

# Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project: Growing Minds and Healthy Communities

Maggie Cramer

Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) has been working for a decade to fulfill its mission of helping local farms thrive, linking farmers to markets and supporters, and building healthy communities through connections to local food. Central to that work is its Local Food Campaign, which creates demand and promotes local food and farms through mechanisms such as its local food guide and annual farm tour. Another large part of that work revolves around the Growing Minds farm-to-school program, which builds the next generation of local food supporters and healthy citizens (more information available at <http://growing-minds.org>).

Farm-to-school is a place-based strategy to benefit children's health and education that also provides market opportunities for local farms and health benefits for communities. Because of its positive impacts, the number of programs across the country has increased dramatically. In 2001, there were 6 pilot farm-to-school programs in the United States. Today, there are programs in all 50 states, and more than 9,000 schools participate.

ASAP's farm-to-school program has 4 components: school gardens, local food cooking classes and demonstrations, farm field trips, and local food in school cafeterias. These components are based on the premise that students will make healthy eating choices such as choosing fruits and vegetables, if they have positive experiences with and positive relationships to the source of their food. Although the program has traditionally been associated

with kindergarten through fifth grade, preschools are now embracing farm-to-school programming and are working to create healthy food environments for the youngest of our children.

Historically, it has been difficult to excite children about eating healthy food. Rather than promoting the healthy aspects of fruits and vegetables, ASAP's farm-to-school approach focuses on providing tangible, hands-on, positive experiences with real, fresh food. Children will eat vegetables, but multiple introductions and associations need to be offered, as well as good modeling and easy access. That's where gardens, cooking classes, field trips and local food in cafeterias come in.

If children grow vegetables in a garden, or meet the farmer who grew them, and cook the vegetables themselves, they are more likely to eat them—at school and at home. Local fruits and vegetables taste great and also have a story with which children can connect. When food comes with a relationship, the likelihood is increased that a child will not only eat it, but also enjoy it.

Recently, ASAP expanded its farm-to-school program to include training for university students studying to become teachers and dietitians. This university training program began as a pilot, called the Farm to School Education Project, in Jackson County, North Carolina, with funding from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation. The concept of working "upstream," integrating farm-to-school programming into college courses of

in the 2009 summary publication *From Farm to Fork: A Guide to Building North Carolina's Sustainable Local Food Economy* [22]. Now, 4 years later, nearly all of the "game changer" plans have been accomplished by CEFS and others, or are under way. CEFS and its partners worked to pass legislation establishing a North Carolina Sustainable Local Food Advisory Council, which provides a forum for policy work and collaborations that enhance the built environment of local food systems. With support from the Golden Leaf Foundation, CEFS in partnership with the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service launched the statewide 10% Campaign to encourage North Carolina citizens and food businesses to commit 10% of their food budget to North Carolina-grown products. Because North Carolinians spend about \$35 billion a year on food, this would make about \$3.5 billion available in the local economy [23].

CEFS also partnered with the Cooperative Extension Service 4-H Program to bring FoodCorps to North Carolina. North Carolina is one of 10 selected inaugural states for the FoodCorps service program, which places young people 18 years of age or older in school garden settings to foster nutrition education, garden engagement, and links between

local farms and school cafeterias. According to Tes Thraves of CEFS (July 2012), North Carolina currently has 6 service members, and since August of 2011 they have built or revitalized 73 school and community gardens, serving over 6,000 students.

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina (BCBSNC) and the North Carolina Recreation and Park Association have joined forces to support the establishment of community gardens in all 100 North Carolina counties by the end of 2013. The BCBSNC Foundation is also supporting healthy food in schools by helping to fund FoodCorps and by providing grant support for the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' Farm to School Program.

Diverse partnerships create innovative, community-based solutions. A range of community partners in Goldsboro, North Carolina, collaborated to create Produce Ped'lers, a bicycle delivery program to deliver fresh produce from the city farmer's market to areas of the community that have limited access to fresh, local produce. Community partners, including Dillard Academy Charter School, the Wayne County Health Department, the Wayne Food Initiative, the City of Goldsboro, Plum Tree Marketplace and CEFS, teamed

study in education and health science, is being put into practice for the first time. Professors, teachers, faculty, and students of Western Carolina University, as well as community members in the university's town of Cullowhee, embraced this new idea and shared ASAP's goal that education and nutrition students be able to incorporate farm-to-school methods from day 1 of their careers.

With continued funding from W.K. Kellogg Foundation, ASAP has established farm-to-school learning labs, sites where WCU students can observe and participate in the farm-to-school approach, close by the university in Jackson County Public Schools and Head Start centers. The consistent presence of that multicomponent approach—which connects classroom and cafeteria activities to create positive food environments and engages educators, parents, and community members—is making an impact.

ASAP program coordinator Anna Littman recently shared a spinach success story. While making fresh fruit and spinach smoothies with children in kindergarten through fifth grade classrooms, one Western Carolina University student admitted that she was hesitant to bite into the fresh, raw spinach the way elementary students had done at the outset of the class. However, she modeled the healthy eating choice and ended up loving the spinach. As this story illustrates, the farm-to-school program creates a healthy food environment not only in the school itself but also in the community at large. Once positively affected, those involved take the experience beyond the school's walls.

Another component of ASAP's work deals with access to food away from the school cafeteria. To improve access to fresh, healthy, affordable food that is grown locally, ASAP has implemented an electronic payments system at Asheville City Market, a farmers' tailgate market run by ASAP in downtown Asheville. The system allows shop-

pers to pay by swiping debit or credit cards or cards issued through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly referred to as food stamp cards. Since the program began, Asheville City Market has led the state in food stamp payments at farmers markets, and ASAP has partnered with more than 50 community organizations that work with low-income residents to spread the word about the availability of this payment method. ASAP also hosts a Kids' Corner Market at Asheville City Market, providing fun children's activities relating to local food and the farmers' market.

Whether at school or home, parents want healthy food for their children and for themselves. ASAP believes that people respond to positive messaging and positive associations with healthy food and with the local food community, and much of its work is built around this belief. ASAP is changing the way Western North Carolinians interact with the food environment in hopes of achieving their vision of strong farms, thriving local food economies, and healthy communities where farming is valued as central to our heritage and our future (more information is available at <http://www.asapconnections.org>). NCMJ

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up to launch this creative pilot program, which employs young people and also trains them in farmer's market management. The under secretary of the US Department of Agriculture attended the project kickoff to announce that the produce delivery program had been approved to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (formerly known as food stamps), which will greatly increase the capacity for all people to better afford locally grown produce. The project is funded by a US Department of Agriculture Farmers Market Promotion Program grant.

Collaboration among diverse partners in North Carolina has proved to be of key importance in making North Carolina a national leader in local food system development. Partnerships between agriculturists, health professionals, planners, and local leaders, among others, generate capacity to create built environments that simultaneously support local and sustainable foods, communities, and healthy populations. In addition to ongoing work to bring healthier food options into direct sale and retail markets, we advocate a strong focus on planning for and creating physical environments replete with opportunities for individuals to

directly engage with all components of their food system—from production through consumption. This strategy offers the most promise for communities to benefit from the link between their food systems and individual and community health. NCMJ

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