April issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* examines how farm-to-school programs have the potential to improve children's diets by providing locally grown produce without burdening the school's finances.

Researchers at the Michigan State University, Lansing, examined why farmers, school food service professionals (SFSP), and food distributors participate in farm-to-school programs and how they characterize the opportunities and challenges to school food procurement from local farmers. Researchers identified three major reasons why SFSP participate in farm-to-school programs including (1) "The students like it," (2) "The price is right," and (3) "We're helping our local farmer."

There were three areas that emerged from analysis of the SFSP's interviews about students/children participation in the farm-to-school programs which included: (1) quality, (2) influence of food service staff, and (3) relationships with farmers. The findings were best described by following two SFSP's interviews:

"A lot of our teachers go to apple orchards so it was neat to have them served for lunch [. . .] so we had that link, cafeteria, classroom, field trip. I think they might have said something to the kids, and then the kids get a little more attention so they're like huh, maybe I should eat this apple instead of just letting it sit on the tray."

"The kids just love [farmer]. He's one of the coolest guys in the world. And if we're able to do that, it becomes a cool food and kids like cool foods, you know. They don't want things that aren't cool."

A "trickle-down effect" was found for SFSP being proud to serve high-quality products that students were excited to eat.

The researchers found the farm-to-school programs benefited both the school and farmer. SFSP reported that the lower price for produce was attributed to a shortened supply chain. SFSP were able to buy produce that is not typically offered in school cafeterias such as asparagus, blue potatoes, Asian pears, etc.

Schools are an attractive market for the farmer because "perfect" products are not always needed. For example, a SFSP commented:

"I will take the outsize apples. [Farmer] will bring me bushels of apples, the tiny ones, and that's great for our kindergarteners, our first-graders. We sort them out and the big ones children here [middle school] love so I think we're a great market for off-size. We don't need the perfect-sized apple. That's great for retail, that's what sells. But in schools, we can take the carrots that have "s" [shape] in them because we'll clean them, we'll take the skin off, and then we'll chop them up and it doesn't matter to us. They'll end up in the homemade soup that day, or on top of salad. So for us, we're a good market and I don't think farmers realize that."

This research is being presented at a time when budgets are tight and there is a huge need for nutrition education in schools. The farm-to-school program may help to promote healthful eating and improve our school food programs.

Writing in the article, the authors state, "Relationships with farmers and vendor characteristics emerged as important variables that may have contributed to the benefits that these food service professionals expressed. This study suggests a relationship between locally grown food and potential benefits such as increased consumption of fruits and vegetables among children. However, much more research is needed to better understand how these and other variables influence children's short and long-term dietary habits so that supportive programs and policies can be developed. This study also emphasizes the need for SFSPs to understand the advantages and disadvantages of buying locally grown food from different intermediaries as well as their own motivations (eg, improving children's fruit and vegetable intake) and interest in local food

procurement. More research is needed on how different types of intermediaries influence the benefits attributed to farm-to-school programs. Finally, whether buying locally grown food directly from a farmer or through a food distributor, connecting children and food service staff to the source of their food— where and how it was grown and who grew it—appears to be a key mediator between locally grown fruits and vegetables and children's consumption of these food items. Therefore, as schools increasingly look to distributors for their local food needs, educational materials that retain or create a link from farms to schools will be important."

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The article is "Farm-to-School Programs: Perspectives of School Food Service Professionals" by Betty T. Izumi, PhD, MPH, RD; Katherine Alaimo, PhD; Michael W. Hamm, PhD. It appears in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, Volume 42, Issue 2, (March/April 2010) published by Elsevier.

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