

From Knife Skills to Networks

Amplifying Farm-to-School in a Rural California County

Executive Statement

This case study demonstrates how a third-party intermediary has been essential to Humboldt County's Farm-to-School success, and how its sustainability is dependent on outside support.

Farm to Fork Campaigns Find Their Way to Schools

The local food movement has been growing in the United States at a steady rate over the past 25 years. As individual consumers desire more local food options, these preferences also show up in the institutions that serve them. Today, in 2021, it is commonplace to see "locally grown" promoted at grocery stores, restaurants, hospitals, and schools.

But the ubiquity of these products in the marketplace is not driven by consumer demand as much as it is enabled by a system of intermediaries, advocates, technical assistance providers, and funders. Federal agencies such as USDA, HHS, and EDA, as well as numerous state agencies and private philanthropies have played a major role in enabling this movement, funding efforts ranging from market development, education and awareness, compliance assistance, capacity-building, innovation, and academic research. And intermediaries such as food distributors, educators, grower networks, and university extension have also played major roles.

A Case in Humboldt County, California

Located in northwest California, Humboldt County is one of the largest and most rural counties in the state. There are approximately 135,700 residents at an average density of only 33 people per square mile. The county residents include European settlers, Native American Tribes, and recent immigrants from Mexico, Central America, Southeast Asia, and Central Europe. There are very high rates of poverty and food insecurity, particularly among school children.

The Humboldt County Office of Education (HCOE) provides administrative services and support to the county's 32 independent school districts. Its Nutrition Program and Services spearheads its farm-to-school work, with Program Coordinator, Erin Derden-Little at its helm. The HCOE Farm-to-School (F2S) Program is unique in its structure, its program offerings, and its ability to generate successful results.



HUMBOLDT COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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A fresh approach to student health.

What Makes HCOE's F2S Program Unique?

Community Interest

The Humboldt County community is active in advocating for improvements to school meals, has a strong presence of small scale family agriculture, and includes several community organizations that promote local food, economic independence, and environmental sustainability.

Funding

All of the F2S program work is funded through grants written by program staff. The program has a track record of implementing successful projects and it develops strategies that allow its program to compete for funding sources against much larger and better-resourced entities.

HCOE F2S

Service Structure

HCOE is a stand-alone agency serving public schools throughout the County; it has established administrative functions, relationships, and a core mission that allow it to provide resources and support to local schools. However, its Nutrition Service program is almost entirely self-funded.

Key Players

HCOE Nutrition Program and Services Staff and HCOE Admin Staff
School District Food Service Staff, Business Managers, and After School Program Leaders
Local Farmers and Ranchers
Community Partners

When Live Gives Lemons: Problems Being Addressed

The evolution of HCOE's F2S program has occurred in response to the identification of barriers and pre-conditions existent within the system that functionally stand in the way of successfully implementing any F2S initiative. Increasing the purchase of local products by a governmental entity entrenched in a staunch bureaucracy and operating with very tight resources is no easy goal to accomplish. Any progress made toward this goal requires critical thinking and an ability to understand and adapt to complex and often contradictory situations.

Consumer Demand Exceeds Capacity

Consumers of school meals, or more accurately, parents of the children who eat school meals, have been a primary source of pressure for schools to change food options available to students. This demand has largely grown from the development of consumer preferences for healthier, less processed, and fresher food options (in more recent years, also including locally grown or source-identified products). **But consumer pressure alone doesn't shift the system because the system has institutionalized constraints that must also be overcome.**

Basic Supply Chain: In Direct-To-Consumer Markets, the supplier (e.g., farmer) assumes roles of broker, processor, and seller



Humboldt County’s economy is historically resource-based: it has been dependent on farming, ranching, timber, and fishing as its primary economic drivers. Today, timber and fishing play a less prominent role, replaced by tourism and cannabis production. But food-based agriculture is still a notable part of the local economy.

Most produce farmers in the county operate at a small-scale (less than 40 acres) and rely on direct-to-consumer sales through farmers markets and local retail accounts (grocery stores and restaurants). Many farmers sell all that they can grow through these preferred and established channels, but there are some farmers who are looking for additional sales outlets and sales to schools provide them an opportunity for increasing revenues and marketing.

Coupled with the small scale and cash-based marketing outlets (i.e., farmers markets), many farmers are also considered beginning farmers (operating less than 5 years). Often, the operators are trying to make ends meet and honing their craft; learning the business side of their operations is a hurdle for many. For instance, sales contracts, product pricing, marketing, and food safety compliance, are hurdles that thwart their expansion into new markets.

Farmers with the highest likelihood of success in selling produce to schools are ones who have enough experience to plan crop production, manage wholesale purchasing processes and accept wholesale pricing, deliver promised goods in a time and condition that is acceptable to schools, and handle necessary paperwork.

HCOE’s F2S staff have discovered that both school and farmer capacity-building are necessary steps in building a reliable F2S program.

The System, The School, The Spread

Institutional constraints are the most significant barrier to F2S successes. Because of the county’s high rates of poverty, students at public schools also access the “National School Lunch Program” (and related programs for breakfast and dinner); this offers students free and reduced meal costs, but also requires schools to follow strict serving requirements. These Federal standards are highly inflexible in regard to portion size, ingredient choice, and procurement options. This rigid system prevents many F2S opportunities.

The structures and priorities within schools themselves also pose numerous constraints. For one, school budgets are generally very tight; accommodating additional costs for local produce (typically, but not always more expensive than produce available from large distributors) is often not an option. School food service programs themselves may also be unequipped to handle fresh, unprocessed produce: schools may not have prep kitchens or cooking equipment, staff may not have skills to break down ingredients for recipes, and food service directors who are already operating under highly stressful and often-changing circumstances may not be able to add on another set of logistics to accommodate. Further, local produce is not reliably available throughout the year (most produce peaks during the summer school break, and small farmers often cannot provide consistent supply for long periods during the school session); working it into meal planning creates a lot of additional uncertainty for food service programs.

Finally, Humboldt County schools are spread far and wide: most students are centered in the coastal urban area, but the majority of schools (many with less than 100 students) are remote and dispersed, making deliveries very challenging and expensive for farmers.

Due to these constraints, there has been a mixed response among schools prioritizing purchases of local food. For schools seeking to purchase local produce for its meals, several factors must align: budgets need to be available, school leadership and food staff must support the added effort, and farms have to offer produce that can easily be incorporated into school meals.

And It Still Comes Down to Money

At a school or district level, the major financial limitation is in school budgets mentioned above. Commercial produce distributors who serve schools do not carry local produce offerings, and prices for produce through these distributors are often lower than locally sourced produce. Stretching an already tight food program budget requires a creative and dedicated staff.

Funding that supports efforts to promote and expand F2S adoption is largely from grant programs. This means that schools, or support programs like HCOE's F2S, must constantly submit grant requests, compete for funding on state and national levels, and morph their programming to the often-changing priorities of grant funders. HCOE's Nutrition Program and Services is almost entirely grant-funded (as opposed to receiving funding from the organization's general budget). These factors result in constantly changing program offerings, short-term projects, and uncertain funding flows. While F2S program staff have been successful in fundraising for its programs, this success hinges on the priorities of the funders themselves.

A Smorgasbord of Strategies: Wide-Ranging Solutions

The success of the HCOE F2S Program stems largely from the creative capacity of its staff and its constituents to design and deploy initiatives and services appropriate to the constraints of the system and relevant to the needs of its stakeholders.

HCOE's Multi-Pronged Approach to Increase of Local Food in School Meals

Local Food Promotion

Revise Harvest of the Month agenda to include 70% local items, procure produce from local farms, distribute produce to participating schools, produce and provide educational materials for classroom and home use

Produce video shorts of featured farms and produce items to accompany classroom-based curriculum

Produce print materials including wall calendar of locally available produce featured in HOTM program, farmer profiles, and art by local artist

Host and promote student engagements, including annual Salsa Competition (local chefs, products, sales), school taste-testing events, farm / farmers market field trips

Coordinate and promote annual county-wide "Taco Tuesday" event featuring local beef, sour cream, and...

School Food Service Support

Develop and coordinate networking and peer-learning events for school food service staff

Provide kitchen staff training in recipe development, knife skills, meal planning, procurement, and produce featuring (lunch line displays, signage, etc.)

Help school districts access funding to upgrade kitchen tools and infrastructure needed to handle and prepare fresh, whole, local produce

Lead pilot project with region's largest school district to source local produce during peak (summer) periods, prepare and preserve processed produce, and test recipes and student satisfaction using preserved produce

Assist farmers with meeting school procurement requirements, including food safety plans, invoicing procedures, and contracting

F2S Strategies

Garden-Based Education

Create garden-based education programs for train-the-trainer events and support school garden purchases of garden equipment (created a seven-week gardening program using the Junior Master Gardener and Life Lab curriculum as a foundation)

Establish a partnership with College of the Redwoods Agriculture Program to develop an internship program for college students to support school gardens.

Institutional Capacity-Building

Develop technical assistance capacity at HCOE to support farm and school procurement needs

Adopt "broker" role to coordinate farm produce availability with school meal program interest/need; purchase, aggregate, and distribute produce

Develop inter-governmental agreement to act as a purchaser on behalf of school districts, streamlining district purchasing for local produce and ensuring district compliance with Federal regulations

Utilize existing internal systems at HCOE to simplify the purchasing and billing procedures associated with local procurement (inter-district transfers allow districts to reimburse HCOE for farm purchases)

Prepare grant funding proposals to support program efforts, implement pilot projects, and provide additional resources to participating schools

The Proof is in the (Local) Pudding: Real Results

The wide-ranging and far-reaching strategies that HCOE has employed to further its F2S goals have resulted in similarly extensive impacts: many increases in positive outcomes, decreases of key barriers, and improvements in pre-existing conditions that enabled its successes.

The most significant outcomes align with positive changes in student and family awareness of local products, school purchases from farms, and bureaucratic adjustments to facilitate activities.

By the Numbers

Harvest of the Month: Over 4,800 children: 200 K-5 Classrooms, 23 After School Programs, 18 Pre-Schools / Playgroups

Video Shorts: 30 videos, over 4,000 views
<https://vimeo.com/channels/hcoenutrition>

Salsa Competition: Over 4,000 students

Garden Education Support (2018-2020):
11 farm field trips, 10 school gardens supported, 2 teacher trainings

Produce Purchased (2018-2019): \$12,000 value, 8 participating farms

Food Service Training and Networking:
3-5 events per year in food prep skills (knife work, recipe development), policy changes, and lessons learned

Pass the Plate: Call for Sustainable Funding

HCOE's F2S program has relied exclusively on outside funding to support implementation. This funding has enabled a wide variety of approaches to problem-solving, opportunity-seeking and capacity-building.

But the program's continuity is threatened on a nearly annual basis as funding priorities shift. Further, many of the positive impacts have yet to be realized; changing food choices of children

who enter adulthood, changing institutional structures, and longitudinal impacts across multiple years of effort all require long-range planning and consistent implementation.

The most critical need for this program to sustain itself into the future is to establish a diversity of funding strategies. These strategies must utilize different staff capacities to explore underutilized resources, develop value offers that can be monetized, and produce some degree of self-sustaining revenue.

Critical Needs

Long-term programmatic funding for support services and direct school implementation

Commitment from HCOE administration to fund program out of the general budget

Ability for participating schools to fund some of HCOE's services

Key Strategies

Maintain and enhance relationships with funders and pursue long-range fund sources

Advocate for program funding through HCOE's general budget

Develop fee-for-service model to monetize select offerings to participating schools

Farm-to-School as a national initiative continues to gain ground in its appeal to stakeholders, its impact for both farms and consumers, and its ability to complement curriculum standards. But, its future is inherently tied to the priorities of large funding bodies; until more sustainable approaches are developed to support these initiatives, they will continue to be in a precarious position of uncertain futures.

Successes of programs like HCOE's F2S show that resources can be used more efficiently when barriers are removed as a part of program implementation efforts. Addressing necessary preconditions – such as providing knife skills to kitchen staff or training and networking opportunities for food service directors – affords greater sustainability to the F2S program.

Eureka City Schools, the largest district in the county, has become a leader in local procurement with HCOE's help. They now purchase directly from at least eight produce farmers and two ranchers.