

Integrating Farm to School into School-Based Policies

Where to Begin and How to Build Support

Integrating farm to school language into school wellness, procurement, fundraising or other school policies can be an important step towards sustaining farm to school programming in a school or district. Including farm to school goals in these policies can create school-wide accountability for achieving a healthy food environment for students.

Key stakeholders in the school policy world include members of wellness, fundraising or other committees, as well as school administrators and school board members. Working with committee members to include farm to school goals in school policies is not always an immediate or uniform process. In fact, the adoption of farm to school language in school policies is often first preceded by the demonstration of sustainable farm to school practices in a school or district.

The story below is an excellent example of how a dash of commitment and a pinch of creative thinking can lead to positive farm to school policy changes and a stronger farm to school program, overall.

Wood County: Embracing Redirection to Achieve Policy Goals

Sue Anderson and Kristie Rauter, members of the Wood County Farm to School team, can attest to the hard work of building support for policy changes among committee members. It takes time to explain the benefits of writing measurable farm to school goals into policy documents. Anderson and Rauter learned this lesson while negotiating with staff and administrators from several school districts to incorporate farm to school language into wellness policies. After a year of collaboration, they achieved minimal traction, so have changed tactics to both support the progress that has been made, while also encouraging future policy support through more creative means. Rauter and Anderson hope to produce a swell of grassroots farm to school support that begins in the kitchen. They are optimistic that this strategy will initiate a steady chain of policy updates.

Wellness Policy Setbacks & Successes

Rauter, a Community Health Planner at the Wood County Health Department, encouraged the wellness committees in each of the six county school districts to include farm to school goals in existing policies, with the support of model language provided by the Wisconsin Department of Instruction (DPI). Ultimately, food service directors decided that they were not ready for the full-scale adoption of farm to school language. Directors were concerned they would not have enough capacity to meet measurable goals, such as purchasing 10% of products locally by the year 2016. School nutrition services face a number of barriers, including cost and time constraints, and they worried that such rigid factors would sometimes limit their options in meeting stated procurement goals.



Wood County Farm to School staff are enthusiastic about strengthening farm to school efforts in their community (Photo: Get Active Wood County)

In order to ease into the process, three of the six school districts decided to write farm to school goals into their wellness policies with less-binding language such as, “when possible, local foods will be purchased.”

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Wood County: Embracing Redirection to Achieve Policy Goals (continued)

Shifting Gears to Support Farm to School Through Procurement Practices

Anderson, the Wood County Farm to School Coordinator, is thrilled about the successful adoption of farm to school language in several of the school wellness policies. She notes that it is also encouraging that school nutrition services in Wood County and across the country have recently improved vending and a la carte nutritional requirements, which now prohibit the sale of items with high caloric or fat content. There is, however, room for stronger policy language to be adopted in the future in Wood County. Considering the specific time and budgetary concerns of the area school nutrition directors, Anderson says that, “the wellness policy might not be the only place to make positive change happen. New ideas in procurement, cooperative purchasing or other areas can also move farm to school forward.”

Accordingly, Anderson has connected with school districts and universities in neighboring counties to notify them about a local food aggregator and distributor that serves the Central Wisconsin area. Her goal is to broaden the base of wholesale local food buyers in Central Wisconsin and boost regional sales for the aggregator, Parrfection Produce. A more robust and stable customer base in the region would make it easier for the aggregator, whose primary market is Chicago, to continue serving the Wood County schools and perhaps begin forging new purchasing agreements with more rural districts in the area.

As a result of Anderson’s networking and the ‘seal of approval’ provided by food service departments that have previously worked with Parrfection produce, the aggregator has seen a spike in new large-volume Central Wisconsin buyers. Other institutions are taking note, and new customers include a large school district in Marathon County and two buyers from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.



From carrot coins to carrot sticks – there is little doubt that Wood County students love snacking on this beta carotene-rich veggie! (Photo: Get Active Wood County)

Leveraging Buying Power through Informal Collaboration

Following on the heels of the above successes, Anderson is now trying to expand the availability of minimally-processed products from Parrfection Produce. This includes sweet potato sticks, which are laborious and expensive for Parrfection to offer without strong and consistent demand from buyers. Anderson is working with school food service departments and the aggregator to find a solution. The most promising idea has been for an informal, collaborative Harvest of the Month on a pre-selected month in the winter, in which all participating districts would agree to purchase sweet potato sticks on the same day. For example, the first Tuesday of February. Such an agreement would provide enough volume for Parrfection to both process the sweet potatoes and deliver them to the Central Wisconsin region.

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Wood County: Embracing Redirection to Achieve Policy Goals (continued)

An Introduction to Cooperative Purchasing

The innovative purchasing strategies highlighted in this story form an excellent foundation for beginning to form cooperative purchasing agreements. In fact, this is how most “buying groups” begin, through informal collaboration and sharing of resources. Cooperative purchasing can take shape in a number of ways, ranging from informal school purchasing associations that comply with all procurement regulations, but are otherwise loosely organized, to privately managed group purchasing organizations that draft bylaws and adhere to Wisconsin statutes. More information on the various forms that cooperative purchasing can take, as well as benefits and potential drawbacks to these purchasing models, can be found on page 27, in the Resources section of this chapter.

Typically, cooperative purchasing is a win-win situation for both schools and local food aggregators and distributors. Increased purchasing volume provides a more secure distribution channel for businesses selling local produce. In turn, consistent high-volume orders for the same vendors can help lower product costs for districts that order through a cooperative purchasing agreement. In addition, participating in a buying group can increase leveraging power, which can be useful when negotiating with vendors. An example would be to ask that more minimally processed local produce be made available for purchase, similar to the example previously mentioned in the story. By making local produce an easy and affordable option for nutrition service departments, cooperative purchasing agreements can be a pivotal way to build internal farm to school support.

The Impact of Farm to School “Buzz”

In another thoughtful approach to eventually building more farm to school goals into school policies, Anderson believes that generating community buzz about farm to school can positively influence nutrition services staff. If they know that students, family members and community members are excited about local food procurement, it can encourage nutrition services staff as they weigh the factors associated with bringing the farm to the school. A Wood County nutrition services director mentioned how rewarding it was to receive an email from a local parent that congratulated and thanked the director for buying local produce for the schools. Community encouragement, as evidenced in this small example, can have a very meaningful impact on those engaged in farm to school programming.

With the support of students, parents, administrators and food service directors, more farm goals will hopefully soon be written into Wood County school district policies.



Wood County nutrition services staff processing whole, local vegetables (Photo: Get Active Wood County)

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LESSONS LEARNED

Where to Start with Policy Change

- Assemble resources and conduct research on how wellness, procurement and fundraising policies work at your school district.
- Prepare an elevator speech for the different stakeholders that influence each policy, remembering that even seemingly peripheral people or groups can become program champions.
- Build ground level support among people that enact farm to school activities on a frequent basis, such as nutrition services staff and administrators. Think strategically about the best groups to approach first.
- Highlight the success that other school districts have found in incorporating farm to school language into their policies. Use creative methods in your own district to build success based on the unique factors of your specific school environment.

Who To Talk To About Policy Updates

- **Nutrition Services Directors:** Often occupy a central role in farm to school, and commonly serve on the wellness committee, so their buy-in is crucial. It is advantageous to build support from the ground up.
- **School Administrators and Wellness Committee:** Farm to school advocates in school administration or on the wellness committee can be influential players in encouraging farm to school policy updates.
- **Program Champions:** Regardless of their department or place in the community, seeking out and collaborating with a program champion can help build school-wide support for policy changes, as enthusiasm is contagious.
- **Local Health Department:** Plays a pivotal role in farm to school and can provide backbone information support, as well as suggestions for potential policy champions.
- **Other School Districts:** Their successes and struggles can inform your own strategies, and vice versa.
- **Department of Public Instruction:** Can provide support on Wellness Policy Standards.



Policy changes, just like snap peas, don't sprout overnight. To nurture the possibility of adding farm to school language into school policies it can be helpful to keep track of potential partners and advocates, which is not unlike counting the peas in a pod. (Photo: Marathon County Farm to School)

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LESSONS LEARNED

School Policy Matrix: Writing in Farm to School Support

School-based Policies That Can Support Farm to School	Policy Description	Who Manages The Policy
Wellness	Guides a school district's efforts to establish a school environment that promotes students' health, well-being, and ability to learn by supporting healthy eating and physical activity. Mandatory for school districts participating in the National School Lunch Program.	Typically food service directors <u>OR</u> school boards
School District Food Service Procurement	Rules and regulations that govern the process of acquiring food products used in a school.	Food service directors
Cooperative Purchasing	Cooperative procurement is the process by which an organization forms a partnership or shares contracts with other organizations for the purchase of goods or services. By aggregating purchasing demands, organizations are often able to increase their market power and achieve lower prices.	Food service directors
Fundraising	Governs the management and control of student activity funds, and how funds can be raised by students. Can include policies on the nutritional value and category of products that can be sold in food fundraisers.	School boards <u>OR</u> school administration

Thoughts to Revisit

- Demonstrating a successful farm to school program before asking that farm to school goals be incorporated into school policies can help achieve a more immediate positive response to policy update requests. Established farm to school programs help to ensure that policy goals can be met and maintained.
- Remain flexible and remember that there are multiple ways to find success. Be willing to change direction and shift your energies to more creative solutions, if necessary.
- Updating policy language takes time. Celebrate small wins and leverage them to build further success.

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RESOURCES

-- Wellness and other School-Based Policy Resources --

National Farm to School Network Policy Page

A great place to start when initially considering integrating farm to school into school policies. Provides a great overview of the federal, state and local policy landscapes, as they relate to farm to school.

<http://www.farmtoschool.org/policy>

USDA Team Nutrition Resources

<http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/local-wellness-policy-resources/school-nutrition-environment-and-wellness-resources-0>

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/local-school-wellness-policy>

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction: School Wellness Policy Resource Page

Your go-to site for Wisconsin-based school policy resources.

http://fns.dpi.wi.gov/fns_wellnessplcy

CIAS: Model Wellness Policy Language for Schools

<http://www.cias.wisc.edu/foodservtools/8-Build-sustainability/model-wellness-policy-language.pdf>

Model Local School Wellness Policies on Physical Activity and Nutrition

(National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity – NANA)

Provides model farm to school policy language for school districts. Schools can use the language in original form or revise it, as needed, to fit unique circumstances.

<http://www.schoolwellnesspolicies.org/resources/NANAWellnessPolicies.pdf>

Local Wellness Policies: Assessing School District Strategies for Improving Children’s Health

(Robert Wood Johnson Foundation)

A comprehensive report on the scope and effectiveness of school wellness policies. Key findings in this report can help improve policy-making efforts.

http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/_asset/hxbby9/WP_2009_monograph.pdf

-- Cooperative Purchasing Resources --

Farm to School Policy Assessment Memo

Includes model policy language for cooperative purchasing agreements .

<http://datcp.wi.gov/uploads/Business/pdf/Farm%20to%20School%20Policy%20Memo.pdf>

Strength in Numbers: An Introduction to Cooperative Procurements

Although slightly technical, this short document introduces different forms of cooperative agreements and addresses both the advantages and disadvantages of developing a cooperative model.

<http://www.naspo.org/dnn/portals/16/documents/CooperativePurchasingBrief.pdf>