

Chapter 26: Farm to School

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The Farm to School initiative is an effort to connect schools (K - 12) with regional or local farms in order to serve healthy meals using locally produced foods. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the term “Farm to School” encompasses efforts that bring local or regionally produced foods into school cafeterias; hands-on learning activities such as school gardening, farm visits, and culinary classes; and the integration of food-related education into the regular, standards-based classroom curriculum.

Program History

Farm to School programs originated through pilot projects in California and Florida in the late 1990’s. In recent years such programs have experienced a boom in popularity and now Farm to School programs are operational in 42,000 schools spanning all 50 states, D.C., and the U.S. Territories as of 2014.

USDA began supporting these initiatives in 2000 with the establishment of the National Farm to School Program and later, in 2001, with the Small Farms/School Meals Initiative. Better connecting consumers with local producers formed the “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” initiative as a USDA-wide effort to create new economic opportunities. One of the goals for this initiative is to break down barriers and support policies that focus on the connection between farmers and consumers. Out of this goal, and in response to the growing demand for Farm to School activities, in September of 2009 the “USDA Farm to School Team” was established. The Team works with local and state authorities, school districts, farmers, and community partners to develop mechanisms to 1) assist schools in accessing local markets, 2) enable food producers to effectively service their local schools, and 3) facilitate communication between interested stakeholders.

In South Carolina, the statewide Farm to School Program originated in 2011 as a two-year funded project from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Since the program began, it has expanded to include more funded schools, but also other institutions. In 2015, the umbrella organization South Carolina Farm to Institution was founded to encompass a wide variety of institutional sites beyond preschools and schools. From 2015 – 2018, South Carolina Farm to Institution existed as a collaborative partnership between the South Carolina Department of Agriculture, South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, South Carolina Department of Education, South Carolina Department of Social Services and Clemson University as well as other stakeholders. The South Carolina Farm to Institution strived to increase the number of farmers providing locally grown products into institutions, such as schools, childcare centers, food banks, hospitals, military installations, and other businesses.

In 2018, the School Garden Assistance Program was created within the South Carolina Department of Education and aims to fund 100 school gardens over a five-year span. The program is administered by Clemson University Extension’s School Gardening for SC Educators and introduces children to hands on agriculture and nutrition education as well as encourages public schools to use locally grown South Carolina produce in their school menus.

Program Legislation

Currently, the South Carolina Farm to School Program is a joint effort of the South Carolina Department of Agriculture, the South Carolina Department of Education, and Clemson University.

National

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 authorized and funded USDA to provide technical assistance and competitive matching farm to school grants. The grants may be used for training, supporting operations, planning, purchasing equipment, developing school gardens, developing partnerships and implementing farm to school activities. USDA received five million dollars each year from 2012 (FY 2013) – 2017 (FY 2018) to administer these grants and provide technical assistance.

Through the FY 2018 Omnibus Bill, the Farm to School Grant Program was appropriated additional funding. In FY 2019 and FY 2020, Office of Community Food Systems (OCFS) will release approximately \$7.5 million to help reach more communities seeking to incorporate local products into the school meal programs, integrate agricultural education into the classroom, and cultivate and expand school gardens.

State

In 2013, the South Carolina Fresh on the Campus program was created within the South Carolina Department of Agriculture to encourage schools to serve locally grown, minimally processed farm foods. This program fosters relationships between South Carolina farms, school districts, and other institutions and regularly consult with staff of the South Carolina Department of Education, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, and Clemson University, along with other state agencies concerning implementation.

Goals and Requirements of the SC Farm to School Program

Core components of the South Carolina Farm to School Program include increasing the number of farmers that are certified to provide locally grown products into schools; providing education to foodservice staff and teachers on Farm to School practices; and providing hands-on learning activities to promote healthy eating among school children.

The South Carolina Farm to School Program supports schools in implementing the four components of Farm to School. Participating schools are required to: 1) source at least two SC grown fruits and vegetables per month to be served as a part of the school meal; 2) promote SC grown in the school cafeteria; 3) integrate nutrition and agriculture education into classroom activities; and 4) establish a school vegetable garden.

Program Administration

The USDA Farm to School Program is operated by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), which has seven regional offices around the country; in each is a Farm to School Regional Lead who is available to provide Farm to School related support to state agencies and other entities in their region.

In South Carolina, staff supporting the South Carolina Farm to School Program are housed at the South Carolina Department of Education and the South Carolina Department of Agriculture.

Additional Info

For more information on the SC Farm to School Program visit www.scfarmtoschool.com.

To learn more about incorporating local produce and other Farm to School activities into your Child Nutrition program operation, contact SCDE at (803) 734-8188.