

Farm to School Programs Invest in Future of Our Children and Our Family Farmers

Source: sustainableagriculture.net

Published: March 16, 2016



Student working in her school garden. Photo credit: National Farm to School Network.

Farm to school programs are a win for kids, farmers, and communities. They empower our children and their families by informing them about their food system and giving them the tools and confidence to make healthy choices. At the same time they support local farmers financially by connecting them to new market opportunities.

On Tuesday, March 15, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) [announced](#) the final results of their [2015 Farm to School Census](#). The census was great news for farm to school programs and for farmers, showing that the programs have had huge successes all across the country.

Big Impacts for Farmers and Students

In surveying over 18,000 school districts across the country, census shows definitively that farm to school programs result in increased market opportunities for local farmers. Some 42 percent of the school districts that responded to the survey reported that they hosted farm to school programs as of the 2014-2015 school year. According to the census local food purchasing from these school districts translated into nearly \$800 million spent on local food during the 2013-2014 school year.

Farm to school programs are not only making big impacts now for the farmers, students and communities they serve, they're poised for even more growth in the future.

Of the schools surveyed, 16 percent said that they plan to start programs in the future, and 46 percent of school districts currently sourcing from local producers report that they plan to buy even *more* local food in future school years.

Estimates from the USDA predict that the buying power of new farm to school programs, combined with pledged increases from current school districts, could result in an additional \$350 million for family farmers. All together the economic impact of these current and future programs could top \$1 billion according to USDA estimates.

Farm to school programs not only create new economic opportunities for farmers, they invest in the future of our children by giving them access to healthy, local foods and gardening and farm-based learning opportunities. By connecting students to agriculture, farm to school programs connect children and their families to a healthier way of eating both for themselves, and for the environment.

The Farm to School Census highlights the manifold social impacts and benefits of farm to school programs:

- 38 percent of surveyed school districts indicated increased support from parents and the community for healthier school meals after introducing farm to school programs
- 28 percent reported improved acceptance of healthier school meals by their students
- 21 percent reported lower school meal program costs
- 18 percent reported reduced plate waste, and
- 17 percent indicated increased school meal program participation.

“One in a Melon”

To recognize outstanding school districts the USDA Farm to School Program is holding a contest in conjunction with the Farm to School



Secretary Tom Vilsack. Photo credit: USDA

Census release, wherein school districts can win USDA’s coveted “One in a Melon” award.

Now through **April 15**, USDA will be accepting nominations through their website from parents, students, teachers, farmers and other community members for their favorite farm to school

programs. Awards will be announced before the end of school year, with one district from each state winning!

See how your school district is doing and vote for your school district to win a “One in a Melon” award [here](#).

The Farm to School Program: Past, Present & Future

Thanks to the leadership of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) and our congressional champions the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) included, for the first time, mandatory funding of \$5 million per year for the USDA Farm to School Grant Program. The Farm to School Grant Program has played an important role in supporting the growth of farm to school programs nationwide, as highlighted through the census.

Congress is currently going through the process of renewing authorization and funding for all school meal programs, including the [USDA Farm to School Grant program](#), through the [Child Nutrition Act Reauthorization](#) (CNR). CNR expired September 30, 2015, which means Congress is now significantly behind in reauthorizing several critical nutrition, anti-hunger, and education programs for our nation’s children.

NSAC is currently working with our partners at the National Farm to School Network, along with key congressional champions, to encourage Congress to pass a CNR package with a robust Farm to School Grant Program expeditiously.

Four months after the last iteration of CNR expired, on January 20, the Senate Agriculture Committee took a critical step forward by unanimously voting their new version of the bill out of committee. Titled “[Improving Child Nutrition Integrity and Access Act of 2016](#)”, the Senate committee bill includes an increase of \$5 million in annual grant funding for the Farm to School Grant Program (from \$5 to \$10 million per year), which would significantly help school meal programs to increase local food purchases and expand educational food and agriculture activities.

The House Education and Workforce Committee, which has jurisdiction over CNR in the House, has yet to release or consider in committee their own version of the bill. However, NSAC has it under good authority that staff and committee members are in the process of writing their version of the bill, which they have indicated they plan to mark-up in committee in the near future.

NSAC has been actively urging House Education and Workforce Committee members and staff to follow the Senate’s lead and submit a robust CNR that supports our children and our family farmers, including, of course, a strong Farm to School grant program.

Stay tuned for updates on the CNR process.
