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Co-op to Cafeteria: Building a Food Value Chain for Farm to School

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CO-OP TO CAFETERIA:
BUILDING A FOOD VALUE CHAIN
FOR FARM TO SCHOOL

By

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Portfolio

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INTRODUCTION

"I believe in the future of agriculture, with a faith born not of words but of deeds – achievements won by the present and past generations of agriculturalists; in the promise of better days through better ways, even as the better things we now enjoy have come to us from the struggles of former years."

– E.M. Tiffany, *"*The FFA Creed*"*

Born and raised on Iowa soil, naturally, my interest in food systems was planted early on in life. While I did not come from a farming background, I found myself drawn to the subject in high school during agriculture education classes and my involvement in the National FFA Organization, formerly Future Farmers of America. Historically, FFA is for farm kids. I remember my mom telling me, lovingly, "You can't join FFA; we're not farmers." Unbeknownst to her, the only requirement was to enroll in a class taught by a vocational agriculture instructor. And so it all began in Introduction to Agriculture, which I resented having to take from the start, as it was a prerequisite for horticulture, the course I actually wanted to take. One of the first assignments was to study the FFA Creed, and the first to memorize and present it to the class won a free t-shirt.

After many hours in the shower reciting, I won the t-shirt, and the rest was history.

With support from my agriculture education teacher and FFA advisor, I paved an untraditional path, like many others curious about food and agriculture at the interface of rural and urban divides. In those formative years, I experimented with starting flowers and vegetables in our school's greenhouse; hatched chickens from an incubator in the classroom; even wrote an argumentative speech in support of entomophagy (bugs are protein-packed!). This early exposure in agriculture education ignited my personal and professional interest in food systems.

Eventually, that interest serendipitously led me to the farm to school movement, where I found a natural home for my past experiences with my aspirations for food systems change.

During my graduate studies, my research on the farm to school movement began while searching for community-based solutions to our unsustainable food system. Despite the challenges posed by highly consolidated agricultural markets and capitalist enterprise (Philpott 2020), I found hope through the alternative food movement and its practitioners, who find opportunity where others see struggle (Carlisle 2022; White 2018). For example, many Indigenous communities have used the framework of food sovereignty to reclaim their cultural heritage. "Food is more than nutrition," foodways scholar Elizabeth Hoover asserts in her research with the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne, "it is bound up with social relations, culture, and meanings of health" (2017:169). Additionally, food cooperatives have enabled grassroots resistance and fostered collective autonomy, particularly among underserved and marginalized communities (White 2018). These movements offer solutions that come from within and encourage individuals to mobilize into coalitions. These values-centered groups bring together resources in a pragmatic, step-by-step approach to raise awareness and generate action within their communities (Hassanein 2003). Farm to school coalesces with these movements and can provide a community-based response for many of the concerns we find in our food system today, which I document in this portfolio.

The burgeoning farm to school movement offers a solution, albeit partial, at the intersection of food and education. Farm to school – or farm-to-school, FTS, or F2S – can be generally defined as initiatives that connect K-12 schools with local and regional producers in a way that generates benefits for both (Vallinatos et al. 2004). Farm to school brings together often siloed actors, such as producers, educators, and community members, under a common goal of

providing enriching education and nutritious foods to today's youth. In practice, these collaborations bring locally-procured, high quality food into cafeterias and incorporate community-based and experiential education in school gardens and classrooms throughout a student's primary and secondary education. In these ways, farm to school can effectively facilitate change in the food system by building a knowledgeable and participatory food citizenry (Hassanein 2008). This portfolio demonstrates the significance of farm to school within the alternative food movement through three elements from my graduate research and experience.

Element 1: Literature Review of Farm to School Practice and Policy

Farm to school has grown significantly since its emergence in American institutions in the early 1990s. Colleges and universities were among the first to begin shifting their food procurement to the local and regional scale (Orr 1990). An early emergence of the movement in K-12 schools can be found in 1996 when a cooperative agreement between the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and a small network of Black farmers in northern Florida began supplying freshly cut and bagged collard greens to a local school district serving a largely Black, rural population (Vallianatos et al. 2004). Today, over 8,000 school districts – urban and rural – across the United States have implemented farm to school programs (Bobronnikov et al. 2021). In the first element of this portfolio, I explore the history, challenges, and opportunities of farm to school from its origins to the present through a literature review. Through this research, I sought to answer the following: what exactly is farm to school; what are the current state and federal policies supporting it; and how can it promote transformation in our food system?

My findings highlight the pivotal role state and federal agencies play in supporting farm to school, as well as a gap in the research concerning the motivations of school food authorities

(SFAs) and other stakeholders who implement and promote these programs. This literature review lays the foundation for the rest of my portfolio, which emphasizes the need for strategic communication and storytelling in school food value chains.

Element 2: Communications and Marketing Plan of Value-Added Products for Schools

Around the 1990s, food value chains emerged as a relational model in agribusiness that merge economic priorities with social and environmental values. In doing so, food value chains shift competitive and win-lose business tactics towards cooperation and interdependence. The result is significant in two distinct ways. First and foremost, food value chains are fundamentally about relationships that seek to create welfare for all, from producer to consumer; each participant has a self-interest in the prosperity of other stakeholders. Second, as opposed to the undifferentiated and uniform commodity products of conventional supply chains, food value chains often emphasize product differentiation and "value-added" food products that extend beyond a food's objectivity (Diamond et al. 2014; Stevenson et al. 2011).

Schools and community-based institutions, such as hospitals and early care education centers, are closely aligned with the collaborative vision of food value chains. Recent survey data from SFAs around the United States indicate these institutional buyers are seeking to procure foods that benefit their community economically and socially, but are also cost-effective and desirable for clients (e.g., students) (Bobronnikov et al, 2021a). Traditionally, SFAs participating in the Food and Nutrition Services' Child Nutrition Programs receive a set amount of USDA commodity foods. These American-grown commodities are uniform, undifferentiated products which have received criticism for being too processed and of generally low quality, among other concerns.

One innovative opportunity to shift from these commodities is through raw food and value-added products offered from mid-scale food value chains. The nuanced, more-than-economic "value" in value-added products often alludes to distinguishing or differentiating characteristics of a product in terms of its locality, certification, or processing. The product could fit a definition of "local," for instance, such as being produced within the state or a certain number of miles from where it is purchased. The product might meet stringent regulations for certification of a specific quality, such as USDA organic or Fair Trade certification. Or, the definition may indicate the additional processing of raw ingredients into a more convenient product, such as being baked, diced, or blended.

Institutions, particularly schools, find many benefits from value-added products, especially processed ones. An often cited reason is for their ease in meal preparation and long-term storage compared to fresh produce. Many individual producers and producer cooperatives are limited in their capacities to process their fresh product, as well as overcome other barriers in school food service programs, such as price competing with USDA Foods or broadline distributors, inaccessible or inefficient procurement and delivery processes, and higher transaction costs (Bobronnikov et al. 2021).

The second element of this portfolio focuses on a novel and collaborative farm to school project in Montana that aims to overcome these barriers. As an experienced and reputable developer of locally-sourced and processed products for Montana's institutions over the last 20 some years, Mission West Community Development Partners (MWCDP) in Ronan, Montana was awarded a USDA Farm to School grant in 2022 to expand its capacity to develop local and regional value-added foods. With assistance from the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) and the Western Montana Growers Cooperative (WMGC), MWCDP released the project's flagship

product, Montana Marinara, in the fall of 2022. This innovative, value-added sauce combines Montana-grown ingredients with canned tomatoes from the USDA Foods in Schools program. A significant benefit of Montana Marinara is that SFAs can directly use allocated funds from their USDA foods budget to purchase the sauce while also using local ingredients that support regional producers and processors. Furthermore, the product is distributed through OPI, which reaches every school in the state, something that is beyond the capacity of WMGC to reach independently. The project has received positive feedback with 151 of Montana's 253 SFAs placing orders for the sauce in 2022.

For my part, I developed a specific, team-based communication plan for the project's implementation through 2025 that aims to educate and empower K-12 food service directors and other relevant audiences about the project's benefits and community embeddedness in Montana's local and regional food system. The plan showcases the project's pragmatic approach to addressing the common struggles of local food procurement, especially for rural and understaffed food service programs, and highlights its significance for Montana's students, producers, educators, and communities. Rooted in the principles of the farm to school movement, the plan provides effective communication and marketing strategies that further opportunities for education and relationships, while considering the reasonable capacity of MWCDP to execute the plan. The communications strategy aims to be a low-cost and teams-based messaging tool for a values-oriented procurement model which resonates with broad audiences, while also engaging directly with relevant stakeholders at the nexus of food, agriculture, and education.

Element 3: Profiles of Montana's Farm to School Food Service Directors

The third and final element of the portfolio demonstrates one of the communication plan's key tactics: storytelling. I developed five narrative profiles of food service directors and their farm to school programs in Montana. These profiles explore the motivations, challenges, and successes of food service directors in local food procurement, as well as other aspects of the farm to school model. These profiles were made in conjunction with the communication and outreach efforts of MWCDP, and will be shared with the Northwest Food Hub Network's stakeholders via published web pages on the Network's website. Printed versions will also be presented at Montana and Washington's School Nutrition Association Conferences and directly with the Network's K-12 customers. For these profiles, I organized in-depth and in-person interviews with food service directors representing a diverse range of schools from Montana's communities, including those from the Flathead and Crow Reservations, urban and rural areas, and with varying levels of experience with farm to school.

The interviews led to the discovery of educators, community members, and producers who worked with food service directors to create sustainable and successful farm to school programs. Follow-up interviews were conducted via Zoom with several of these individuals, and in addition to the food service director interviews, I used excerpts from transcripts to create a story-driven profile for each program. These profiles aim to serve as practical and inspiring examples of farm to school initiatives in Montana; celebrate teams making a difference in their communities; and offer learning opportunities for schools looking to implement similar programs. Conducting these interviews was immensely helpful in my conceptualizing of the day-to-day operations of a school food service program and the often additional work needed to facilitate farm to school programming. One piece of wisdom garnered from these interviews came from a food service director who, when asked what resources were key to farm to school

success, stated emphatically, “It’s the small town, the people on the front lines who make the biggest difference. They've got to want to, though.”

Conclusion

In the development of this portfolio, I am grateful for the opportunities that these projects have given me to travel across Montana and connect with the dense network of food system movers and shakers in this rural state. Like the interdisciplinary path I have taken during my graduate studies in the Environmental Studies Program at University of Montana, I resonate with the many ways I have encountered folks involved with farm to school–whether they be a producer, educator, food service director, or community advocate. I appreciate the wealth of knowledge they have imparted since this journey began. This portfolio is as much a culmination of my research as it is a documentation of the collective efforts of many who have paved the way for farm to school’s success in Montana.

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ELEMENT 1

What's Cooking for K-12 Schools and Local Food: A Review of Farm to School Practice and Policy

1 - The Case for Regional Food System Reformation in K-12 Education

Scholars, activists, and journalists have long recognized and documented the social and environmental unraveling that has resulted from the modern industrial and global food complex (Kloppenburg et al. 1996; Philpott 2020; Montalvo 2015; iPES-Food 2016). From the growing hypoxia zone in the Gulf of Mexico due to excessive nutrient run-off from commodity crops and concentrated animal feed operations within the American Corn Belt to the ever-increasing cultural and physical distance between the consumer and their food's origins, one need not look far for signs indicating to a system gone awry. The historic capitalization of cheap oil and exploitative labor practices by agribusinesses is emblematic of the system's relentless extraction from both the planet and people (Holmes 2013). While much more has been said to warrant a structural shift in our food system's trajectory, the conversation also requires steps toward practical solutions that emphasize broad engagement in food system transformation.

Some theorists posit reconnecting communities with local and regional food systems that "rebuild the middle" between niche, small-scale growers and large corporations as the corresponding alternative (Stevenson et al. 2011). Many of these place-based theories, such as "foodsheds," utilize direct-markets like community supported agriculture and farmers' markets as well as food hub intermediaries to facilitate the economic transition from the global to the local, albeit partially. Kloppenburg et al. argue these methods "supply fresher, more nutritious foodstuffs to small-scale processors and consumers to whom producers are linked by the bonds of community as well as economy" (1996:34).

One mechanism that would expedite these methods is through institutional purchasing from community-based organizations, such as hospitals, universities, and school districts. These community-oriented organizations not only have the procurement capabilities to economically

sustain a wide range of small- to mid-scale growers within a given area, but also reflect the altruistic values reflected in a local and regional food economy. Schools, in particular, offer a unique market where diverse stakeholders–students, school boards, parents, administration, legislators, etc.–can and do actively collaborate with one another to make local and regional food systems work possible and enriching for all. This economic, social, and educational model, coined "farm to school," is the matter discussed in this paper promoting food system transformation.

2 – Introduction to Farm to School

Farm to school (FTS) is an increasingly popular mechanism for regional food system development within the United States. Often described by alternative food system advocates as a "win-win-win" approach, FTS aims to facilitate a community good for producers, schools, and communities alike through its three-pronged approach: local food procurement, education and promotion, and school gardens (Azuma et al. 2001; Bisceglia et al. 2020). Ideally, local and small-scale producers and processors benefit from FTS through the institutionalized procurement of regionally-sourced fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, meat, dairy, and minimally-processed products for school meal programs. Research has found these new market channels are occurring predominantly in urban and lower income communities–an encouraging sign for FTS as a mechanism for equity and social justice in school food reform (Christensen et al. 2019). For schools, many FTS studies perceive a positive relationship between FTS education and promotion with improved childhood health and wellness (Prescott et al. 2020; Vallianatos et al. 2004; Weaver-Hightower 2011). FTS generates significant community benefit through the circulation of local food dollars, increased employment in food-related industries, and stronger

social ties through collaboration (Bisceglia et al. 2020; Christensen et al. 2018; Plakias et al. 2020; Wen and Connolly 2022).

Economic partnerships created through FTS can serve as the impetus for increased collaboration among diverse stakeholders from producers and distributors to parents and administrators–an important dimension of an emerging food democracy (Hassanein 2003). With all these purported benefits, one might ask: why is FTS not ubiquitous in American K-12 education? While scholars and practitioners identify many theoretical benefits, the long-term outcomes and impacts of FTS activities are inconclusive and require further and more rigorous study (Bobronnikov et al. 2021b; Prescott et al. 2020).

Rather than a prescriptive set of practices, the National Farm to School Network (NFSN) describes FTS activities in three broad categories: education and promotion; local food procurement; and school gardens (2022). Whether a school focuses on a single category or a synergy of two or all three, advocates argue FTS generates a net positive for all stakeholders. In reality, numerous structural challenges hinder the nationwide implementation of FTS. FTS can be an expensive lift for schools with limited resources. It may be difficult to access land for a school garden or maneuver the logistical hurdles to purchase, store, and process local foods, for example. The full-scale implementation of the FTS model typically requires significant economic, social, and political capital (Bobronnikov et al. 2021). That said, both the challenge and opportunity of FTS resides in coalition-building to overcome these obstacles. For example, the feasibility of acquiring local foods may be easier for some districts with streamlined access to local food distributors than it would be to facilitate a school garden program–at least initially. As a program gains popularity within its community, FTS "champions" can arise who lead and expand the program's initiatives into new frontiers. In short, FTS programs evolve by their

intersecting policies, partnerships, and geography that make each program economically and logistically solvent and unique. Recent USDA data and FTS research indicate a growing trend of FTS programs in the United States, indicating a call to action for scholars, practitioners and policymakers to address significant questions for the future of FTS (Bobronnikov et al. 2021).

The research questions I seek to address through this literature review are:

1) What are the current federal and state policies relevant to FTS?

2) How do these policies address the practical challenges facing FTS today?

3) To what extent does FTS further the alternative food movement and food system transformation?

To answer these questions, I begin by briefly describing my methodology for conducting the literature review. Then, I examine the holistic FTS approach through its three main themes: school gardens, education and promotion, and local food procurement. I incorporate in these descriptions an analysis of the 2019 United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm to School Census (2021)–which is the only comprehensive national FTS statistical database available–to indicate overall trends and significance of the FTS movement from a quantitative lens. Next, I investigate current federal and state FTS policies and incentives, touching briefly on their actualized or predicted implications. Finally, I present the ongoing challenges and opportunities facing FTS according to the literature, and conclude with recommendations to fill gaps in the research.

2.1 Literature Review Methodology

While still a newer subject of inquiry, existing FTS research is substantial. In 2021, USDA released a comprehensive FTS literature review detailing the activities, participation,

challenges and barriers documented between 2010 to 2019. Rather than duplicate USDA's work, the scope of this literature review focuses on the economic-related FTS research released since the USDA study, while also capturing the prevailing practical and theoretical themes of the movement. Literature for this review was searched for on Google Scholar and the University of Montana's Mansfield Library from Web of Science, Springer, ScienceDirect, ProQuest Central, Agriculture and Environmental Science, DOAJ, and Wiley Online Library databases using the following key terms: "farm to school," "FTS," "F2S," "local food procurement" and "school gardens." The scholarly journals publishing FTS research include ones with broad alternative food system audiences like *Agriculture and Human Values* and the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems and Community Development*. This review also includes journals with education and nutrition-specific objectives such as *Advances in Nutrition; Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior;* and *Journal of Child Nutrition Management.* Sources include two systematic reviews, and primary and secondary data, mainly from academics, but often alongside nonprofit and federal collaborators, such as NFSN and USDA.

3 – Farm to School Activities and Participation

This section discusses FTS participation broadly on the national scale. Each subsection describes the three main strategies of FTS–school gardens, education and promotion, and local food procurement–and includes case studies from the literature for context. This section will also integrate respondent data from the 2019 Farm to School Census to explicate general trends and denote the growing significance of the FTS movement.

The 2019 Farm to School Census published in 2021 sought responses from every school food authority (SFA) participating in the federally-administered National School Lunch Program

(NSLP) during the 2018-2019 school year (SY). Participants included public, private, and charter schools. NSLP sent surveys via email to nearly 19,000 SFAs with 12,634 responding, for a response rate of 67%. Of the respondents, 8,393 SFAs had participated in at least one FTS activity in SY 2018-2019, referred hereafter as 'FTS SFAs.' While nearly all FTS SFAs (88%) participated in local food procurement, almost half reported holding seven or more FTS activities across all three core elements (see Figure 1). Census data also suggest a surge in FTS growth nationwide as over half of FTS SFA respondents (57%) had started some aspect of FTS since SY 2016-2017. While most respondents came from very large or suburban SFAs, many of the most recent FTS programming came from rural SFAs with higher rates of reduced and free lunches than the average FTS SFA (Bobronnikov et al. 2021a).

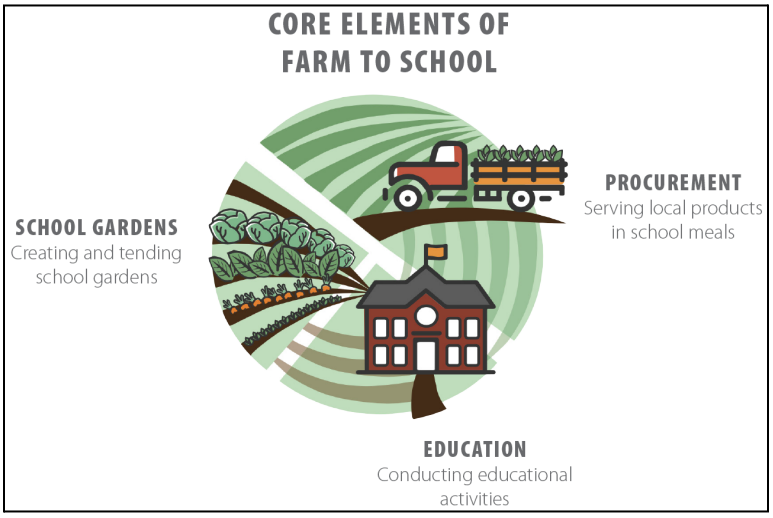

Figure 1. Source: Montana Farm to School

3.1 School Gardens

School gardens are experiential, place-based classrooms where education, production, and recreation intersect (Weaver-Hightower 2011). As of SY 2018-2019, 2,853 FTS SFAs (34%) reported having at least one edible garden. About half of these harvested produce for garden- or classroom-based educational activities, community donations, and/or school meal use (Bobronnikov et al. 2021a).

The societal knowledge and skills regarding food production, preparation, and consumption are systematically deteriorating, being lost, and/or devalued, a phenomena referred to as food system deskilling. And so, what educational mechanisms exist to intercede? Pedagogically, school gardens in K-12 education have the potential to address this need and connect with broader food system transformation goals (Cramer 2018; Cramer et al. 2019). School gardens and farms can be place-based outdoor learning centers for interdisciplinary, hands-on instruction. Math, social studies, and science instructors have indicated that "teach[ing] scientific methods [in school gardens] is more effective than teaching the concepts in the classroom alone" (Bobronnikov et al. 2021b:13). An often-cited example of this interdisciplinary approach is Alice Waters' Edible Schoolyard Project in Berkeley, California. Waters' work, despite critiques of elitism and universalism, is held as an exemplary pilot of school gardens and their potential for food system transformation (Cramer et al. 2019). Overall, FTS advocates argue for the implementation of school gardens as "sites for developing new tastes and skills that can, over time, address a wide range of concerns from agricultural sustainability to food security and healthy eating" (Cramer et al. 2019:508).

3.2. Promotion and Education

Educational and promotional tools implemented in FTS operate in explicit and implicit ways. For example, gardening, cooking, and taste tests are explicit, skill-based pedagogies, while posters, stickers, and nutritional brochures are more subtle promoters for changes in perceptions and behaviors (Weaver-Hightower 2011). Education and promotion are often integrated with procurement and school gardens, implying FTS practitioners may prefer and find more effective results with a synergistic approach (Prescott et al. 2020). According to the 2019 Farm to School

Census, most FTS SFAs (66%) utilize educational and promotional activities *with* local food procurement versus only procurement (22%) or education and promotion alone (12%) (Bobronnikov et al. 2021a). An example of this might mean inviting a producer, who grew a portion of the day's lunch, into the cafeteria for a "Meet the Farmer" event where students and staff can learn not only where their food comes from, but also how it was grown and by whom. In practice, the integration of education with local food procurement can erase the anonymity of a food's origin; recognize the agricultural skill and experience needed to produce food; and expand nutritional knowledge.

Some scholars emphasize that there is a critical need for schools to facilitate healthier eating habits through specified nutrition curricula (e.g., wellness plans). Established wellness policies were first mandated for all schools participating in the National School Lunch Program by the Child Nutrition and and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Reauthorization Act of 2004 and furthered developed by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. Cramer et al. (2019) argue for increasing nutrition education due to rising rates of obesity and to reverse the "McDonalization" of American society, that is, the cultural emphasis towards the uniformity and consistency offered with processed convenience foods. Corporations producing fast-food and highly processed food recognize the marketing potential offered by school cafeterias. One need look no further than the milk carton or vending machine to see that students are bombarded with advertisements in what one study called the food industry's "hidden curricula" (Weaver-Hightower 2011).

One example of how FTS advocates are combating such industry propaganda is through statewide promotional events highlighting local foods, such as "California Thursdays" and "Harvest of the Month" in Vermont, Montana, Florida and several other states (Bobronnikov et

al. 2021a). In Montana's 2015 statewide pilot project for "Harvest of the Month," over 30 schools and after school programs showcased a different Montana-grown food each month over a 10 month period in a snack or lunch, taste test, and educational activity. Newsletters, logos, and posters were provided to participating programs for classrooms, cafeterias, and home handouts. At the end of the pilot, the majority of students reported through taste test surveys to have "liked" or "loved" the Montana-sourced foods (Bark et al. 2017). The program has grown significantly to become a year-long showcase of Montana foods in 92 registered schools serving 17,434 students, according to the Montana FTS 2020-2021 annual report (MT FTS 2021).

3.3 Local Food Procurement

The case for "local" food procurement is relatively straightforward but difficult in practice. By increasing purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables sourced from local producers, this procurement strategy would ideally create stable, institutional markets for small- and middle-scale growers; encourage the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables in child and adolescent diets; and circulate more dollars through local communities. The 2019 Farm to School Census found local food procurement to be the most common introduction to the FTS model for many SFAs (Bobronnikov et al. 2021a).

What constitutes "local" is not succinctly defined in the literature, but frequently refers to food produced or processed within the state of origin or within 400 miles of the school district (Christensen et al. 2018; Plakis et al. 2020; Wen and Connolly 2022). Given the nuance surrounding the term "local," measuring the hypothesized outcomes for local food procurement is not simple in practice and there are substantial gaps in the literature (Prescott et al. 2020; Wen and Connolly 2022). This is discussed further in section 3 of this review regarding FTS policy.

Best estimates for total local food procurement purchases were collected in the 2019 Farm to School Census. In SY 2018-2019, FTS programs reported spending approximately $1.2 billion on local foods, excluding purchases from USDA Foods[1] and the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable[2] program. In the same year, each FTS SFA spent approximately $114,000 on local food purchases; these expenditures accounted for about 20% of each SFA's total food budget (Bobronnikov et al. 2021a).

While many schools have found reliable sources for local food, the two most cited barriers to local food procurement are the limited and seasonal availability of such products and associated costs (Bobronnikov et al. 2021a). Generally, schools pay a premium for raw local products, but there are also additional costs for processing equipment and labor needed to move from conventional "heat and serve" methods to scratch cooking in large, commercial kitchens (Fitzsimmons and O'Hara 2019; Stephens 2015; Wen and Connolly 2022).

Furthermore, there is little research available to effectively describe the economic benefit to communities generated by FTS markets. Christensen et al. (2018) proposed a framework adapted from USDA's "Local Food Economics Toolkit" to evaluate FTS local food procurement strategies and provided case studies to facilitate the framework's implementation. In their synthesis of six case studies, researchers found that in all districts they studied (two in Minnesota and one each in Oregon, Colorado, Florida, and Vermont), every dollar spent through local food procurement generated between $1.03 to $2.90 for local economies. On the production side, however, research by Izumi, Wright, and Hamm (2010:379) has shown that economically, procurement is a "relatively insignificant opportunity for farmers," due to the increase in related

[1]According to USDA's website, "The USDA Foods in Schools program supports domestic nutrition programs and American agricultural producers through purchases of 100% American-grown and -produced foods for use by schools and institutions participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), among other programs."
[2]Beginning in 1996, the Food and Nutrition Service, Agricultural Marketing Service and Department of Defense entered into a contract that allows states to use commodity food entitlement funds to expand their access of American-grown fruits and vegetables through DoD's supply lines.

costs such as heightened food safety and additional distribution. This suggests further research is needed on the non-economic motivations of producers collaborating with FTS projects, and the possibility of publicly and privately-funded incentive programs as well as cooperative cost-sharing approaches.

4 – Farm to School Policy

As with many facets of primary and secondary education, the preparation of school lunches is bound to federal and state laws and policies (Weaver-Hightower 2011). FTS scholars and practitioners would do well to understand these policies, and recognize "the importance of offering a financial, organizational, procurement, and delivery plan that can ease the transition to inclusion of fresh food" (Vallianatos et al. 2004:418). Federal and state FTS programs are designed to expand the horizon for FTS and not supplement pre-existing relationships, such as additional reimbursement for already locally-acquired foods, such as milk (Bobronnikov et al. 2021b).

Since the passage of the Richard B. Russell Act creating NSLP in 1946, school lunches have been administered in American schools as a social welfare program and "a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children" while simultaneously propping up the value of U.S. commodities by "encouraging the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food" (NSLP, 2). FTS, however, is larger than just school lunches. Many state and federal agencies have started to recognize the social, educational, and economic potential within the FTS model. Federal and state incentives for school gardens, FTS education and promotion, and local food procurement are relatively new to the movement. So new, in fact, according to the 2019 Farm to School Census, "over half of

FTS SFAs had no policies supporting farm to school or did not know whether they had any such policies" (Bobronnikov et al. 2021a:iii). This section details these incentives to date, what they are utilized for, and how FTS is supported financially.

4.1 Federal Policy

Utilizing schools in federal interventions for systemic issues like poverty, hunger, and nutrition is not new. An early emergence of federal involvement in K-12 schools can be found in 1996 when a cooperative agreement between the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and the New Florida Cooperative, a small network of Black farmers in northern Florida, facilitated the supply of freshly cut and bagged collard greens to a local school district serving a largely Black, rural population (Vallianatos et al. 2004). Through NSLP, school meals are of economic, social, and political interest to a variety of stakeholders, such as agribusinesses who maintain the price of U.S. commodity crops by the distribution of commodity surplus through USDA Foods since 1936 (Lyson 2017). Since the passage of the Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures Act in 2010–an amendment to NSLP bolstering FTS efforts and stricter nutrition standards–federal support for FTS has skyrocketed. Through the facilitation of technical expertise, best practices, and a $5 million annual FTS grant program applicable to all facets of FTS, advocates and practitioners have found a net benefit from increased federal support, though scholars argue these resources are still insufficient (Lyson 2017; Serrano 2017; Wen and Connolly 2022).

In addition to the annual FTS grant program, which awards no more than 75% of a program's operating costs maxed at $100,000 per project, USDA's Food and Nutrition Services has offered Supply Chain Assistance Funds since 2020 for local food procurement. These funds

were allocated to assist schools in acquiring unprocessed or minimally processed products such as fresh fruit, milk, and cheeses as a result of supply chain disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All school districts have or will receive an equitable distribution of funds based on enrollment with a minimum of $5,000 per district. Furthermore, the American Rescue Plan ordered the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service to administer the Local Food for Schools Cooperative Agreements (LFS). This policy distributes millions of dollars for local food procurement that local, state, and tribal governments can apply for and then redistribute to school districts accordingly, whether directly or through the allocation of a centrally-procured product, like flour or tomato sauce. LFS explicitly instructs schools and state education authorities to use the additional funds for the procurement of fresh, local foods from underserved and underrepresented producers and distributors within the state or 400 miles of the school. While these funding streams aim to lessen the costs of procurement, they do not address the need for additional equipment to process and store whole, fresh foods, nor do they include funding for additional kitchen staff, both substantial barriers noted by FTS SFAs (Bobronnikov et al. 2021b; Stephens et al. 2015, Wen and Connolly 2022).

The overall sustainability of these grant-funded programs is debatable, despite grant applications stipulating the need for outside funding and additional collaborators (Bobronnikov et al. 2021a). While it is an overall benefit for the additional federal support in recent years, FTS scholars also recognize their impacts vary greatly according to their state-by-state implementation (Bull 2022; Lyson 2017).

4.2 State Incentives

With the influx of FTS programs on the local level and increased federal funding, states are recognizing the need for statewide FTS coordination and support. The primary objective of statewide FTS incentive programs is to increase economic, social, and educational opportunities for local communities, a concept which often receives bipartisan support (Bull 2022; Serrano 2017). From 2002 to 2018, at least 15 state legislatures have passed FTS incentive programs with an array of priorities including the creation of task forces and coordinators, state-allocated or grant-awarded funding, logistical assistance, and increased school reimbursements for local food procurement (Bull 2022; Bobronnikov et al. 2021a). As of 2022, 41 states have passed general FTS policies or resolutions; yet, only 25 of these offer a funded statewide staff position or program for FTS coordination (Wen & Connolly 2022). A bill in Michigan, for example, directed the state's Department of Education to create an opt-in grant that reimburses schools $0.10 per meal served with local fruits and vegetables. Compared with competitive grant cycles, opt-in funding is often a more equitable pool of funds which consequently recruits higher participation from lower income and more rural school districts (Giombi et al. 2020; Long et al. 2021). Unfunded policies, however, still have potential to make significant impacts. Lyson's 2017 analysis of statewide FTS policies and resolutions finds that "states with school food legislation that sets standards that exceed federal USDA school meal standards and states with strong laws regulating competitive foods are associated with lower student body mass index status" (p. 28). Additional study of statewide FTS incentive programs is needed, particularly documenting their purported benefits, as well as an effective design and collaborative structure that explores the heterogeneity of statewide programs to date (Bull 2022).

5 – Farm to School Challenges & Opportunities

As the FTS movement gains nationwide popularity and more resources are allocated, the current obstacles in its path may shift entirely, especially as more case studies are published and the movement continues to evolve at a rapid pace. For example, in 2001, FTS scholars Azuma et al. advocated for bonus reimbursement for local foods through NSLP, a clear directive from USDA to SFAs to procure foods locally, and for states to initiate complementary FTS programs. In recent years, FTS programs in British Columbia have found that "an earlier focus was in-school salad bars, stocked as much as possible with locally-grown produce, whereas the broader focus now includes experiential food literacy education and strengthened connections between school programming and community-based food systems work" (Powell and Whitman 2017:201). This section details the prevailing practical and theoretical challenges, as well as opportunities, facing FTS today.

5.1 Student Perspectives

Student perspectives in FTS are a recurring topic for future study. Most research regarding nutrition and eating habits use self-reported data from children. While relatively easy to implement, this reporting method likely overestimates fruit and vegetable consumption (Prescott et al. 2020). Due to affirmative bias, many children–like adults–feel the need to appease societal expectations of a "healthy diet" in their response by claiming higher intake of fruits and vegetables. It may also suggest children forget or have a difficult time assessing serving sizes (Taylor and Johnson 2013). Future studies could incorporate methodologies that assess not only short-term but also long-term outcomes of FTS interventions on eating habits that mitigate these commonly-cited struggles (Bobronnikov et al. 2021a).

5.2 School Food Authorities

While FTS is necessarily collaborative work, scholars recognize the impetus for FTS begins with individuals, namely the SFA (Fitzimmons 2019; Long et al. 2021; Lyson 2017). The SFA–a role also referred to as food service director or director of nutrition–can play a critical role in facilitating elements of FTS, especially in local food procurement. In their review of the FTS literature, Wen and Connolly (2022:313) conclude, "An important driver of the successful implementation of a farm to school program is the presence of an enthusiastic and dedicated 'champion,' usually a food service director, who is willing to overcome these procurement barriers." While there is considerable research on local food procurement, the SFA's socio-political motivations for extending beyond their job description to implement FTS is not well-documented (Bobronnikov et al. 2021a).

Furthermore, the SFA is faced with a multitude of economic and logistical challenges. Broadly speaking, (re)building the necessary infrastructure to work with whole, fresh foods is crucial (Stephens et al. 2015). On the supply side, SFAs are often working with multiple farmers to source local produce, which is usually sold at a premium compared to USDA commodities, in a process often muddled with transaction costs, inefficiencies, and complexities. Food hubs, cooperatives or farmer's markets may facilitate sustainable supply chains (Vallianatos 2004); yet, less than 10% of SFAs currently use this marketing channel. Further research is needed to understand the benefits and deterrents with direct markets and regional intermediaries with SFAs (Bobronnikov et al. 2021a; Wen and Connolly 2022).

There are also discrepancies in what constitutes "local" food procurement. In SY 2018-2019, one out of three FTS SFAs did not have or did not know of a set definition for what constitutes a "local" product (Bobronnikov et al. 2021a). The lack of a definition for locality is

concerning not only for distributors looking to sell "local" products, but also for small-to mid-scale producers engaging in institutional markets. Traditional school food supply chains from USDA Foods and DoD Fresh to broadline distributors can lack sufficient product tracing between schools and producers. Farms may lack the knowledge they are selling directly to schools, and SFAs are not effectively informed on how a product was sourced (Janssen 2014). Many FTS scholars advocate that local producers are instrumental to FTS, and "if farmers are unable to participate or derive no benefit, the potential benefits of FTS will not be realized" (Conner et al. 2012:322, as cited in Christensen et al. 2019:78). More research is needed on best practices for local food procurement and additional collaboration among SFAs to overcome these common obstacles (Bobronnikov et al. 2021a; Wen and Connolly 2022).

5.3 Neoliberalism Critique of Farm to School

For the scope of this literature review, the nuances of local food procurement have been explored; yet, purchasing is only one activity–and often the precursor to many others–within the much broader FTS movement. Critics of the movement have suggested FTS reforms are entirely market-based solutions, unlikely to result in the transformative food system change proponents claim; they argue that emphasis on procurement and FTS' devolution from the public to private sector will lead the movement to participate in or reproduce the same neoliberal tendencies of the traditional school food system. Two such critics, Allen and Guthman (2006:412), argue, "No doubt the constant struggle and fire fighting needed to establish FTS programs obscure the presence of alternatives to neoliberalism." This perspective, however, ignores the precedence of FTS as a grassroots, collaborative effort and the creativity needed to reform a deeply political institution like K-12 education. While scholars recognize the importance of individuals in the

work, such as SFAs, there is also extensive documentation of collaborators including universities, nonprofits, food distributors, producers, parents and teachers enacting and sustaining FTS programs (Azuma et al. 2001; Bark et al. 2017; Gilbert et al. 2018). Rather than succumbing to individualism, FTS proponents suggest it widens and expands the economic, social and political relationships required to reform K-12 education and offers an inclusive and equitable pathway to food system transformation where the opportunity is ripe.

Scholars recognize that FTS practitioners "need to think more creatively about how to conceptualize the alternative institutional designs," while simultaneously seeking a pragmatic approach by "endeavoring to achieve equity, public funding, and state support for their proposed reforms" (Kloppenburg and Hassanein 2006:420). There is a dearth in evidence documenting the merits and potentials of FTS to transition to a more just, equitable food system, but "the critiques [of FTS] are largely theoretical and generally do not account for the complex outcomes of real-world FTS programs" (Bisceglia et al. 2021). As FTS programs continue to develop nationwide, practitioners and researchers should pay attention to the critics, yet also maintain that reformist work is imperfectly pragmatic. There is no presently-achievable "utopia."

5.4 Farm to School and Food Democracy

Food democracy is a concept with three core dimensions: meaningful participation, collaborative work among organizations, and orientation towards the common good (Hassanein 2008). FTS advocates and practitioners can find these dimensions in all facets of FTS work, and frequently recognize FTS as an innovative model in shaping an emerging food citizenry. "Food establishes who we are," Weaver-Hightower (2011:18) observes, "in gendered, sexualized, racial and ethnic senses, and who we are through food has social consequences." I argue the social

consequences of FTS derive from rich, meaningful participation by individuals that is generative for developing self and group identity in positive ways. Unfortunately, traditional school lunches may be sites of stigmatization by separating students by rigid class structures, these being free, reduced, and paying statuses. FTS programming can address these stigmatizing relationships by ensuring equitable access to healthy, delicious school meals through the support of universal free meal programs as well as meaningful participation in cooking classes, taste tests, and school gardens. Giombi and Stephens (2018) recommend collaborating with external partners such as universities and state agencies to further support and inform the prioritization of equity in FTS program development and evaluation.

Collaborative work abounds with FTS initiatives and, again, is essential to the movement's success and sustainability. "One unifying characteristic among states [with FTS incentives]," Bull (2022:108) finds, "was the presence of strong partnerships with businesses, nonprofits, institutions or agencies." When students visit farms, or when parents, school staff, and producers start a FTS program, coalition building affirms the importance and value for regional food systems (Azuma et al. 2001). While the motivation may start with FTS, these unique partnerships may then spark additional food system collaboration by expanding opportunities for local food processing or exploring other farm to institution markets, for example (Cramer et al. 2019; Valliantos et al. 2004).

The ideal result of FTS programs is a knowledgeable food citizenry actively engaging with food system transformation through daily participation. In actualizing this, FTS diversifies school food systems, and generates greater community good through the production, distribution, consumption, and disposal of food, ideally through a relational paradigm versus a transactional one (Gilbert et al. 2018). Rigorous research documenting the extent to which these perceived

long-term outcomes are realized would give further credence to the movement and provide helpful methodologies in evaluating FTS's complex, holistic approach to move towards food democracy.

5.5 Farm to School and Food Sovereignty

Another ideological framework FTS aligns with is food sovereignty. A term utilized primarily in Indigenous communities for reclaiming autonomy of ancestral foodways from colonization, food sovereignty has contextual meaning. One working definition for food sovereignty comes from the 2007 Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty, which summarized the framework as "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems" (Powell et al. 2018). Food sovereignty and FTS may share many broad goals, particularly in strengthening local food systems, supporting producers, and reducing food insecurity. Scholars and practitioners of these movements can–and already do–work synergistically by linking often consumer-focused and economic concerns like procurement, nutrition, and food literacy to broader, systemic change with social goals.

One example of how FTS can support food sovereignty is through the statewide instruction of Indigenous history and culture. The 1999 Montana state legislature passed House Bill 528 affirming the state constitutional mandate requiring every school in Montana to implement Indian Education for All (IEFA). The goal of IEFA is to encourage every Montanan to "learn about the distinct and unique heritage of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner" (MTOPI, 2022). Through this initiative, Montana schools instruct Native and non-Native students alike in the understanding of Native languages, traditions, and customs.

Dugan Coburn, the IEFA director for the Great Falls School District and enrolled member of the Blackfeet Nation, uses the framework to instruct Native and non-Native students about traditional foodways of the Blackfeet. One activity Coburn facilitates is a bison harvesting ceremony where he instructs students on the way bison were used for food, fiber, and tools. He also celebrates their unique, ecological role in supporting prairie ecosystems when bison roamed the Great Plains by the millions (Birkenbuel 2023).

While Montana's Indian Education for All framework and Coburn's example are seemingly rare in the United States, the broader FTS movement has the opportunity to similarly build collaborative social goals alongside community partners to highlight the political and environmental context of food systems transformation. Additional research is needed in elucidating the relationship between FTS and food sovereignty as a mechanism for community food security and cultural significance of traditional food systems.

6 – Conclusions

FTS is both a practical and theoretical framework. Applied, FTS can include activities such as hands-on experiential learning in school gardens, integrated agricultural and nutrition education, and local food procurement in school meal programs. Theoretically, FTS uses these methods to expand food literacy, empower local communities to advance economic and social goals, and alleviate food insecurity.

In recent years, federal and state legislatures have recognized the potential for FTS to facilitate community good, and have passed resolutions and incentive programs in support of the movement. The 2019 Farm to School Census denotes a growing trend of FTS nationwide

indicating a substantial need for further financial, logistical, and political resources to support burgeoning efforts.

Next steps in FTS research should entail further examination of SFAs and their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes towards the FTS model. Case studies on best practices in local food procurement, especially with direct market channels and regional intermediaries like food hubs and cooperatives, may prove the most salient for SFAs seeking to diversify their purchasing. Research of student attitudes towards local foods as well as their long-term eating habits may also prove useful for further nutritional interventions using the FTS model. Finally, as a mechanism of the alternative food movement, FTS practitioners and scholars should also heed critiques to ensure FTS maintains a holistic and transformative endeavor. Only then will FTS achieve broader food system transformation theorized in the like-minded movements of food democracy and food sovereignty.

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MISSION WEST COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

ELEMENT 2

Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center
Strategies in Farm to School Communications
for 2023 – 2025

Table of Contents

Section I. Plan Overview

MMFEC Farm to School Positional Statement

The Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center (MMFEC) is dedicated to the development of a sustainable food system in Montana and the wider Pacific Northwest. Rooted in our regional community, MMFEC was established in 1999 as a division of Mission West Community Development Partners (formerly Lake County Community Development Corporation) in Ronan, MT. Local and regional partnerships are essential to the creation of a robust, adaptable, and self-sufficient local food economy for the communities we serve. This collaborative approach has naturally coincided with farm to school initiatives to bring nutritious foods into schools; provide agricultural education through local foods to students and adults alike; and connect individuals and organizations along the local food value chain.

Farm to school is a growing institutional market for Montana producers and processors. In the 2021-2022 school year, Montana schools served 22.5 million meals; these meals were free to all Montana students enrolled in eligible schools under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) from March 2020 through the 2021-22 school year. In the atypical year, food service directors in Montana K-12 spent over $244,000 across 84 schools and afterschool sites on local foods, excluding milk (MT OPI 2022). Conventional supply chains were clearly unreliable during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and have meant food shortages and distribution issues for many school food service programs. Accordingly, school food authorities are increasingly looking to the local scale for healthy, tasty, and reliable foods for their meal service programs.

To meet this growing demand, MMFEC plays a facilitator role in leveraging years of market research and development, federal grant writing, and picky-eater-approved farm-to-school products to its collaborative approach. This work has been driven by MMFEC's core beliefs in the farm-to-school movement. We believe farm to school:

- Promotes economic and social development in local and regional communities;
- Improves the health and nutrition of school-age children, particularly youth on the margins; and
- Establishes cooperative and mutually-beneficial partnerships with shared risk and investment, which are fundamental to the movement, especially in local food procurement.

MMFEC is uniquely positioned to provide locally-sourced, value-added products for K-12 school meal programs which are: 1) affordable for schools' price-sensitive budgets; 2) nutritious and meet United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) meal pattern regulations; and 3) accessible for eligible schools in terms of distribution and storage.

MMFEC Farm to Institution History

In the early 2000's, MMFEC began developing its farm-to-institution program. MMFEC worked with the Western Montana Growers Cooperative (WMGC), a regional marketing and producer cooperative, and three rural local school districts in a pilot farm-to-school program that focused on pre-planning, production, and processing of five local fruit and vegetable products with an intent to purchase produce considered second standard quality. Pilot products developed included: cut carrots and apples, pitted and frozen Flathead cherries; frozen wedged apples; and blanched and frozen squash cubes. Most of these products were used directly for the school breakfast and lunch programs. During this time, MMFEC evaluated production needs and purchased equipment for peeling, dicing, slicing, and packaging of produce in order to develop an efficient and cost effective processing line. MMFEC's processing infrastructure created new markets for the WMGC resulting in an additional $20,000 in sales for second quality fruits and vegetables in 2011. The 2011 farm-to-school pilot project resulted in solidifying relationships between WMGC, MMFEC, and area schools, which

readied partners for the full implementation of the farm-to-school program in 2012. With the addition of a cost analysis tool developed by the Montana Manufacturing Extension Center, MMFEC was able to develop competitive pricing for the pilot products, which increased sales by 80% from 2012 to 2013 and allowed more schools to purchase the products.

In 2011, MMFEC also collaborated with the Oregon State University Food Innovation Center to develop a Montana Lentil Burger to meet the increasing needs of food service operations to provide alternative protein items. The burger is a unique center-of-the-plate item that features many Montana crops: lentils, oats, barley, eggs, flax seed, bell peppers, onions, and carrots. The Montana Lentil Burger was originally developed for K-12 institutions, but has found more success with University clientele and is an item that the University of Montana and Montana State University consistently order through the WMGC. MMFEC has held meetings with various institutional stakeholders to identify potential new value-added products such as a beef-lentil crumble and other minimally-processed fruits and vegetables.

Since the early 2010's, MMFEC has built on the success in developing value-added products, including the Montana Lentil Burger, beef-lentil crumble, and minimally processed produce, with a Specialty Crop Block Grant that supported the development of an additional six value-added local food products for institutions, including a blended beef-lentil-mushroom meatball, tomato sauce, breakfast bar, vegetable tots, hummus and salsa. The tomato sauce recipe, in particular, fueled new partnerships between MMFEC and other farm to school partners across Montana.

Expanding Farm to School Value-Added Products for Montana K-12

Montana Marinara is the flagship product of MMFEC's 2022 USDA Farm to School grant: *Developing and Distributing Montana Sourced Value-Added Products to Montana Schools through Collaborative Partnerships.* It's the first of MMFEC's value-added

products to combine a commodity from USDA Foods in cooperation with the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI). By incorporating canned tomatoes from USDA Foods with local ingredients, the marinara is not only affordable for tight school food budgets, but also able to be distributed statewide through OPI's distribution network, whereas previous value-added collaborations were limited to WMGC's more limited region.

For its initial distribution in 2023, using a picky-eater approved MMFEC recipe, the WMGC supplied MMFEC with carrots and onions from Harlequin Produce; butternut squash and onions from Lowdown Farm; onions from Five Fox Farm; onions from Rocky Mountain Produce; and safflower oil from Oil Barn. These ingredients were processed at MMFEC with OPI's canned tomatoes from USDA Foods. WMGC distributed the ingredients to MMFEC and then delivered the frozen product to OPI in Helena for statewide distribution in spring 2023.

Over the next two years, MMFEC will continue to collaborate with an advisory council of food service directors and other statewide stakeholders to develop two additional value-added products. This strategic communications and marketing plan aligns with the grant project objectives, and aims to provide the necessary promotional framework needed to achieve the initiative's overall goal:

Improve access to local foods in eligible Montana schools through local food procurement and agricultural education.

Montana Marinara Farm to School Working Group

The grant work plan identifies a diverse and well-equipped working group to expand local food opportunities for K-12 schools in Montana. The core partners are:

- **Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center (MMFEC):** As the only USDA and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) designated shared food processing center in the region, MMFEC incubates start-up food product enterprises, strengthens Montana's food supply chain, and bolsters our local food economies. At MMFEC, product development experience and processing infrastructure work together to bring Montana Marinara—and other local products—to fruition.
- **Western Montana Growers Cooperative (WMGC):** Founded in 2003, WMGC is a coalition of growers in the Flathead, Jocko, Mission and Bitterroot Valleys—including the farms behind Montana Marinara's locally grown ingredients. WMGC has some two decades of experience collaborating with MMFEC as a marketing, processing, distribution, and aggregation partner.
- **MT Office of Public Instruction (OPI):** OPI empowers local school nutrition professionals as community leaders to provide equitable access to healthy food and environments that support the success of Montana's children. As the USDA Foods in Schools program coordinator in Montana, the agency facilitates the ordering and distribution of Montana Marinara to schools across the state.
- **Montana No Kid Hungry**: MT No Kid Hungry is a public-private partnership between Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services and the nonprofit Share Our Strength. MT No Kid Hungry collaborates with communities around healthy food solutions to curb hunger today while cultivating systemic change alongside community leaders to end hunger for the future. MT No Kid Hungry has been an indispensable ally in the project, providing grant funding, strategic guidance, and creating new partnerships to support our local-first approach to meeting school nutrition needs.
- **The Northwest Food Hub Network (NWFHN):** NWFHN is a collective of farmer-owned cooperative food hubs in Montana and Washington that connects organizations like school districts, hospitals, and colleges with local,

sustainable food. Currently, the NWFHN includes three food hubs - WMGC, LINC Foods, and Puget Sound Food Hub. The Network provides shared infrastructure and cultivates partnerships to support market access and reinvestment in its 200+ source farms and their communities.

Why a Communications Plan?

MMFEC has been in partnership with WMGC for nearly two decades. The current project is unique, however, as it expands the values-aligned partnership to combine Montana-grown ingredients with USDA Foods commodities through OPI's distribution infrastructure as well as additional cooperative food hubs through the Northwest Food Hub Network. This innovative project has gained attention from states and nationwide organizations, including the National Farm to School Network.

Therefore, to promote its novelty and drive momentum for future collaborations, a strategic communication and marketing plan is essential. Apart from the project's national prominence, it reflects MMFEC's mission and vision to communicate the story of Montana Marinara and future products with values-based marketing activities. To encourage Montana K-12 food service directors to participate and support Montana Marinara and future efforts of this partnership, they need to be aware of its benefits for their program, students, and community. Furthermore, establishing trust and credibility among the project's stakeholders is critical for its success and any future endeavors of the working group. As this project is untraditional and uncharted territory, a communication strategy that utilizes traditional media, social media, and email tactics is necessary to convey its significance and connective tissue (Miller, 2021).

Communication Goals & Objectives

This communications plan is a program-specific tool for MMFEC staff under the organizational leadership of MWCDP. Given the far-reaching implications of the

project's communications, the goals and objectives of each organizational layer are strategically aligned to ensure consistent and efficient messaging.

MWCDP Communication Goals

- Goal: To cost effectively inform and engage the public with MWCDP's vision, mission, strategies, goals, programs and capabilities.
    - Objective 1. To clearly and concisely convey MWCDP's vision, mission, strategies, and top-level goals and objectives for MWCDP and the region it serves.
    - Objective 2. To publicize MWCDP's programs and capabilities.
    - Objective 3. To provide easily accessible, correct, and timely information to the public about MWCDP programs, events, and public meetings.
    - Objective 4. To grow community participation by promoting the benefits and features of MWCDP's programs, events, and public meetings.

MMFEC Communication Goals

As the leading food processing facility in the Northwest region, MMFEC offers distinctive services to agriculture producers and food related entities that encourage regional economic growth and support local and regional food systems alike.

MMFEC specializes in value-added programs and is the only USDA and FDA inspected processing facility in the region. Our staff is professional, experienced, and easy to work with. We prioritize cleanliness, employ diligent food safety protocols, and exercise methodical testing to ensure the highest quality in the industry. MMFEC offers a range of businesses and product development services from testing and market development to business planning and financial services. We supply technical assistance services and education to clients and employees and offer various training opportunities to support growth and development of food and agriculture businesses across Montana.

As a member of the Montana Food and Agriculture Development Network, MMFEC works with various organizations, communities, and demographics, such as the Montana Organic Association, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and various school programs to serve a crucial role in the regional food system. We serve kids, families, communities in need, local farms, markets, co-ops, woman-owned and indigenous businesses, small businesses, and local communities, thus playing a vital part in the fight for food sovereignty and equality.

MMFEC Farm to School Communication Goals

<u>Goal 1: Increase awareness of and participation in MMFEC Farm to School programming for Montana school food service directors and their staff.</u>

- Objective 1.1: Increase overall sales of MMFEC's value-added local food products by 10% by September 2025.
- Objective 1.2: Increase the percentage of Montana school districts who purchase MT Marinara and/or other MMFEC value-added products distributed through OPI from 60% to 75% (151 to 190 of 253 districts) by September 2025.
    - Activity 1.2.1: Connect with the 102 school districts who didn't buy MT Marinara in 2022.
- Objective 1.3: Send one newsletter per month to the complete school food authority contact list through the NWFHN.
    - Activity 1.1.1: Update contact list quarterly to ensure accuracy.
- Objective 1.4: Utilize MT OPI's communication channels with food service directors.
    - Activity 1.4.1: Share timely, statewide, value-added procurement project updates, like MT Marinara, with MT OPI's Lunchline as appropriate.

    - Activity 1.4.2: Develop newsletter columns to be included with MT OPI's USDA Foods distribution - story of product, source farms, etc. Column will be included in the newsletter when products are delivered.
- Objective 1.5: Participate with on-the-ground farm to school efforts by facilitating site visits with the farm to school Advisory Council.
    - Activity 1.5.1: Offer a visit to every school on the Advisory Council during product promotional campaigns, like Marinara Madness.
    - Activity 1.5.2: Assist in gathering student feedback at site visits using taste tests, surveys, etc. and share results with schools.
- Objective 1.6: Develop easy-to-use tools for the farm to school Advisory Council to communicate with colleagues about MMFEC programming.
    - Activity 1.6.1: Generate a list of ways FSDs interact with their stakeholders (menus for families, morning announcement slide for students/staff, flyers in kitchens for staff, etc.) through discussions with the Advisory Council and develop templates for identified tools.
    - Activity 1.6.2: Identify channels and shareable content for peer-to-peer engagement among food service directors.
    - Activity 1.6.3: Create a formal agreement between FSDs on farm to school Advisory Council with MMFEC documenting responsibilities and expectations of the role annually in August (see MT Farm to School leadership team agreement for example).
- Objective 1.7: Develop promotional materials such as point of sales and product spec sheets for effective marketing of value-added products.

<u>Goal 2: Build continued trust and transparency in the MMFEC Farm to School program with respected partners through consistent communication and engagement.</u>

- Objective 2.1: Collaborate with trusted partners to communicate about MMFEC programming, including MT OPI, MT Farm to School, MT Team Nutrition, MT Department of Agriculture, MT No Kid Hungry, and the NWFHN.
    - Activity 2.1.1: Tag at least one relevant partner in every MMFEC farm to school post.
    - Activity 2.1.2: Use at least three hashtags commonly used by partners in every MMFEC farm to school post.
    - Activity 2.1.3: For promotional campaigns, develop a communication overview including sample language for social media posts, newsletter sample, graphics, and timeline to share with partners.
    - Activity 2.1.4: Sharing MMFEC updates and perspective in quarterly MT Farm to School Local Food Procurement, K-12 Education, and Beef to School working groups.
- Objective 2.2: When appropriate, invite project partners to collaborate with MMFEC at promotional events and in outreach materials.
    - Activity 2.2.1: Share representation at booths and presentations during statewide conferences and meetings, such as the MT SNA Summer Conference and NWFHN Summit.
    - Activity 2.2.2: Highlight project partner perspectives in videos and outreach content.
    - Activity 2.2.3: Invite partners on school visits during product promotional campaigns.
- Objective 2.3: Participate in farm to school-relative promotional campaigns organized by regional partners.
    - Activity 2.3.1: Check-in with partner organizations monthly for upcoming events and strategize a way to collaborate [directly or indirectly].

- Activity 2.3.2: Review partners' social media pages once a week and share upcoming programs and deadlines with MMFEC audiences.

Goal 3: Increase outreach to other Farm to School stakeholders about MMFEC programming, including MT legislators, school administrators, educators, and parents.

- Objective 3.1: Create at least two Farm to School social media posts per month during the school year (August–May) and one post per month in the summer (June & July).
  - Activity 3.1.1: Respond to every comment on all publishing platforms for farm to school posts within 48 hours, except for comments explicitly tagging others.
- Objective 3.2: Identify and conduct outreach to at least 1 partner for each professional stakeholder group to communicate farm to school programming.
  - Activity 3.2.1: Engage MT Legislators through the Grow MT Food Policy Coalition by providing briefs for committees and task forces on the economic, educational, and nutritional benefits of farm to school products during the legislative session.
  - Activity 3.2.2: Engage Montana school administrators through No Kid Hungry by providing farm to school information at the School Administrators of Montana (SAM) annual conference.
  - Activity 3.2.3: Engage key Montana educators by exploring collaborative opportunities with OPI's Career and Technical Specialists:
  - Activity 3.2.4: Organize a list of key farm to school stakeholders and advocates for future promotional campaigns, profiles, and resources. Update monthly.
- Objective 3.3: Identify language and communication mediums to use when conducting outreach to specific stakeholders.

    - Activity 3.3.1: Generate an ongoing list of key words/phrases and mediums that connect with our specific audiences: food service directors, school admin, legislators, educators, parents, and students. Update monthly.
- Objective 3.4: Create and share quarterly farm to school success stories.
    - Activity 3.4.1: Identify and curate a list of potential farm to school programs within our network to profile.
    - Activity 3.4.2: Share other relevant farm to school stories created by MW's network of partners like MT Farm to School, MT Team Nutrition, etc.
- Objective 3.5: Create strategic campaign overviews to share with partners outlining the campaign's timeline, target audiences, calls to action, and methods of participation.
    - Activity 3.5.1: Share farm to school product campaign press releases and text language with newspaper, radio, and TV outlets in communities with participating school districts.
- Objective 3.6: Promote and communicate the value of procuring value-added products through sales representation and trade show attendance, such as the Montana School Nutrition Association's summer conference.

Section II. Plan Background Analysis

Target Market Segmentation

MMFEC specializes in business-to-business (B2B) relationships, providing products and services to institutional and entrepreneurial businesses to meet their operational needs. Our primary audience for farm to school value-added products is food service directors who prioritize local procurement of nutritious and high-quality foods for students and staff. Within the framework of USDA's Food and Nutrition Service Programs, such as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP), K-12 food and nutrition services function as non-profit businesses, although they can be financially self-sufficient and even profitable.

Communication strategies to reach food service professionals will differ from business-to-consumer (B2C) strategies used to reach students or staff (Miller, 2021). While food service directors are the primary audience, MMFEC recognizes the collaborative nature of farm to school initiatives. Local food procurement is one aspect of an interdisciplinary model that includes educational and demonstrative activities. While not the primary audience, educators and community members often serve as "connectors" who can influence and assist food service directors in purchasing local, value-added products. MMFEC's secondary audiences, which include school administrators, state legislators, teachers, parents, producers, and students, are potential connectors to food service directors.

The following section provides a market analysis for each of MMFEC's target audiences. The demographics section uses statewide research of each audience's general age, gender, education, and related interests in MMFEC's farm to school products and services. The challenges category outlines major concerns for the audience that are most relevant to MMFEC's programming. The next two categories, language and content, provide a brief overview of the audience's responsibilities and "shop" words

and phrases. Taken together, these criteria inform the appropriate messengers, call to action, and content for each audience.

K-12 Food Service Directors

- Demographics
  - Generally, food service directors (FSDs) have some combination of prior food service and/or nutrition experience. FSDs interested in MMFEC's products often value serving a local item for its higher nutritional quality, better taste, and support for sustainable agriculture; sustainable in this case meaning small-scale, family-owned, etc. Pertaining to MMFEC's prior farm-to-school efforts, these FSDs are geographically within the distribution radius of the WMGC and, for the MT Marinara project and future collaborations with USDA foods, OPI's statewide distribution network.
- Challenges
  - A lack of local product supply and distribution issues
  - Labor shortages in kitchen staff due to low wages/lack of funding
  - Rising operational costs such as procuring food and processing equipment
- Role & Language
  - Food service directors are responsible for meeting USDA's regulatory school meal patterns while also managing inventory, staff, and day-to-day kitchen operations and budgets. Given the complexity of the role, food service directors are keen on problem-solving and business-applicable language.
  - *Words and phrases*: Innovative, forward-thinking, cutting-edge, solutions, ideas, increased sales, nutritious, easy-to-prepare, time-saving, reducing waste, conserving resources, win-win, fresh, operations
- Messengers

- ➢ MMFEC Advisory Council
- ➢ MT OPI Food Distribution Manager/Farm to School Specialist

❖ Message/Call to Action

- ➢ "Including local food on your school menus doesn't have to be complicated or break your budget. Thoughtfully purchasing local foods can help you meet your nutrition goals and meal pattern requirements, support your local farmers, and increase student engagement during meal time."

❖ Applicable Outreach Content

- ➢ Presentations during OPI Wednesday Webinars over Zoom.
- ➢ Statistics on cutting labor time and costs with value-added products; stories and case studies for do's and don'ts of incorporating local food procurement into menus and budgets; creative, low-cost ways to showcase and celebrate local food offerings during meal time.

School Boards

❖ Demographics

- ➢ According to the Montana School Board Association, Montana's 1,400 elected trustees volunteer over 750,000 hours overseeing 20,000 public employees and their service to 150,000 children (2022).

❖ Challenges

- ➢ Improving student achievement
- ➢ School curriculum and teaching methods
- ➢ Budget issues and the district's operating expenses

❖ Role & Language

- ➢ School board trustees are elected, voluntary members from their communities who oversee the employment of district employees and the holistic experience of students and families within the district, including

education, transportation, and food service. School boards are keen on programming and innovations that widely benefit students and families. Elected trustees "collaborate in full partnerships with students, parents, educators, and community members to develop the full potential of each child" (MTSBA Legislative Platform 2023).

- ➢ *Words and phrases:* universally available, community-engaged, innovating, adapting, community-centered, transparency, reconnecting, reinventing, experiential learning, values-aligned

- ❖ Messengers
  - ➢ Montana School Board Association
- ❖ Message/Call to Action
  - ➢ "Planting seeds early on will bear lasting fruit. Through your values-aligned investment in your district's local food purchasing, you're not only providing your students with a healthy start for a healthy future, but you're also cultivating their interest in healthy food choices and sparking a curiosity for where their food comes from and how it's grown. Food-informed students become the future leaders in your community, but will only have a chance with your help."
- ❖ Applicable Outreach Content
  - ➢ School board presentations showing the increase of students' acceptance of more diverse foods, increased dollars to local communities, and expanded educational opportunities through MMFEC collaborations.

School Administration

- ❖ Demographics
  - ➢ According to a 2005 survey of 182 Montana superintendents, a majority are male (88%) with a median age of about 53. About 70% have between

21-30 or 30+ years of public education experience (Sullivan). About 30% of superintendents nationwide are involved with purchases for food and nutrition services (Williams et al. 2021). Many farm to school efforts, such as building permanent infrastructure, like school gardens, and passing local food purchasing policy, require superintendent approval.

- Challenges
  - Improving academic performance for underprepared students
  - Communicating the value of the district's programs to the local community
  - Preparing students for engaged citizenship
- Role & Language
  - Superintendents are responsible for student success, community engagement, and maintaining compliance with state and federal mandates. As their role involves a holistic view of student instruction, words and phrases that reflect a multi-faceted solution are key.
  - *Words and phrases*: Hands-on learning, innovation, strengthen communities, student achievement, preparation, increased student performance, closing learning gaps, student-centered, save (time, money, etc.), equity, personalized learning
- Messengers
  - Montana No Kid Hungry
  - MTSNA Board
- Message/Call to Action
  - "Investing in your school's food service program through local purchasing is the perfect way to make deeper connections with your community and demonstrate your investment in student success. By purchasing local, healthy, and nutrient-dense foods, your students will perform better

academically, stay in school longer, and pay closer attention in class. By supporting healthier, locally-sourced lunches, you're preparing your students to be future leaders in your community."

- ❖ Applicable Outreach Content
  - ➢ Case studies and presentations to school boards showing the benefits of local food procurement to the community, increased student meal participation and/or satisfaction, and experiential learning opportunities.

Teachers

- ❖ Demographics
  - ➢ Farm to school educator "champions" often arise from K-5 and STEM teachers. Career and technical education (CTE) instructors, particularly in Culinary Arts and Ag. Ed., appear the most salient and cost-effective demographic for MMFEC due to their food-focused nature.
  - ➢ As of 2022, there are 673 CTE teachers in MT with a total student enrollment of 21,205 across Ag. Ed. and Family & Consumer Sciences. Of MT's 173 high schools, 169 (98%) participate in some aspect of CTE.
  - ➢ Teachers involved with Montana Harvest of the Month (HOM) are also a key demographic as they incorporate HOM materials and lessons around a Montana-grown product once, twice, or several times a month.
- ❖ Challenges
  - ➢ Integration of farm to school lessons into curriculum standards
  - ➢ Lack of awareness or interest in farm to school
  - ➢ Capacity to teach farm to school lessons, especially with the loss of FoodCorps
- ❖ Role & Language
  - ➢ Teachers are responsible for providing grade- and subject-specific curriculum aligned with state and federal guidelines.

- K-12 and ECE educators can all participate in farm to school activities. In MT, Harvest of the Month is a free, go-to resource for educators with lessons, activities, and materials for a variety of grade levels. To aid this demographic, MMFEC can provide complementary educational resources (e.g. videos, Powerpoint slides) along with local products that enhance resources already provided by HOM.
- *Words and phrases*: Investigative, hands-on activities, community-based learning, STEM

❖ Messengers

- Eric Tilleman, OPI Ag Ed Specialist, eric.tilleman@mt.gov
- Gayla Randel, OPI Family & Consumer Sciences specialist, gayla.randel@mt.gov

❖ Message/Call to Action

- "Your students are curious about the world around them. Incorporating local foods in the classroom can pique their curiosity and help them draw connections across subjects, such as science, health, math, and more. By investing in quality agricultural education around local and regional foods, students will use this place-based knowledge for the betterment of their future careers and communities."

❖ Applicable Outreach Content

- Complementary educational resources with HOM connecting MT-grown and -made products with their origin communities.
  - Videos profiling MT farmers and ranchers to be shared in classroom instruction
  - A grade-appropriate quiz that follows the video for teachers to test knowledge retention.

Montana State Legislators

- Demographics
  - In the current 2023 session, MT legislators are primarily male (⅔), between 45 and 74 (81%), Republican (⅔), and recipients of higher education (79%). About ⅛ are affiliated with agriculture, ranching, and forestry industries or education.
  - Given the embeddedness of farm to school in K-12 education, potential state incentives are incredibly valuable to food service directors, producers, and food hubs in procuring local foods.
- Challenges
  - Funding a farm to school bill that would expand local food purchasing and prioritize MT-grown and processed foods
  - Funding to support the statewide SNAP matching program where Double SNAP Dollars incentivizes SNAP recipients to prioritize MT-grown fruits, vegetables, grains, meat, and dairy
  - Increase the number of state-certified small, medium, and mobile processing units for more MT-raised meat
- Role & Language
  - The primary objectives of the legislature are serving district constituents, allocating state resources to agencies and programs, and serving the citizens of MT as a whole.
  - *Words and phrases*: economic growth, land stewardship, supporting rural livelihoods, MT designed and led
- Messengers
  - Grow Montana
  - MT No Kid Hungry
- Message/Call to Action

- "Agriculture is the cornerstone of Montana's economy, and yet most of the food grown or produced in the state is shipped elsewhere for processing and consumption. Schools offer an important market segment for Montana foods, and policies that support local food purchasing by schools can increase Montana's food and agriculture economy and help Montana children learn about their state's rich agricultural history."

- Applicable Outreach Content
  - Direct communication (calls, emails, and letters) to offices
  - Briefs about the benefits of MMFEC products distributed through Grow Montana

K-12 Parents

- Demographics
  - Age may be generally anywhere from 20's to 50's. In Montana, approximately 39% of families are eligible for free and reduced lunches.
- Challenges
  - Participation in their student's education
  - Not enough time or know-how to participate in farm to school activities
  - Balance of cost, value, and food waste with school lunches
- Role & Language
  - Parents have nuanced concerns about their children's food intake. Some are particularly concerned about the quality and nutrition of school meals while others want their children to eat, regardless of what's in the meal. Perhaps more universally, parents are frustrated when students come home ravenous due to a school meal they didn't want to eat or couldn't afford.
  - *Words and phrases*: locally-sourced, fresh, farm-to-table, farm-to-fork, seed-to-stomach, community partnerships, high quality, healthy,

well-nourished, food access, picky-eater approved

- Messengers
  - School Wellness Committees
  - Montana PTA
- Message/Call to Action
  - "Introducing your child to local foods is a great way to engage them in conversations about how foods give them energy, how different foods provide different nutrients and benefits to our bodies, and where their food comes from. Serving local foods at school not only ensures they are getting nutritious and healthy meals, but also helps them connect lessons they are learning in the classroom–science, health, and more–to the foods on their plate."
- Applicable Outreach Content
  - Stickers, buttons, or stamps (maybe meal bibs?) for students to take home and share with parents about an upcoming local food showcase in the cafeteria.
  - Handouts for parents during parent/teacher conferences highlighting the benefits of local foods. For site-specific handouts, these could include story sheets of local producers with the NWFHN who have worked with the school.

Cooperative Producers

- Demographics
  - For its farm to school products, MMFEC is supplied by the NWFHN's collective of grower cooperatives in Washington and Montana. WMGC, MMFEC's long standing farm to school partner and member of the NWFHN, is made-up of 40+ primarily specialty crop growers in the Mission, Jocko, Flathead, and Bitterroot Valleys.

- Challenges
  - Sustainable long-term markets, especially for lower grade product
  - Food safety and enough product to meet needs of institutional markets
  - Food processing and distribution, particularly in rural areas or outside WMGC's distribution
- Role & Language
  - As of March 2023, MMFEC sources all produce for minimally processed and value-added products from WMGC.
  - *Commonly used terms:* local and regional food economy, cooperation, shared vision
- Messengers
  - WMGC and/or growers for MT Marinara veggies
- Message/Call to Action
  - "The school system near you can provide another market for your product and lead to increased sales. The relationship with a school may take time to develop, but by being a reliable and engaged vendor, you can not only grow your operation but also engage with your community under a shared vision of a strong local and regional food economy."
- Applicable Outreach Content
  - Sharing webinars and instructions with how to connect with school markets and the necessary regulations, e.g. GAP
  - NWFHN GroupGAP workshops

Students

- Demographics
  - Between 6 and 18 years old. The formation of cultural food traditions and dietary habits are crucial during adolescence and are reinforced primarily by parents, teachers, and peer-to-peer relationships.

- Challenges
  - Taste, quality, variety and choice in school lunches
  - Stigma associated with school lunches
  - Price point, sometimes
- Role & Language
  - Students are the key demographic of concern for all stakeholders; all messaging relates back to direct benefits to kids.
  - As it relates to school meals, students may be most concerned about taste, though nutrition, choice, and social pressures may also factor.
  - *Commonly used terms:* tasty, delicious, options, choice, fun, phrases with alliteration, farm field trips, food justice, food sovereignty
- Messengers
  - Montana FFA
  - Montana 4H
- Message/Call to Action
  - "Do you want school lunches to taste great, fill your appetite, and fuel you well? Do you want to make a difference in your community? We do, too. It's time for us to reimagine lunch time from the bottom-up. You are connected to everyone through food, and you deserve to know where your food comes from and have a say in what's on your lunch tray. By eating whole, locally-sourced foods, you become the best version of yourself, and in the process, help the farmers and ranchers in your community bring you the best food out there. It takes a community to make sure environmentally-sustainable, nutritious, and delicious foods get into your hands–together, we are the changemakers that make it happen."
- Applicable Outreach Content

- Taste tests materials, colorful posters, coloring pages, infographics for the meal line and tables communicating farmer stories and nutritional benefits.

Channels

Channels, or mediums, facilitate direct sales, build brand awareness, and connect with new and existing stakeholders. Mediums can be utilized for two forms of marketing: direct and indirect. MMFEC's direct marketing strategy, for example, targets food service directors with a specific call to purchase farm to school products; Kitchen Sync, a collaborator with the NWFHN, facilitates the network's sales to schools. Indirect marketing often uses broader mediums, like Facebook, to build brand awareness and reach secondary audiences like parents and students. Listed below are examples for how MMFEC can leverage new and existing partnerships to engage stakeholders through direct and indirect channels.

- **K-12 Food Service Directors**
  - OPI's Lunchline and Wednesday Webinars
  - MT No Kid Hungry Webinars
  - MMFEC Farm to School Advisory Council
  - Word of mouth among FSDs
  - One-on-one emails/calls
  - Farm to school product specification guide
  - School visits from MMFEC staff & partners
  - NWFHN newsletter
  - Montana SFNA Conference
  - Montana Farm to School Webinars, Working Groups, and Summit

- **School Administration**
  - School visits from MMFEC staff & partners
  - MASS Spring Conference
- **MT Legislators**
  - Grow MT Policy Coalition
  - During session: MT Legislators Information Desk (406-444-4800)
  - Interim: Address and email for individual legislators.
- **Parents**, secondary*
  - School board meetings
  - Social media posts
    - Mission West (FB)
    - No Kid Hungry (FB & Instagram)
  - School menus
  - School-specific farm to school Committees
  - Local press releases/radio/TV
- **Producers**
  - Social media and newsletter updates through partnerships channels:
    - CFAC monthly newsletters and social media
    - NWFHN newsletters and FB
    - MT Dept. of Ag
    - Food and Agriculture Development Centers
    - NCAT
    - Montana Farmers Union
  - WMGC
    - Board meeting agendas
  - NWFHN Summit
    - Presentations

- Food item for luncheons

- **Students**
  - All Students
    - School menus
    - Posters
    - School morning announcements
    - Stickers
    - Taste tests and cooking demos
    - Farmer-in-the-cafeteria visits
    - Farm visits
  - Elementary School
    - Coloring pages
  - High School
    - Cooking competitions

Section III. Farm to School Communications Plan

Overview

To realize overall communications objectives, our team will focus on three strategies: food service director relations; farm to school partner outreach; and farm to school coalition-building. Each strategy corresponds with a program-specific goal outlined in Section I.

Each strategy will have a liaison responsible for the creation, dissemination, and revision of the strategy's communication tactics. Liaisons will develop their strategy's work plan and coordinate with one another mainly through Asana, the MWCDP project management software. Given the skill sets and responsibilities of the liaisons, there will likely be overlap in these strategies. Liaisons will collaborate to balance workload and ensure the development and delivery of effective communications.

Communication plan liaisons for the 2023-2025 working group include:

- Anne Harney, MMFEC Local Food Promotion Coordinator
- Charlie Michel, MWCDP Regional Food Systems Project Manager
- Blake Lineweaver, MWCDP Cooperative Development Outreach Coordinator

Each liaison will take lead on their designated strategy to:

- Oversee the strategy's overall success, usefulness, and alignment with target goal;
- Network with their strategy's audiences and provide perspective on the appropriate language and mediums for disseminated content;
- Ensure content and delivery of tactics are compliant with MWCDP/NWFHN policy and respective branding guidelines;
- Collaborate with other liaisons and members of the working group to leverage the team's strengths in their strategy's tactics; and

- Provide briefings to the working group on their strategy's progress as necessary.

Strategy 1: Food Service Director Relations

Goal

Increase awareness of and participation in MMFEC Farm to School programming for Montana school food service directors and their staff.

Focus

We build and maintain relationships with Montana food service directors. We connect directly through one-on-one emails and phone calls regarding MMFEC products and site visits. We compose presentations, graphics, and text that will serve food service directors and their staff. We facilitate the Advisory Council regarding product development and marketing strategy.

Tactics

1. Prepare meeting agendas, logistics, and correspondence for quarterly Advisory Council meetings;
    a. Construct an agreement between participating food service directors and MMFEC detailing the responsibilities and expectations of serving on the Advisory Council.
    b. Facilitate activities that maximize the creative potential of Council meetings.
    c. Design Council-specific surveys to collect feedback on the effectiveness of promotional campaigns for food service director use;
2. Provide ongoing consultation via email and phone to food service directors regarding MMFEC's farm to school programming, such as: fresh and frozen product and value-added products like Montana Marinara, Beef Lentil Crumble,

Big Sky Bites, and Montana Lentil Burger; coordinated site visits and local food events for MMFEC to promote;

3. Create, update, and disseminate product specification sheets of MMFEC farm to school products that enticingly describe stories of local farmers when applicable as well as school-relevant requirements, like meal pattern, serving size, price, and quantity per package;
4. Probe for and create materials food service directors can easily use to engage their stakeholders (parents, students, administration) such as coloring sheets, stickers, home-notes, and taste tests;
5. In MMFEC campaign "toolkits," create sections on recipes and ordering information.

Strategy 2: Farm to School Partnership Outreach

Goal

Build continued trust and transparency in the MMFEC Farm to School program with respected partners through consistent communication and engagement.

Focus

We collaborate with partners on an ongoing basis, such as our regional food hubs through the NWFHN, MT Farm to School, MT Team Nutrition, Office of Public Instruction, MT Department of Agriculture, and MT No Kid Hungry. We exchange, accumulate, and create original research and programs with these partners. Additionally, we produce campaign overviews that detail activities, schedules, and sample texts for partners to use in their work that promote our efforts to a wider audience. To the extent of our capacity, we actively participate in partners' workshops, campaigns, and working groups.

Tactics

1. In MMFEC campaign "toolkits," design materials to share with partners that include, at minimum, the following: social media templates with graphics for partners to post and timelines for when to participate;
2. Contribute to and provide MMFEC updates in quarterly MT Farm to School Working Groups, specifically Local Food Procurement, Beef to School, and K-12 Education.
3. Attend and facilitate programming at relevant partner events, such as: MT Farm to School Summit and workshops; AERO Expo; and the Montana School Nutrition Association Summer Conference;
4. Spotlight collaborating partners in social media posts by tagging them directly and using their campaign hashtags. Share relevant posts from partners on the Mission West FB account.

Strategy 3: Farm to School Coalition-Building

Goal

Increase outreach to other farm-to-school stakeholders about MMFEC programming, including MT legislators, school administrators, school boards, educators, and parents.

Focus

We curate and arrange text, photos, and graphics to reach a wider audience through social media platforms and websites. We also create sample press releases, story pitches, and profiles that can be shared with local media. To effectively communicate with secondary audiences, we identify and develop value propositions that are tailored to specific interests, utilizing appropriate language and mediums.

Tactics

1. Create monthly farm to school social media posts that are timely and relevant for Mission West social media.
2. In MMFEC campaign "toolkits," include participatory activities such as taste tests; farmers-in-the-cafeteria and farm visits; story pitches to invite local press and legislators; and testimonials from parents, educators, and school board members;
3. Coordinate and generate publicity for events coinciding with state and national campaigns such as: sponsored school board dinners using Montana Marinara during the Northern Plains Resource Council's Local Food Challenge; sponsored state legislators breakfasts using MMFEC breakfast bars during National School Breakfast Week; and publishing farmer profiles during National Ag Week.
4. Curate a list of relevant Facebook groups and Instagram pages to regularly share MMFEC farm to school programming like Friends of Local Foods;

MWCDP Communications Policy

Mission West has provided an organizational communication policy to instruct departments on how to conduct engagement with stakeholders, including employees, customers, partners, and the public. Subsequently, the MMFEC farm to school communications and marketing strategy adheres to this policy.

Below is a summarization of the current policy, though it is subject to change.

1. MWDCP will make its best efforts to present correct information in all of its communications.
2. MWCDP will make its best efforts to be in legal compliance with respect to registered trademarks, use of owned images and re-printing of previously published information.

3. MWCDP will make its best efforts to keep all client, and prospective client, financial information confidential unless an authorized information release is obtained.
4. E-mail contact information collected on the MWCDP website, workshop registers and client in-take forms will be considered as consented information for the purposes of MWCDP e-mail blasts. E-mail addresses on the MWCDP e-mail list will not be shared with any parties not employed or contracted by MWCDP.
5. All print, electronic, and video communications produced by MWCDP must comply with the standards in the MWCDP style guide.
6. All print, electronic, and video communications produced by MWCDP are the property of MWCDP.
7. Business Unit Directors are responsible for fact checking internally generated articles, social media posts, advertisements, and the dialogue, graphs, and numbers used in videos.
8. The MWCDP Executive Directors and Business Unit Directors are required to follow MWCDP Communications policies list in the employee handbook.
9. The MWCDP Board Chairman and the Executive Director are authorized to speak to the press and elected officials on behalf of MWCDP, but they may, from time to time, assign these tasks to Business Unit Directors.

Editorial Calendar in Asana

An editorial calendar is a strategic tool used to organize and schedule communication content (Miller 2021). Using the Asana software, liaisons will design their editorial calendar for their strategy's tactics. In a given tactic, the following criteria should be addressed:

1. *MMFEC Farm to School Program Goal*
    a. Which goal is the strategy addressing?

2. *Key Messages*
    a. What are the defining outcomes of the communication? What does the intended audience need to know, believe, and do as a result of the message? (Head, heart, and hand; call to action).
3. *Audience(s)*
    a. Who is/are the intended audience(s) for the key message?
4. *Content*
    a. What is the most applicable content to communicate the message to the intended audience? What language is key? How are the audience's challenges considered?
5. *Medium*
    a. What medium is the best format to share the content?
6. *Timeline*
    a. When should the strategy begin? When does it end?
7. *Measure Success & Reflect*
    a. What metric will be used to know if the strategy was successful? What went well? Where is there opportunity for growth?
8. *Designated Role*
    a. Who is responsible for ensuring the strategy is designed and distributed on time?

Campaigns

Campaigns are coordinated promotional efforts used by MMFEC and partner organizations to elevate awareness and advocacy of farm to school, especially local food procurement. Annual campaigns not only increase awareness for farm to school products and brand identity but also guarantee demand among participating schools for specific products over a specific timeline (Matsunami, 2020). MMFEC can leverage new and existing campaigns to effectively engage audiences for the promotion of

MMFEC's value-added products. For each campaign identified, this plan outlines outreach tactics to engage target audiences across all three strategies to meet overall goals.

Marinara Madness (February – April)

Started in 2023, Marinara Madness is a promotional campaign organized by MMFEC to spotlight Montana Marinara, its first value-added product to combine USDA Foods and Montana-grown produce with assistance from MT OPI.

Tactics used in the 2023 campaign included the following:

- Visited schools represented in MMFEC's farm to school Advisory Council.
    - Invited partners like USDA Farm to School, MT OPI, No Kid Hungry, and Abundant MT; media from local radio, TV, and newspapers, such as Montana Public Radio; and Montana state legislators;
    - Distributed "Choose Local" and "Montana Marinara" stickers and taste test materials;
    - Collected photos of meals featuring the marinara as well as student engagement as allowed by each school's policy;
    - Strategically posted farmer profiles and Montana Marinara posters in cafeterias;
- Organized a campaign toolkit for food service directors, school administration, and farm to school partners.
    - Designed sample social media language for schools to use throughout the campaign from product arrival to day it's served;
    - Shared activities to educate and engage students, teachers, and community members about Montana Marinara through farmer-in-the-cafeteria visits, taste tests, recipes, and more;

- Posted weekly social media on the MWCDP Facebook page during the campaign, tagging partner organizations and using the #F2SMonth, #mtfarmtoschool and #farmtoschool hashtags to reach a wider audience.
    - Highlighted key aspects of Montana Marinara, emphasizing its nutritional, economic, and social benefits.

Montana Harvest of the Month (Monthly)

Each month, HOM highlights a Montana-grown food that's seasonally accessible for schools to acquire. HOM is sponsored by the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT), Montana Farm to School, Montana Office of Public Instruction, and Montana Team Nutrition.

- Tactics for this campaign could look like:
    - Share the HOM using MMFEC poster graphics on MWCDP Facebook and Instagram.
    - Highlight through social media and taste tests at Advisory Board schools using MMFEC products for the following months:
        - May (Beef): Big Sky Bites
        - August (Cherries): Pitted cherries and the development of Montana Flathead Cherry breakfast bars
        - November (Apples): Development of Montana Breakfast Bars
        - December (Lentils): Big Sky Bites and Montana Lentil Burger

Montana Crunch Time, National Food Day, and National Farm to School Month (October)

Montana Crunch Time is a statewide campaign run by our partners at Montana Farm to School in collaboration with National Farm to School. This heavily promoted annual

event assists with assuring supply of certain local foods are available for institutions, such as schools.

- Tactics for this campaign could look like:
    - Interview food service directors on the Advisory Council for how MMFEC and the NWFHN facilitate local food opportunities for their program and then disseminate through social media and local news outlets during October.
    - Post a group photo of MWCDP staff "crunching" into a local food, typically apples, and share through social media.
    - Contact schools who haven't purchased Montana Marinara and offer discounted/free sauce to feature the product during a school board meeting, faculty appreciation day, or culinary arts project. Invite local media to showcase the event and share through social media.
    - Collaborate with other businesses and nonprofits in the community and reach out to Ronan's school garden operators. Offer assistance with garden maintenance, harvest, or instruction. Invite Valley Journal to share the story and highlight on social media.

National School Breakfast Week (Early March)

MMFEC's next farm to school product, a nutrient-dense and easily distributable breakfast bar, coincides with the School Nutrition Association's National School Breakfast Week.

- Tactics for this campaign could look like:
    - Use #NSBW24 in social media posts and consider how the spring break theme can incorporate the breakfast bar – "Surf's Up with School Breakfast" is the 2023 theme.

- Create a poster for cafeterias highlighting the breakfast bar and its many benefits using kid-centric MMFEC branding.
- Organize a school visit with a member of the Advisory Council that serves breakfast or breakfast on the go. For example, invite a local celebrity skier in Whitefish to have breakfast with students at Daly Elementary highlighting the importance of a nutritious breakfast using MMFEC's breakfast bars, and invite local media to share the event.
- Taste test the breakfast bars at a school represented in the Advisory Council. Share results through social media.
- Coordinate with MT No Kid Hungry's School Breakfast Coordinator for a "Local Breakfast at the Capitol" event in Helena for state legislators promoting school breakfasts and the breakfast bar.

Ongoing Partner Social Media Campaigns

The national School Nutrition Association started the social media campaign, #RealSchoolFood, to showcase real, fresh meals served in school cafeterias across the country. They also use #TrayTalk and their blog site to share posts of innovative and exciting stories happening in K-12 cafeterias.

For products used in salad bars, the hashtag #SaladBars2Schools started by the Chef Ann Foundation coincides with getting more fresh vegetables into cafeterias. They also started the #RealSchoolFoodChallenge to highlight photos of healthy, as-scratch-as-possible meals.

Section IV. Measuring Success

Regularly evaluating the tactics employed to achieve communication objectives and tracking the LFPP grant's performance indicators are necessary to gauge the communication plan's effectiveness. This routine assessment will track key performance indicators (KPIs), or the performance of a goal against a predetermined goal (Miller, 2021). Liaisons should meet and decide these goals and appropriate timelines to measure KPIs. This assessment should also consider the following and additional metrics to measure success of the communication strategies outlined in this plan:

- Activity metrics: Evaluate content produced (utility, quantity, and quality), cost-effectiveness to how it was produced, and its alignment with organizational and program-specific objectives.
    - Evaluate the cost of producing communication materials such as printing, distributing, and hours needed to complete each task.
- Reach metrics: Summarize to the extent possible who and how many the strategy reached through:
    - Social media impressions on posts, shares, and event postings;
    - F2S stakeholder attendance at MMFEC/NWFHN-workshops or conference booths;
    - Total NWFHN newsletter subscribers.
    - Number of published news articles.
- Engagement metrics: Collect the number of active participants in the strategy, such as:
    - Clickthrough rates, likes, and shares on social media posts;
    - Open-rate for NWFHN Mailchimp newsletters and FADC Constant Contact campaigns;
    - Student participation in taste tests during school site visits;

    - One-on-one calls and emails inquiring about farm to school products and programs;
    - Increase website traffic and lowering bounce rate for MMFEC and NWFHN website pages;
    - Attendance and participation in Advisory Council meetings;
    - Track downloads for promotional materials, product spec sheets, and other tools.
- Impact metrics: Documented purchases or changes in beliefs, perceptions, or values from the strategies.
    - Data from pre- and post campaign surveys and focus groups with food service directors on the Advisory Council and other relevant stakeholders;
    - Sales data before and after promotional campaigns;
    - Additional stories from local news sources like newspaper, radio, and TV;
    - Gather testimonials from food service directors, producers, students, etc.

Resources

MWCDP/MMFEC

Website

Facebook

Instagram

Anne Harney | MMFEC

Local Food Promotion Coordinator

anne.harney@missionwestcdp.org

Blake Lineweaver | MWCDP

Cooperative Development Outreach Coordinator

blake@missionwestcdp.org

NWFHN

Website

Facebook

Instagram

Marinara Madness Webpage

Charlie Michel | NWFHN & MCWDP

Regional Food Systems Program Manager

charlie.michel@missionwestcdp.org

Michelle Perkins | Kitchen Sync

Regional Food Sales Lead

michelle@kitchensyncstrategies.com

Other helpful tools:

MMFEC Branding Guide

NWFHN Branding Guide

MMFEC Photos

Linda Cleatus | MT No Kid Hungry

School Breakfast Program Coordinator

LCleatus@mt.gov

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ELEMENT 3

Perspectives in Local and Regional Foods:
Profiles of K-12 Farm to School Programs in Montana

While there have been many successes, Holloway has faced setbacks–particularly with procurement, where sourcing and distributing locally ingredients can be challenging for rural communities.

"Sometimes, it's tough with procurement. And if we do find something, because of the small amounts that we order, it tends to be pricier," according to Holloway. "We've been able to balance that out with free vegetables from the [school] garden. So I'll still pay that extra price, knowing that for a month, I don't buy tomatoes."

In overcoming these procurement challenges, Holloway has found that cooperating with other schools and larger businesses can make local foods accessible and affordable. In early 2023, Holloway was informed that Farm to School of Park County had started a cooperative agreement with Livingston Hospital and the Livingston Food Center to collectively source local carrots in bulk.

"I called and said, 'I want to be a part of that,'" Holloway recalls. "And they said, 'Okay.' [Joining the agreement was] that easy."

The group has made similar agreements to order local beef and bison for a more affordable price. Holloway pays the same four dollars a pound for local beef as she would for non-local beef. In the future, she hopes the group continues to leverage their institutional purchasing for other local foods and farm to school expenses, like purchasing soil or wood for raised beds.

Holloway also participates in the Montana Marinara project through the Office of Public Instruction (OPI). This veggie-packed and kid-approved sauce combines USDA commodity tomatoes with Montana-grown butternut squash, carrots, onions, and safflower oil aggregated by the Western Montana Growers Cooperative in Missoula, MT. The sauce is made at the Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center in Ronan, MT where it's then distributed statewide through OPI. Besides the benefit of sourcing locally for her rural and remote community, Holloway is able to use her USDA entitlement funds for the sauce, making it a win-win for her and Montana's regional economy.

Words from the wise

Next steps for Gardiner's farm to school program are top of mind as Holloway's transitions out of her role with Gardiner schools at the end of the 2022-2023 school year. For up and coming farm to school programs or those looking to start one, Holloway points to areas where she might have done things differently.

"Start small. I did not. Even if it entails procuring one item, once a month, and doing that for a whole year," Holloway recommends. "[Also], find programs that failed and find out why. Then you won't make those mistakes that they made…a lot of the programs that I've heard have failed because they didn't have a group of people operating it."

Especially for rural schools, Holloway recognizes that it takes many seats at the table to make a program sustainable. "In a rural community, everybody wears ten hats, and so a lot of times you don't have the numbers to support [farm to school]," says Holloway. "It's been such a huge communal effort to make it work."

Whether you're a food service director, administrator, or community member interested in starting farm to school in your district, reach out to our team of local food innovators ready to help you in the next steps to transform your school meal program:

Michelle Perkins | *Regional Food Sales Lead*
(206) 390.5216 | michelle@kitchensyncstrategies.com

Anne Harney | *Local Food Promotion Coordinator*

Image: Salad bar display

NORTHWEST FOOD HUB NETWORK

FARM TO SCHOOL COOPERATION IN GARDINER, MONTANA: A RURAL SUCCESS STORY

By Blake Lineweaver, Mission West Community Development Partners

A FARM-TO-SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Image: Holloway explains bison decline in Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem

GARDINER, Mont. – In the Treasure State, rural is the norm for 470,000 Montanans living in communities with fewer than 2,500 people, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In rural America, access to many basic necessities can be an everyday struggle, from housing and electricity to water and food. Located a few miles north of Yellowstone National Park in Paradise Valley, the vacation town of Gardiner is no exception to these rural challenges.

Where some see struggle, Anna Holloway, Food Service Director for Gardiner Public Schools, finds opportunity. In her rural community, Holloway goes above and beyond in her role to bring Montana's food and agriculture story into the school's cafeteria and classrooms through local and regional foods.

With a degree in outdoor recreation and a teaching certification, Holloway started at Gardiner schools in the classroom and later left teaching to establish Tumbleweed Bookstore and Cafe, a coffee shop across the Yellowstone River from the school. She found her way back to the school in 2016–this time in the cafeteria, where she has slowly shifted food operations from conventional "heat and serve" to mainly scratch cooking that showcases local and regional ingredients.

This transition was inspired, in part, by the "farm to school" approach Holloway first encountered at the Montana School Nutrition Association Conference in 2016. Holloway was quick to "jump on the bandwagon," she says, after listening to Aubree Roth, Montana Farm to School Coordinator, present ways schools can integrate staple Montana foods–such as lentils, winter squash, and beef–into school food service programs, alongside agriculture and nutrition education and school gardens.

"I just fell in love with it," Holloway recalls. "I thought it would be such a great thing to bring to our community, since it is so small, and lots of people have their own gardens."

Drawing inspiration from peer networks at Montana Farm to School Summits and school nutrition conferences, Holloway has introduced local foods onto her menus, such as bison and beef, and built eight raised beds for the school's food service program with help from Gardiner FFA. She sources fresh tomatoes, squash, cucumber, and kale from these beds for the salad bar as well as freezes and stores them for lunches during the winter months. Additionally, she teaches Harvest of the Month (HOM) lessons and conducts cooking demonstrations out of the school kitchen for grades K-5.

Building capacity for these programs is often a challenge, especially in rural communities. Often national and state service programs have assisted with farm to school programs, at least in their initial stages. Since the loss of Montana's FoodCorps program in 2021, Holloway has worked directly with Farm to School of Park County to sponsor a national service member who serves part-time with Gardiner schools facilitating lessons, garden planning, and cooking demos. Sommer Giles, Gardiner's

Image: Student harvesting tomatoes from the school's raised beds

> "In a rural community, everybody wears ten hats, and so a lot of times you don't have the numbers to support [farm to school]," says Holloway. "It's been such a huge communal effort to make it work."

AmeriCorps VISTA for school year 2022-2023, has found teaching farm to school lessons is as much a learning experience for her as it's been for her students.

"I've never really had deep experiences with food, and that's what drew me here," says Giles. "I've never had a garden, I've never seen food grow. Everything I've been learning here is all brand new."

Where there's a will, there's a way

Likewise, Holloway's farm-to-school vision for Gardiner schools was also brand new. With a kitchen staff of two and a passion for homemade meals and gardening, Holloway wanted to explore ways of bringing more scratch cooking and education into the school's 680 weekly meals. When she approached her administration, they were initially hesitant to deviate from the norm.

"In the beginning, there was definitely pushback…mainly the menu changes. [They'd say] 'kids are never going to eat this. They're never going to do this,'" remembers Holloway. "They're not going to do it the first month. But if you just stick with it, they're going to come around."

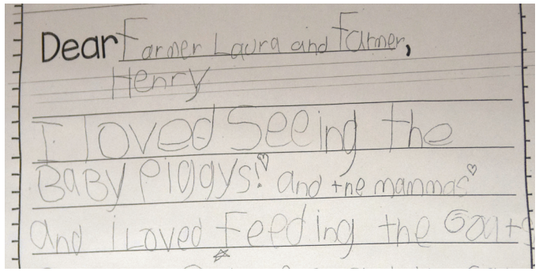
Making lunchtime fun for kids is at the heart of Holloway's transformative food service model. One way she does this is by de-mystifying the central kitchen and having students prepare part of their meals.

"[Last fall], all the pumpkin that we had [harvested], the third and fourth, second and then fifth grade started the process of peeling the pumpkins [and] cooked them," says Giles. "Another class mushed up the puree, and then another class made the pie. [Then the] kindergarten filled the pies. Everyone got to see and have their hands in what they were eating the next week."

Through taste tests and cooking lessons, Holloway has found that by encouraging students to try new foods and diversify their palates at a young age leaves real, lasting impacts. For one, Holloway has noticed a significant decrease in food waste in the school's cafeteria.

"When I first started, we had two trash cans out for elementary, [and] two trash cans for junior high and high school," says Holloway. "Now we have one for the entire school, and it doesn't even fill up."

Images (left to right): Anna Holloway; Chili featuring local bison; AmeriCorps VISTA Sommer teaches students how to soft-boil eggs



community engagement is crucial. In the school year 2022-2023, they designed three farmer-in-the-classroom days, as a part of HOM, where second and third grade students met their local producers.

"We partnered with different local partners to come in and be kind of a guest farmer for the kids," says Harvey. "We really wanted to take the onus off of the teachers."

The first was an apple taste test in October with Samantha O'Byrne with O'Hara Commons. Collecting apples was a community effort, with Nichols bringing 40 pounds of apples from the Western Agricultural Research Center in Corvallis, in addition to donations from kids. Harvey even brought in apples from her mother's backyard tree.

"It brought up so many good questions," remembers Harvey. "They wanted to know, 'Why do we have different apples? And how do you get apples from one tree? And how do you grow them?'" Other farmer-in-the-classroom events have included a brassica lesson with Laura Garber from Homestead Organics in November, and in February, Blankenbaker read the children's book *Tops and Bottoms* for the month's beet showcase.

Soon, Hamilton students will investigate their plant-related questions with hands-on, experiential learning in the school's quarter-acre garden near Daly Elementary. Created years ago, it later went into disuse. Nichols applied for and was awarded two grants to revive the plot.

The dream for the garden includes: "six beds, some fruit trees, some raspberry canes, rhubarb, a pumpkin patch, and an outdoor education space," shares Nichols. "In the next six months, we want to put in beds and ADA accessible walking paths. We also want to plant a traditional Salish garden in one of the beds. We're hoping that will be a really good way for people to learn about traditional Salish foods and medicinal plants."

Cooperation is key

In their first year, Hamilton Farm to School has accomplished much of what it set out to do. For its role, Harvey credits the Institute for getting the program on its feet. "I think it's hard for schools to find motivation to start, and that is one of the benefits [of the Institute]," she says. "It's structured enough that it puts pieces in place for you to begin, but then also it's not super binding. We have to do some reporting, but it's not over the top, and we didn't have to pay thousands of dollars to participate."

Hamilton's team also found there's strength in numbers. "It's probably scary to a lot of food service directors, especially a new one," Giacomino says. "Find a team. If you were to do it by yourself, it would be very challenging. I don't have time during the day to teach a class…And I don't have the knowledge. They [the teachers] are more suited to teaching classes about food."

Their final piece of advice? "Have fun," says Harvey. "You can get lost in the weeds of worrying about things. And it's like, no, it's actually really fun stuff to be working on. And I have to remind myself of that sometimes, too."

For more information about Hamilton Farm to School, follow their website for updates, volunteer events, and impressive farm to school merch. And whether you're a food service director, administrator, or community member interested in starting farm to school in your district, reach out to our team of local food innovators ready to help you in the next steps to finding local food solutions for your school meal program:

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Image: Letter to farmers Laura and Henry

NORTHWEST FOOD HUB NETWORK

FRESH PERSPECTIVES WITH HAMILTON, MONTANA'S FARM TO SCHOOL TEAM

By Blake Lineweaver, Mission West Community Development Partners

A FARM-TO-SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Image: Salad bar with Local Bounti greens

HAMILTON, Mont. – Starting a farm to school program is no easy feat. From purchasing local foods to teaching nutrition and agricultural education lessons in school gardens, the time, money, and staffing for these activities are well-known hurdles. While some school districts have a farm to school "champion" spearheading school food reform, others have found a team-based approach more effective to building sustainable farm to school action.

This was the case for Hamilton School District, located in Montana's Bitterroot Valley and one of the state's newest farm to school programs established in fall 2022. The idea for Hamilton Farm to School took root with Drew Blankenbaker, a member of the school board and local farmer at Lifeline Produce in Victor, MT. An outspoken advocate for strengthening his community's connection with its small- and mid-scale farmers, Blankenbaker made farm to school a key item of his re-election campaign in 2021.

In the spring of 2022, Blankenbaker applied for the first year of the Montana Farm to School Institute, organized by Montana Farm to School, Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI), and Montana Team Nutrition. This year-long program, modeled after a successful evidence-based strategy designed by Vermont FEED, paired community-based teams with experienced mentors from across the state to build sustainable farm to school programs in Montana.

Pieces fell into place when Hamilton School District became one of three schools accepted, including Power Public Schools and St. Ignatius School District. With the help of Aubree Roth, Montana Farm to School Coordinator, and mentorship from Jay Stagg, Food Service Director for Whitefish Public Schools and Hamilton's designated farm to school coach, the team began to take shape.

Building the dream team

With the invitation to the Institute in hand, Blankenbaker contacted Amy Harvey, a third-grade teacher in the Hamilton School District. "Drew sent me an email like, 'We're doing this Farm to School Institute, can I put your name down?' And I said, yes, of course, but I didn't really know what that was at that point," says Harvey. "I mean, I would have said yes anyway."

Harvey is no stranger to bringing local foods into the classroom and cafeteria. An alum of FoodCorps—a national farm to school service program founded in Montana in 2006—Harvey served Missoula County Public Schools (MCPS) from 2015 to 2017 in sourcing local foods and teaching food lessons for the district.

"You got to work with kids, you got to do procurement, you got to be in the classroom and in the garden," says Harvey. "It was really diverse in the things you got to do."

During her FoodCorps service, Harvey assisted with the statewide pilot of Harvest of the Month (HOM), a program that provides food and nutrition lessons and materials for schools, early care education, and community organizations. The program has grown significantly since 2015 from a 10-month pilot of 30 schools to a year-long showcase of local foods across 92 registered schools serving 17,434 students, according to the Montana HOM 2020-2021 annual report.

The team had expertise, but Blankenbaker and Harvey knew they would need more hands. One requirement of the Institute instructed teams to have four to eight members in various roles to establish program credibility and sustainability, or "staying power," as Harvey says.

"We started where we knew we had buy-in and [where] we could get our team on board and dedicate time to doing it," says Harvey. "As a brand new program, we're in a really good starting spot and have a lot of the people we need."

Naturally, they tapped Nick Giacomino, the district's freshman food service director, to transition more of the district's food purchasing to the local scale. Second grade teacher Dulcie Belanger added educational capacity at Daly Elementary.

They'd also find community support and grant writing assistance from Grace Nichols, manager of the Speciality Crop Business Development program at Ravalli County Economic Development Authority. Completing the team was Hamilton's community garden manager Warren Nienhaus, with 20 some years experience managing the city's community garden adjacent to the school district's quarter-acre garden plot.

> "You hear stories of farm to school and I'm like, man, it seems like a really big undertaking…Getting [the team] together had me realizing that farm to school for me isn't going to be the stories I've heard."

For Giacomino's first year as food service director, building a team off the bat was a relief from his preconceptions of farm to school. "You hear stories of farm to school and I'm like, man, it seems like a really big undertaking for what seemed to be [just] the food service director," says Giacomino. "Getting [the team] together had me realizing that farm to school for me isn't going to be the stories I've heard."

Progress in every step

With support from the Institute, the Hamilton team developed an action plan for the 2022-2023 school year that made incremental steps toward the comprehensive farm to school model: school gardens, education, and procurement of local foods.

At first, Giacomino was skeptical about purchasing from unfamiliar sources. "I guess you could say I was cynical," he says. "I wasn't super knowledgeable on the ability because I've always been from a food safety [standpoint]. You have to order from a reputable distributor. So I'm like, how do they do that?"

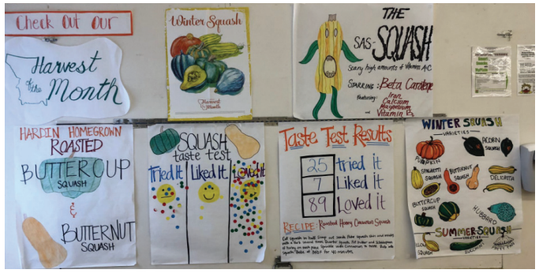
Jay Stagg helped Giacomino connect with resources, such as the Western Montana Growers Cooperative (WMGC), one of three producer-owned food cooperatives affiliated with the Northwest Food Hub Network. Based an hour north in Missoula, WMGC distributes local foods to the Whitefish School District and now, thanks to the Institute, also to Hamilton. Local Bounti, a hydroponic business based in Hamilton and one of WMGC's vendors, provides fresh greens for the two districts' salad bars, year-round.

Looking ahead, Giacomino hopes to expand his local food purchasing. "On the procurement side…[the goal] is 20% of our food purchases [to be local]," he says. "That's the ultimate goal in about three years. We're sitting probably about 7% right out the gate." Defining a local food is still on the table for Hamilton's team, but for Giacomino, anything Montana-grown or raised is considered local.

Beyond the economic benefit to his community, buying local has a special meaning for Giacomino. "It's great to be able to go to the local butcher and shake his hand, and he knows who I am," he says of his local meat processor, Hamilton Packing Co. "You just get a better product, something you can be proud of. And local farmers visiting the kids, that's one of the biggest benefits."

On the education side, Harvey and Belanger agree that

Images (left to right): Nick Giacomino; Letters to local farmers featured on Farm to School board; Farm to School t-shirt



"[The Chef Ann Foundation] will dive into our finances, our background, everything that we have been doing and assess that on a broader level to see what's possible and how school nutrition can utilize farm to school more," says Ross.

Prior to joining "Get Schools Cooking," Hardin Schools demonstrated their desire to incorporate healthy foods by putting salad bars into every school. Ross and Spreng also coordinated with local producers, such as Living Root Farms and High Five Meats, to purchase local foods for the salad bars and Montana's Harvest of the Month program. They also started conversations with regional food hubs, like the Western Montana Growers Cooperative and Yellowstone Food Hub.

With help from Chef Ann, Hardin is planning for a sustainable future, regardless of who's running the show. "We're super excited, but the best part is that the plan is to be sustainable," says Spreng. "If I'm not here, if Elle's not here, it can move forward."

One way they plan to do this is through the school's food service policy. Currently, Hardin School District spends between $10,000 to $20,000 annually on local foods. In collaboration with the district's superintendent, Spreng looks to solidify a local food purchasing goal into Hardin's food service policy manual for future years.

"Then my budget will be guaranteed if somebody on the [school] board five years from now says, 'Oh, you're buying ground beef for that? You can buy it for half the price,'" says Spreng. "And I can say, 'We've made a commitment to spend $10,000 locally, and I'm using it to purchase beef.' You want it to be sustainable."

"It's creating opportunity"

As a community-based program, Ross and Spreng aim to promote economic and cultural vitality through farm to school, because they recognize there's a significant local need. "Plenty Doors, which is a nonprofit here, recently did an economic study. They said [we have] 85% economic leakage, which means [for] every dollar that you have in Bighorn County, 85% of it is going out. That's a huge disadvantage to our community," says Ross. "To have those opportunities, being able to have resources for students, for the community to continue to grow, thrive, and sustain, is the most important part, and really what we're reaching for."

Ross creates opportunities for students to explore local food and agricultural enterprises and nonprofits as a means of demonstrating what's possible and to ensure students have access to food outside of school. In spring 2023, Ross organized two half-day field trips. On one day, students started broccoli, spinach, and lettuce in the school's greenhouse. Later in the semester, students planted the vegetable starts at Helping Hands, Hardin's community food bank where Ross also serves as Executive Director.

For those interested in starting a farm to school program, Ross encourages them to stick it out for the long haul. "Time and relationship building is so important…it's not going to happen overnight. It takes time to both build relationships but then to also just be in it and celebrate those little steps along the way that I always forget…it's a lot more than what's happening in the day-to-day. It's creating that system. It's creating opportunity."

Interested in creating local food opportunities in your school district? Reach out to our team of local food innovators ready to help find local food solutions for your school meal program:

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Image: Harvest of the Month signage at Crow Agency Public School

NORTHWEST FOOD HUB NETWORK

THE THREE C'S OF HARDIN FARM TO SCHOOL: CAFETERIA, CLASSROOM, AND COMMUNITY

By Blake Lineweaver, Mission West Community Development Partners

A FARM-TO-SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Image: Evan and Terri Van Order from Living Root Farm at Farmer in the Cafeteria at Crow Agency Public School

HARDIN, Mont. – A growing number of schools in Montana are adopting innovative approaches to bring local food onto their school menus and into their classrooms. This trend follows a nationwide push in school food service from the "heat and serve" model to scratch cooking using mainly fresh and whole ingredients. Simultaneously, more and more students are gaining knowledge about their local and regional food systems and how they can make a real impact in their communities through food.

Hardin School District 17H & 1, located in Big Horn County, Montana, and on the Crow Reservation, has gone above and beyond in demonstrating how schools can bring cafeteria, classroom, and community together through delicious and nutritious local and regional foods.

Elle Ross, Hardin's Farm to School Director, and Marlo Spreng, Director of Nutrition, are spearheading their district's efforts to integrate food service and farm to school education. For Ross, her passion for local food and agriculture stems from working over eight years at her local farmer's market in St. Louis, Missouri. She later served for two years with FoodCorps at Hardin Public Schools, where she later assumed her current role in 2017.

Marlo Spreng, who brings decades of experience in fine-dining restaurants from around the United States, was no stranger to the "farm to table" concept when she joined Hardin Schools in 2019 from her previous role as head chef at Walkers Grill in Billings, MT. With her dedication to bringing healthy and kid-loving meals into the cafeteria, Spreng has worked with Ross to ensure every aspect of farm to school, from garden lessons to local food procurement, has staying power.

From Ross's perspective, "Farm to school supports everything that's happening in the cafeteria, and school nutrition is supporting everything that farm to school does in terms of learning opportunities, taste tests, and that shared space of food as community." Together, Ross and Spreng connect the classroom, cafeteria, and community through healthy, local foods.

Image: First graders from Crow Agency Public School harvesting

Farm to classroom

Ross and Hardin FoodCorps members have created a comprehensive and engaging food education program for Hardin's pre-K through 5th grade students. The program introduces students to local producers through farm field trips, classroom visits, and at mock farmers markets in the school cafeteria. Ross also designs recipes and conducts taste tests featuring Montana-grown foods featured in Harvest of the Month (HOM), like lentils, chokecherries, and beets. Over the years, Ross has observed a significant increase in teacher buy-in for farm-to-school education.

"I started [in FoodCorps] with three classes sporadically, K through 12, like once a month. By the second year, I was teaching 18 classes a week for K through 5," says Ross of her FoodCorps experience. "I think it just shows how excited people are to try new foods and to have that education component of how our food grows and where it comes from."

> "Farm to school supports everything that's happening in the cafeteria, and school nutrition is supporting everything that farm to school does in terms of learning opportunities, taste tests, and that shared space of food as community."

Spreng was introduced to the "farm to school" concept by Ross and was convinced of its impacts from the start. "When I first started, [I'd] see a kid in [the] middle school run up to [Ross] and tell her, 'Oh, I tried the beets today!'" Spreng recalls. "You can literally see it work." According to Ross and Spreng's philosophy, a classroom-to-cafeteria connection engages students to try more foods in the cafeteria, leading to healthier food choices and less food waste.

Ross's next goal is to build the infrastructure and tools for more students, teachers, and community members to engage with farm to school. In 2020, Ross applied for and received a $75,000 USDA Farm to School grant to build a high tunnel and ten raised beds at the school's eight-acre farm. A majority of produce from the high tunnel will supplement the school's lunch program.

Ross works closely with teachers across the district to integrate the school farm and farm to school education into every classroom, K-12. For example, in fall 2023, Ross plans to have a buffalo hunt with the high school P.E. teacher, which is also a way of implementing Indian Education for All within the context of Crow culture and food sovereignty goals. In five years, Ross will incorporate student-led projects and entrepreneurship around food and agriculture topics. With these plans in motion, Ross and Spreng are taking an incremental approach to ensure each step is thoughtful and well-executed.

"That's one of the things that we've been working on really hard this last year, is to make sure that when we do something, we might do it a little bit slower," says Ross. "But we're doing it right. We're taking our time, so it's not just this one thing that we did one time."

A fresh perspective in schools meals

At Hardin schools, the same philosophy applies to the kitchen as it does to the classroom. In 2022, Hardin Public Schools became one of seven schools–and the first from Montana–to be selected for the Chef Ann Foundation's "Get Schools Cooking" strategic planning program. Chef Ann, a former food service director for Boulder Valley School District in Colorado, created the initiative to help schools transition from "heat and serve" to a scratch cook operational model incrementally over three years. Consultants meet one-on-one with school food service directors and administration to assess the school and community from top to bottom.

Images (left to right): Marlo Spreng; Elle Ross; School meal featuring local cherries, cantalope, sweet corn

NORTHWEST FOOD HUB NETWORK

RURAL CHEF AND SCHOOL FOOD EXTRAORDINAIRE IN RONAN, MONTANA

By Blake Lineweaver, Mission West Community Development Partners

A FARM-TO-SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Image: Scratch salsa from school garden

The students, too, appreciate knowing where their food comes from. "It's connected back to the community, to their family even," says Wartick. "We'll have something we made for the food court, maybe it was zucchini bread. We'll say, 'This was grown in Arlee,' and then the kids' eyes light up and they go, 'Well, my cousin grows that down there.' So to see that they were like, 'Oh, that's so neat.' I think that was really great."

School food is food access

Wartick is a strong advocate for the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), a federal program that allows high-need schools to provide meals at no charge to every student in communities where the free and reduced lunch rate is at or above 40%. For Ronan Public Schools, the rate is 96%. By participating in CEP, universally free meals advances equity in schools by reducing the stigma associated with school lunches. Wartick also spends less time filing out free and reduced forms and can focus on what matters most: serving healthy and delicious meals.

"A lot of our children here, their parents weren't raised to cook. Their grandparents weren't raised to cook. Children back in the 1900s, when the reservation was first done, they were taken out of their homes. So that [skill] was kind of lost to a lot of these generations."

With her own history rooted in the community, Wartick knows the key to healthy diets is building positive relationships with freshly cooked food at a young age. "[Here] we make our own breads, rolls, and pizza," says Wartick. She sources the flour for her bakes from Wheat Montana out of Three Forks. "We also do spaghetti, and yesterday, it was beef stroganoff," Wartick says of her scratch cooking efforts.

"We're not able to [cook from scratch] 100% [of the time], but the more real food we feel like we can cook, the better." By showing kids what meals from scratch can taste like, she hopes students will take the message home.

Wartick has also served traditional foods of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. She's made special menus featuring foods from the 1800s and 1900s, like bison roast and gravy, when she can. "It takes time when you do a special menu, and I need the right cooks to learn how to cook buffalo. You have to go low and slow, you know."

Learn from the experts

For other schools looking to get their start in farm to school, explore CEP, or bring traditional foods into the cafeteria, Wartick recommends getting in touch with the great support network available. Everyone has to start somewhere, and it helps to start small.

"Call the other schools. Get a hold of OPI. Get a hold of Montana Team Nutrition and No Kid Hungry," says Wartick. She also serves as a Peer Mentor with Montana Team Nutrition, another great resource for Montana's food service directors. "They can call us, and we're all experienced. We can help with anything from farm to school to how to figure out a recipe; how to develop a recipe; what foods you can use; what foods you shouldn't use; [and] your salt content."

Whether you're a food service director, administrator, or community member interested in starting farm to school in your district, reach out to our team of local food innovators ready to help find local food solutions for your school meal program:

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Image: Food service team

RONAN, Mont. – Meet Marsha Wartick, the food service supervisor behind the delicious and nutritious meals at Ronan Public School District No. 30 located on the Flathead Reservation in western Montana's Flathead Valley. With over four decades of experience in the kitchen, Wartick knows exactly what it takes to create a menu that kids will love: sourcing ingredients as local as possible and cooking what you can from scratch. Scratch cooking for thousands of hungry mouths can be easier said than done, however.

During her first twenty years in food service, Wartick worked in restaurants along the Mission Mountains. When the position at Ronan Public Schools opened up in 2000, Wartick took her restaurant skills to the school cafeteria, where she now manages a staff of 19 and serves breakfasts, lunches, and snacks for the district's 1,500 students. That shakes out to be about 10,000 meals each week.

Image: Students in Pollywog Park

Wartick remembers the transition from restaurant to cafeteria wasn't seamless. "You have your requirements. You are feeding probably 50 times what you would feed in a restaurant most nights," she says. Fortunately, Wartick found support from Katie Bark and Molly Stenberg with Montana State University's Montana Team Nutrition and Montana's Office of Public Instruction (OPI) to help her navigate the challenges of a new food service director, from placing food orders to menu planning.

With the logistics (mostly) taken care of, Wartick knew that the key to improving her program meant reducing "heat and serve" foods and moving towards as much scratch cooking as possible. For that, she'd need to find the right ingredients, and Wartick didn't look far.

Local food for local kids

Wartick finds value in supporting her community and educating students about where their food comes from. "Helping the community, helping the farmers, the ranchers, the orchards in the area is special," says Wartick. "We're so rural. It's important to keep these kids realizing that it's special to be this way…so many schools, they're getting bigger and bigger, and you can lose that connection." Over the years, Wartick has organized special menus, such as "Montana Day" which spotlights an entirely Montana-made beef taco and other local and regional items.

Wartick honed in on local foods in 2007 when she first learned about "farm to school," an approach that aims to transition school food purchasing away from big supply chains to the local and regional scale while educating students about how their food was grown; who grew it; and why that connection matters. Wartick heard about farm to school from Jan Tusick, director of the Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center (MMFEC), located two blocks from the school district's central kitchen in Ronan.

MMFEC is the only shared-use food processing facility in the region that is certified by the United States Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration. They provide minimally processed local fruits and vegetables sourced from the 40 producer-owners of the Western Montana Growers Co-op (WMGC).

Images (left to right): Marsha Wartick; School garden foods; Greens from "R" Garden

> "Helping the community, helping the farmers, the ranchers, the orchards in the area is special… We're so rural. It's important to keep these kids realizing that it's special to be this way…"

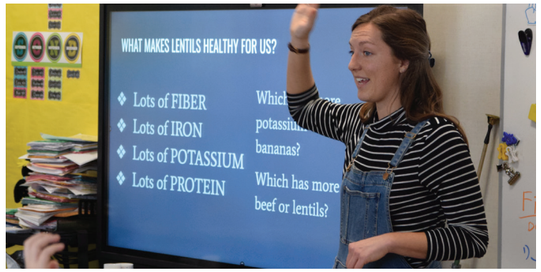
With MMFEC's processing capacity, Tusick began connecting food service directors with local farmers in the early 2000s with the guiding question: how do we get more local food into our schools?

"When Mission Mountain started doing the processing, that was a lifesaver for us, because I have a lot of employees, but we don't have the time to process our own fruits and vegetables," says Wartick. "Trying to process 50 pounds of carrots for us is really, really hard. We just don't have the equipment; we don't have the time; we don't have the room either."

Like many schools, a significant amount of Wartick's minimally processed fruits and vegetables are used in the federally-administered Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable (DoD Fresh) program. Since enrolling in DoD Fresh in 2013, Wartick has worked directly with local producers to supplement a portion of the fruits and vegetables snacks served daily for the 750 kids at Pablo and K. William Harvey Elementary schools. Through DoD Fresh, students learn fun facts about the snack, from where it was grown to its power-packed nutrients.

When she supports local agriculture, Wartick finds her food quality significantly improves. "It's nice getting local stuff that we know is going to be fresh. It hasn't been sitting for five months somewhere and then shipped across the country," she says. A frequent barrier for schools is connecting with producers, and Wartick recognizes the benefit of the school's proximity to the farms and orchards in Western Montana. "[The producers] contact me, and I will get apples, pears, peaches and other fruits and vegetables from them," says Wartick. Additionally, she's connected with local producers through OPI and WMGC. For example, in the winter months, Wartick orders living butterhead lettuce from Local Bounti, a hydroponics start-up out of Hamilton, MT, through WMGC.

Wartick also appreciates the meaningful relationships she has with her local producers. "The farmers too, a lot of times, these are their kids," says Wartick. And that connection makes a difference. "[They'll say,] 'I'm not going to bring any pears right now because they are not good enough quality for you.' Now, you're not going to hear that from these big companies."



producers, who might have little prior experience working with schools, is critical. "I [once] bought a bunch of local beef from Lower Valley, and I went and picked it up because this was before they had delivered, before they knew me…they had packaged it all in, like, one pound, frozen logs. I was getting 800 pounds but like [in] 800 little things of beef. We had to open up each one."

Hiccups aside, Stagg is proud to support local farms and ranches while providing nutritious and delicious meals for Whitefish students. From Moss Farm apples in Rollins to grape tomatoes and cucumbers from Whitefish's own Mountain View Gardens, Stagg has added local foods steadily to his menu and supported his community in doing so. "I love buying local product," says Stagg. "I love putting that money back into the local economy…It's not going to someone I don't know. [And] I like to pay my friends to keep things going. I feel best about that."

The slow part, Stagg believes, is important for the long-term sustainability of local food purchasing in schools. "Don't overwhelm yourself, because then you might not end up getting anything done," Stagg warns. "Pick apples. Figure out how to get apples on your menu. Next year, pick carrots. Just pick one thing and solve it."

Scaling local food for statewide impact

Over the last 15 years, Whitefish has made leaps and bounds in its educational and local food procurement goals. What's to come, Stagg says, is to innovate the local and regional food system from outside the school district.

"For personal goals, I would like to help to meet or to get in with the right people to do the statewide scale stuff," says Stagg. "Now that I know what food service directors will do and won't do, I need to take that knowledge [elsewhere]…if we're going to really expand beef or pasta or something, [we need to] make it work statewide. More projects like Montana Marinara, I think is huge. And that [means] working with the processors and farmers."

Stagg continues to work with the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI), the Northwest Food Hub Network, and the Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center to make local food procurement as easy as possible for Montana schools, regardless of population or geographic location. A recent success for Stagg's advocacy with OPI was assisting Local Bounti in Hamilton, MT in securing the salad greens bid for the Department of Defense Fresh Fruits and Vegetable Program (DoD Fresh). As a result, all Montana schools will soon be able to source hydroponic leafy greens year-round from within the state through DoD Fresh.

In addition, Stagg serves as a resource for other schools looking to expand their local food purchasing as a coach with the Montana Farm to School Institute. He also helps Montana food service directors one-on-one as a Peer Mentor with Montana Team Nutrition.

While Stagg has big dreams for Montana, he finds the most meaningful contributions happen at the local level. "It's the small town, the people on the front lines who make the biggest difference," says Stagg. The caveat? "They've got to want to, though."

Whether you're a food service director, administrator, or community member interested in starting farm to school in your district, reach out to our team of local food innovators ready to help find local food solutions for your school meal program:

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Image: F2S Instructor Emily Bonenfant

NORTHWEST FOOD HUB NETWORK

SETTING THE STANDARD: FARM TO SCHOOL IN WHITEFISH, MONTANA

By Blake Lineweaver, Mission West Community Development Partners

A FARM-TO-SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

WHITEFISH, Mont. – Whitefish Public Schools' cafeterias may soon feature a new splash of flavor at the salad bar: the "Wonder Dressing," a lemon-forward vinaigrette created by 6th graders at Whitefish Middle School as part of the "Tournament of Dressings." The competition, staged like the popular TV show Shark Tank, was held in February 2023 where 42 teams had the opportunity to hone their food science and entrepreneurship knowledge for the coveted prize of having their dressing served in a local venue.

Image: Hydroponic tower in Muldown Elementary

The salad dressing contest is one of many ways the Whitefish School District prioritizes "farm-to-school" programs, which include teaching agriculture and nutrition lessons; hands-on experiential learning in school gardens and farms; and getting local and regional foods served in classrooms and cafeterias. Jay Stagg, Whitefish Public Schools Food Service Director, has led and advocated for these programs since onboarding with the district in 2008. Before his time with Whitefish schools, Stagg built his culinary expertise over decades in fast-food and fine dining, working from dishwasher to head chef. Without much commercial kitchen experience before joining the Whitefish team, Stagg is passionate about building lifelong curiosity and appreciation for a local and regional food system tray by tray.

The evolution of food-centered lessons

In the early 2010's, Stagg started interactive activities at Muldown Elementary to get kids excited about food, recognizing the positive impact it can have. "Having kids of my own, they really liked being in the kitchen and cooking. There are always so many reports of kids cooking lessons," says Stagg. "If kids can grow the food and harvest it and see it, touch it, [and] cook with it, they're way more likely to eat it."

Around 2015, Stagg became an early adopter of Montana's

Harvest of the Month (HOM) pilot program. HOM is a statewide program to increase consumption of Montana-grown and raised foods in Montana communities. Using HOM's lessons and materials, Stagg prepared activities, such as taste tests, with Montana foods from sweet and crispy apples to leafy kale.

"I would never think that kids would eat kale…but [the lesson is] this fun kale salad thing where you get a ziploc bag, and you get to massage it, punch it, break it, [and] you add your lemon juice and salt," Stagg says about one of his favorite lessons. "Twelve years later, [students] are still like, 'I remember making kale salad in second grade!'" Stagg serves the nostalgic kale salad regularly in the school's salad bar.

The food lessons proved a huge success. Teaching dozens of classes, however, soon took up too much of Stagg's time. Fortunately, using funds from the school's profitable food service budget, Stagg was able to hire Emily Bonenfant part-time in 2020 to continue the interactive lessons. Modeling HOM and tools from the National Farm to School Network, Bonefant teaches Muldown Elementary's 700 students a wide range of engaging local and regional food-related topics. With her added capacity, Bonenfant also cares for 14 hydroponic towers placed in hallways and common areas throughout Whitefish's schools. These bright green units provide students a daily window into the plant life cycle from seed to harvest.

Learning by doing

In recent years, Whitefish staff and community members have collaborated to expand their farm to school education beyond the elementary school. In 2018, generous private contributions and grants brought together $2.7 million to build the Center for Sustainability and Entrepreneurship (CSE), a designated space "providing applied learning experiences for K-12 students in energy, agriculture, forestry, natural resources, and entrepreneurship," according to the CSE website. The CSE features two state-of-the art science classrooms, over two dozen raised beds, a composting station, a student-operated farm stand, and a year-round greenhouse. At the CSE, students are given plots in the greenhouse to build their plant and soil knowledge. Students learn about and grow an abundance of fruits, vegetables, and herbs such as rosemary, parsley, lemons, bananas and coffee.

The CSE staff have designed a curriculum for every grade level to engage with the Center. The idea, echoed in Bonenfant's lessons, is to expose students early and often to sustainability and food system topics that prepare them for programs later in middle and high school. Their goal? To inspire a lifetime of curiosity at the intersection of food, entrepreneurship, and the environment.

Elementary students are first introduced to the CSE over multi-day garden field trips. In 5th and 6th grade, students learn about sustainable, values-based business models, such as the dressing competition for 6th graders. The 5th grade operates a farmer's market where students sell herb packets, tea blends, and microgreens. In the fall 2022, proceeds from the market not only covered the costs of the sale, but also left remaining funds for the North Valley Food Bank, a local nonprofit decided on by the students.

Image: Culinary Arts students prepare steak from Eureka, Montana

> "I love buying local product… I love putting that money back into the local economy… It's not going to someone I don't know."

In the high school, students have the hands-on opportunity to run a cooperative microgreens business out of the CSE with support from CSE instructor Chris Bickford. Through the microgreens business–aptly named 4th 'N Pine after the school's address–Bickford advises students on all aspects of a values-aligned food business, from cultivation and packaging to marketing and distribution. In 2023, the 4th 'N Pine students sold to two local grocery stores and several restaurants. One of the student-interns connected the microgreen business to her part-time job at The Farmers' Stand, a 100% farmer-owned market based in Whitefish. When Bickford isn't at the CSE, he operates Whitestar Organics, an organic vegetable farm that grows and stores several thousand pounds of carrots for the Whitefish School District.

Herbs and greens grown by students in the CSE also contribute to the school's food service program at "the microlevel," as Stagg calls it. This collaboration is yet another testament to how Whitefish schools have built the CSE and its hands-on, project-based curriculum around the holistic student experience and for the betterment of the greater Whitefish community.

Moving towards scratch, one crunch at a time

In addition to the classroom, one of Stagg's primary goals since 2008 has been to procure more local foods for the school's 5,000 weekly meals. Stagg credits his restaurant experience for inspiring more scratch and quick-scratch cooking in the central kitchen.

"At a restaurant, I think you pay a little bit more attention to how stuff tastes versus just trying to get it out the door and [to] fill up someone's stomach," says Stagg. "[I've] pretty much changed all the recipes…instead of buying canned gravy, [we] actually make the gravy. I knew how to make that stuff from scratch and slowly taught it to the staff."

The scratch-solution required the right ingredients, and Stagg didn't have to look far. "Pretty much right off the bat, I was trying to figure out how to get local beef in here." Item by item, Stagg has found the right local food opportunities that fit his budget, meal patterns, and processing capacity. "Over the years, I've tried to add a thing or two or whenever anything came up, and slowly [as] to not overwhelm the staff."
Stagg buys directly from regional producers but also indirectly through the Western Montana Growers Cooperative (WMGC), a producer-owned cooperative of 40+ farms and ranches based in Missoula, MT.

Not every opportunity has worked out seamlessly for Stagg, however. He's learned that clear communication with local

Images (left to right): CSE Coffee; CSE Instructor Chris Bickford; CSE Bananas

Appendix A: Food Service Director Interview Guide

Food Service Director Interview Guide

Before the Interview:

1) Ensure all necessary recording and camera equipment has been acquired and charged. Review any steps to using the technology. If using Zoom, make sure microphones are high quality and to *click record before starting the interview (if allowed by the participant)*.
2) Bring a pen and notebook along in case they don't want to be recorded.
3) Record interviews *indoors* if possible, and if outdoors that the space has limited ambient noise from wind, traffic, etc.
4) Make sure the interview is private, and that folks likely won't disturb the interview process.

Introduction

Thanks for taking the time to participate in this conversation. The goal of today's interview is to assist Mission West with our farm to school efforts in order to help you provide healthy, locally grown and value-added products to your program. You and your work will be presented as a profile that I will write and design to be shared with other farm to school leaders, practitioners and advocates through farm to school networks, written reports, and a public presentation as a component of my graduate studies later this spring.

Part of my graduate research considers the role of food service directors in the Farm to School model. Today, I'm curious to learn your story of integrating farm to school into your work.

Before we start, I want you to know that your identity as a participant will not be kept confidential. Your name and information shared in this interview will be used to spotlight you and your work. Once I've made your profile, I would appreciate it if you would review the draft for accuracy. These profiles are expected to be completed about mid-April at the latest.

You also reserve the right to end the interview at any time or pass on any question.

If it's alright with you, I'd like to record the interview. Recordings are helpful in ensuring the accuracy of my reporting and allow me to focus better on your responses. Once I've made your profile, the recording will be deleted. Would that be okay?

[IF YES, TURN ON RECORDER. If not, take hand notes as best as possible.]

Background

I'd like to start off by learning more about you and your background in this work.

1) Tell me about your previous jobs. How do they relate to food service work?
2) How did you come about this job?
    a) Probe: Years as FSD
3) Tell me about a typical day for you at your job.
    a) Probe for: Cooking?
4) Sounds like your position involves a lot of different tasks like meal planning and navigating federal nutrition guidelines [Echo appropriately here]. What kind of training, if any, have you received?
    a) Follow-up: Who put on the training?
5) Sometimes eating school lunches get a bad rap. What would your response be to that?

General farm to school information

Now that I have some context, I'd like to hear more about your involvement with farm to school.

6) How did you first hear about farm to school?

7) What are the main benefits of farm to school?
    a) Probe: Any other benefits?
8) When you're telling others about farm to school, what are one or two stories you like to share?
9) Tell me about the ways your school district participates in farm to school.
    a) Probe: School gardens? Education or promotion through Harvest of the Month?
10) What are the major challenges you've experienced with farm to school?
    a) Probe: Any other challenges?
    b) Follow-up: I heard you mention ____, but what about food preparation or storage?
11) When you think about who supports your farm to school efforts, who comes to mind and why?
    a) Probe: Outside the school district? Inside the school district?
12) When you think about developing a farm to school program, what resources have you found useful?
    a) Probe: Any specific government or community organization that comes to mind?
13) What resources are not currently available that you think would be useful?
    a) Probe: Ordering information? Value-added products? Grants? "Things like that."

Local food procurement

In your role, I imagine procurement is top of mind. I have some questions about your purchasing process.

14) Share a bit about how meals are prepared here.
    a) Probe: Scratch cooking? What meals do you mostly cook from scratch?
15) How do you define "local" food?
    a) Follow-up: How do your vendors define "local?"
16) How did you start purchasing local foods?
    a) Probe: How do they fit into your food program? Any challenges?
17) Tell me about the logistics of purchasing locally-sourced foods in your work.

a) Probe: Vendors (Commercial distribution, USDA, wholesalers, farmers?)? Seasonality of products? Distribution? "Things like that."

18) When thinking about integrating school gardens or agricultural education with procuring local foods, in your experience, what are effective ways of doing that?
    a) Follow-up: Ineffective ways?
19) How do students and parents learn about your serving of local food?
    a) Follow-up: What have their reactions been?
20) What foods are you looking to buy locally if they were available?
    a) Probe: Fruits? Vegetables? Meat? Grains, beans, lentils? Dairy? Processed?

Concluding questions

Before we wrap up, the last questions I have for you look at the bigger picture of farm to school.

21) Looking ahead, what are your goals for implementing farm to school over the next few years?
22) What support from local, state or federal policies would assist you in your farm to school work?
    a) Probe: Financial incentives; source regulations; assisting producers. "Things like that."
23) For a food service director interested in starting their farm to school program, what words of advice would you share?

Wrap up

Thanks for your time and thoughtful responses today. Is there anything else you'd like to share that I may have missed or you'd like to circle back to?

Great! I'll end the recording here. [Turn off recorder]

Lastly, I have a post-interview survey that captures more of the quantitative data of your work; it should take 5 minutes or less to complete. Would you be okay filling it out?

Food Service Director Post-Interview Handout

Name of school district: _____

Your name and position: _____, _____

Number of total students for each school in the district:

Pre-K: _____

Primary: _____

Middle: _____

High:_____

Other: _____

Approximate percent of students in district eligible for free and reduced lunch: _____%

Number of kitchens? _____

Central kitchen? Y/N

Storage: Do you have a central warehouse? Y/N

Total number of food service staff? _____

Average number of meals served during the week? _____

school year? _____

Thanks for your time today!

CONCLUSION

"How do you respond? To your environment, your city, your community? What do you make of this world? How do you transform what you find into what you would like it to be?"

- Senga Nengudi

During my graduate studies, I have encountered the term "wicked" used to describe the pervasive issues present in the U.S. food system. These problems have a complex and interdependent nature, making them seem, at first glance, impossible to solve. The deterioration of farmland and soils in California and the Midwest breadbasket–two of the United States' major agricultural regions–as well as the significant disparities in access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate foods are examples of such issues (Philpott 2020). Ample evidence also indicates vulnerabilities in our consolidated agriculture industry and the extensive loss of food knowledge, including of the source, preparation, and cultivation of food. While these problems have been known to environmentalists and food activists for decades, the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront many of the deep fissures in "business as usual." Motivated by these challenges, my purpose for graduate study was to investigate holistic approaches that address these food system issues, understanding that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions. Creating this portfolio has been a testament that cooperative solutions and mutually beneficial outcomes are not only possible but happening across Montana.

Beginning with a broad perspective, my preliminary research and coursework exposed me to stories of collaboration and resilience. Many of these came from marginalized communities who have used food as a catalyst for community resilience. From these stories, I gained valuable insights into food sovereignty from solidarity movements in Black and Indigenous communities, such as the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and the

Freedom Farm Cooperative in rural Mississippi (White 2018). These coalitions assert that access to nourishing food, clean water, and knowledge to cultivate one's food are essential human rights. In considering these values in my work, I gained a deeper understanding and appreciation for how farm to school, like many alternative food movements, owes credit to marginalized communities who have laid the groundwork for how to collaboratively create pockets of resistance from systems of oppression.

In producing the literature review for this portfolio, I explored ways farm to school similarly promotes community. Qualitatively, the movement integrates school gardens and food system education to provide enriching experiences that bring people and land closer together through food. I argue the economic aspect is also crucial, and a just transition from the conventional food system should consider the livelihoods of small and mid-scale farmers and ranchers working within often tight institutional budgets and contracts. In informing the other components of this portfolio, I found it interesting how existing farm to school research puts the onus on specific individuals, namely school food authorities (SFAs), to initiate and sustain farm to school programs, whereas my research shows that farm to school can just as often be championed by school board members, educators, students, and community members. Additionally, many farm to school training programs today are utilizing a teams-based approach, rather than focusing on the efforts of any single individual. This approach makes the work far less daunting and sustainable for when the inevitable turnover happens.

Through the creation of a strategic, farm-to-school communications plan for Mission West Community Development Partners (MWCDP), I saw how this collaborative approach comes together in food value chains. Unlike the transactional supply chain that accentuates a product, the food value chain emphasizes transparency and relationship-building from seed to

stomach. The Montana Marinara project posed a novel opportunity where I could explore the shared value of a statewide project and its shortened food value chain with significant economic and social impacts. The challenge became how to strategize the "win-win" benefits of the project, build ongoing trust, and connect with key messengers; all important considerations for building any kind of public relations or outreach strategy. Without much of a communications background, I recognized the adaptability and flexibility required of nonprofits and activists in organizing outreach efforts. A key takeaway in designing this plan was the importance of relationship-building to making systemic change – I've found the old adage "it's not what you know, it's who you know" rings especially true in cross-sector collaborations such as this.

In cultivating these relationships, storytelling emerged as a powerful tool to inspire and sustain change. Profiling Montana's food service directors and their programs was an opportunity to explore storytelling, while identifying and communicating the motivations of "champions" in farm to school. While my initial intentions of the interviews were to understand the motivations of food service directors, allowing flexibility in the interview process to connect with other stakeholders, such as educators and community members, made the stories more enriching and impactful than if they had come from a single source. If I had predicted this trajectory in advance and had enough time to plan suitable strategies for collecting additional data, I would have formulated interview questions specifically for follow-up interviews. I also would have engaged more with the student perspective, which is a significant demographic missing from farm to school research.

I plan to apply the insights and understandings gained from this research into my professional aspirations. During my undergraduate studies in agronomy and international agriculture, I aimed to gain the knowledge to assist producers in making sustainable choices for

their land and communities. Unfortunately, for aspirations such as this, pursuing a career as an agronomist in consulting or seed and fertilizer sales within the corn and soybean industry did not seem to offer the transformative potential I was seeking. In addition, I heard stories from agronomists who found themselves in a therapist-like role, working with farmers who felt like victims of a broken system. I realized that science-based solutions that placed undue pressure on individual producers were impractical and unrealistic. In my graduate coursework, I have been inspired by collaborative approaches that acknowledge the necessity of shared risk to achieve shared rewards. While these approaches are not without their challenges, theories such as food democracy and farm to school support these efforts, and will continue to inform my career in cooperative development into the foreseeable future.

References

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