COLLEEN MATTS
CENTER FOR REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS

SUSAN B. SMALLEY
EVALUATION CONSULTANT

JULIA SMITH
CENTER FOR REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS

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MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY
CRFS MSU CENTER for REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS

MSU CENTER FOR REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS
480 WILSON ROAD, EAST LANSING, MI 48824
FOODSYSTEMS.MSU.EDU

MICHIGAN FARM TO SCHOOL FOCUS GROUPS

As part of its *Michigan Farm to School: Scaling Up and Branching Out* project funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems convened three focus groups in Michigan – one each in Grand Rapids, Detroit and Battle Creek – in late February and early March 2013.

Invited participants – farmers, school food service professionals, Extension educators and staff members from community organizations within each of the respective cities and their surrounding areas – were selected to represent a range of interests in and experience with Farm to School. Although winter weather kept some confirmed participants from attending, 20 people participated and contributed to the conversations. The findings collected from these three groups in three very different cities illustrate various stages of Farm to School activity and experience in the state of Michigan.

NO TWO PROGRAMS ARE THE SAME

The unique factors as well as the universal themes affecting every Farm to School situation were highlighted in these focus groups. Uniqueness can be attributed to each school's particular location, size, student mix, school board and administration, and food service director. The food service program may be self-operated or contracted with a food service corporation. It may have more or less flexibility with its kitchen and storage facilities and staff members. There may be one or many distributors available and servicing the program. The program may have experienced more or fewer successes or failures with past efforts to incorporate local foods. Its administration and teachers may be more or less interested in trying to incorporate food-related educational efforts and reinforce local food messages from the food service program.

The Battle Creek group had fairly limited experience with Farm to School as far as including local products in school meals. However, the participants in this discussion brought considerable educational experience in preschool, K-12 school, and community settings to the conversation. They discussed opportunities for engaging students in learning about the foods served as part of school or preschool meals. Participants in the Grand Rapids group had more Farm to School experience with some positive early efforts providing a solid base for continuing and expanding the program. They also engaged in valuable discussion about the potential for increasing parent understanding about school meal issues. Detroit participants were also more experienced – both positively and negatively - with Farm to School. The size and location of many schools in the southeast region of the state resulted in an especially rich discussion about how to further engage full-service (broadline) distributors in Farm to School.

FARM TO SCHOOL COMMONALITIES

With all these differences, what were the commonalities? One was affirming the food service director's commitment to making Farm to School work in the school. Purchasing local food is not something that just happens; it requires the director to go beyond routine food procurement, really know and understand the cost structure of the meals program, see both possibilities and potential obstacles, and take some considered risks. Not every food service director is prepared to accept that commitment and the accompanying requirements.

Another commonality was recognizing that many farmers also face barriers in implementing Farm to School. For some, their distribution channels are well established. For some, the prices that they can get by selling to schools may not make it profitable. Some do not have the capacity or infrastructure to process or deliver food as schools may require. Some would need to invest in additional infrastructure to sell to schools, and they may lack resources to make that investment or view it as too risky.

A third commonality, though articulated in only two of three focus groups, was recognizing that all schools have the opportunity to purchase local food through one of three school food purchasing cooperatives in the state. The directors and members of these cooperatives have great potential influence regarding the types and amounts of Michigan-grown and processed foods that are readily available to schools. A related common factor is that each school uses one or more full-service (broadline) and/or specialty food distributors for much of the food they purchase. Farm to School advocates need to engage these distributors from both sides. They need to help schools voice their demand for local foods and develop distributor contracts that specify amounts of foods to be sourced from Michigan. Concurrently, they need to help Michigan farmers and distributors work together to increase the number and amount of local foods available through this market channel. After all, "they have a market opportunity in front of them" with Farm to School. In addition to supplying the food, it is important that the identity of the food be preserved through the supply chain, if not by farm name, then perhaps by general location, such as Dundee potatoes or Oceana County asparagus.

The idea of risk was also a common thread through these conversations. Farmers take risks if they invest in infrastructure or pay for a food safety audit or plant crops to sell to schools without full assurance that the schools will purchase them. Broadline distributors take risks if they venture into marketing local or regional foods and find out that their customers really will not purchase them or cannot cover the costs. School food service directors take risks if they plan to use local foods and then they are not available or the students will not eat them. Helping everyone involved learn more and manage and balance their risks will be necessary for Farm to School to grow and become sustainable. For example, more complete cost data is needed on producing and distributing local and regional foods to find possible savings and develop Farm to School pricing that is fair for all who are involved.

As food service directors are coping with tight budgets, increased regulation and public scrutiny, many feel "under the gun". They deal with diverse expectations from students' families, ranging from a request to provide a list of all genetically modified foods on the menu to answering a question about why chicken nuggets are no longer served. They try to communicate with the families through newsletters, menus sent home, school websites, surveys and more. Many of their outreach efforts are met with very limited response, so they may assume that the information they are sending is getting through. The exchanges in the focus groups highlighted that there may still be big gaps in understanding between schools and childcare centers on one hand, and farmers, parents and community organizations on the other. A discussion around the challenges of trying to use produce from student gardens in the school meals program provided one example about differing perspectives and understanding. A conversation about how preschool programs and childcare centers purchase and receive food and the standards that their programs must meet provided another example. All three focus groups reinforced the existence of widely differing perspectives on U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) food safety audits. All these examples point to the importance of school food service directors having support as they embark upon local food purchasing efforts. They need ties with strong allies, both within and outside their schools, to increase the chances for initiating, expanding and sustaining Farm to School programs.

GRAND RAPIDS FOCUS GROUP

Five participants took part in the Grand Rapids focus group on February 27, 2013. Three other confirmed participants were unable to attend. Participants in this focus group recounted successes with area Farm to School endeavors, including sales of Michigan apples, asparagus, dry beans, lamb, peaches, roasted soybeans and soy oil. This focus group was held in western Michigan where numerous farms grow a bounty of fruits, vegetables and other agricultural products, and the participants considered local food purchasing at schools to be a longer-standing tradition than the recent Farm to School hype would indicate. All seemed to agree, however, that people still need education to understand from where various local food items come.

Considerable optimism was expressed about the potential for Farm to School, especially for local farmers

and food processors provided they could practice safe food growing and handling practices and maintain the cold chain. However, many smaller-scale farms may need incentives and assurances to invest in infrastructure or collaborate with other area farmers to supply to schools and meet their pricing requirements.

Some participants emphasized that, regardless of the source, local food products should be easy for schools to obtain with good distribution, school-friendly packaging and food safety assurance. One food service provider noted that, "as a buyer, it's easier to do everything through a broadline distributor, but if the product is easily obtained, if there's good distribution and a good set-up, we'll venture out" to work directly with a farmer or other food supplier. Another food service provider had formed a relationship with a farmer to purchase local foods because the farmer "spoke our language, and our language is food safety and food that's packaged in a way that's easy to distribute". When purchasing local food was not possible through a local grower, there was considerable interest in having broadline distributors provide more information about the sources of their products.

This wide-ranging discussion was especially helpful in examining parents' knowledge of and involvement in Farm to School. A community organization staff member raised questions about how meal and menu decisions are made, how lunch times and prices are established, how food service directors communicate with students' parents and families, how they deal with food waste, and whether and how school gardens fit in. While school food service directors may feel they communicate endlessly about their food service program, it seems many families may remain unaware of food service activities, including local food purchases and sources, and constraints.

Much of the conversation focused on intent and impact, especially around communication. It was the intent of the schools to communicate clearly and completely with students and their families. It was the intent of a community-based organization to add value through school-based work. The perceived impacts, however, did not always match the intent.

DETROIT FOCUS GROUP

The Detroit focus group on March 5, 2013, had eight participants, with two confirmed participants unable to attend. This discussion indicated deep experience with Farm to School and most group members shared extensive knowledge about the topic. Likely because this experience took place in a metropolitan setting, much of the conversation focused on larger-scale production and distribution of food to schools.

This discussion highlighted the role the school food service director plays in committing to and championing local food purchasing for the program to work and last. This commitment can start small, by serving a Michigan product at least once a month or focusing on sourcing one local product consistently. Creativity and an entrepreneurial spirit are also important. The director must be able to think about how local food products, including those from school gardens, can be prepared and served in kid-friendly ways. Decisions must take into account federal nutrition and menu requirements, which were considered responsible for reducing flexibility to use local food products, specifications for federal reimbursements, labor costs, price, etc. If a local food item costs just a few cents more per serving, the other menu items must be adjusted to make up that price difference.

It is up to the food service director to decide food service production methods, and whether and how much processed or pre-packaged food the food service staff members can handle. One food service professional believes that, "we as professionals have to change our menu mix…and change how kids perceive food and change how kids are eating food." If he or she moves forward with local food purchasing, this can allow for many important teaching moments with the kids who eat school food. One staff member of a local non-profit organization said, "some of my most memorable moments so far in Farm to School were having apples that were different shapes and sizes… they weren't waxed and shiny and didn't look identical, and [the students] didn't know what to do with them… It's those teaching moments that are exciting for me. As I look at it, we're teaching the next generation of eaters, and that's really critical to the health of our communities."

Some foods are relatively easy for farmers to grow and

for schools to use, such as sweet corn (in the husk), asparagus, peaches, apples, greens, beans, cherry tomatoes, Swiss chard, carrots, and squash. But for Farm to School to work, food service professionals understand that "a farmer needs to know that he's got a market." One farmer with Farm to School experience indicated that "the biggest problem is trying to coordinate the availability of what they [school food service directors] need…at the time they need it," along with having the time to coordinate the harvesting, packaging and delivery. Farmers may find that contracting for an entire season provides them with the flexibility to balance various markets and be able to provide what the schools want and need. Such a contract also reduces risk for the farmer. One farmer stated, "if you knew you had a set price for so much, then you could play with your retail markets and your wholesale markets…to make a little bit more." Forward contracting can be especially helpful for smaller-scale and newer farms.

Farmers cannot afford to take a loss, but many do not necessarily demand top dollar for their products. They need a fair and steady price that all players can live with – one that covers their costs and provides a reasonable profit. Transportation, aggregation, sorting, cleaning, packing, and cutting changes a raw farm commodity into a finished food product. Going through the supply chain, the product picks up costs at every point, and broadline distributors are also unwilling to take a loss. Compliance with USDA Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and other food safety assurance programs are still extremely challenging for many farms and also need to be part of the discussion.

School food service directors can make spot buys from local farms, but they can also source local through food distributors and even add local food requirements into their contracts with distributors. For example, there could be a requirement that 20% of the school's fruit and vegetable purchases be made from Michigan. While school milk purchases likely derive from Michigan or the Great Lakes region, it is important to specify foods in addition to milk when ramping up local food purchases. Additional customer demand – more food service directors requesting and demanding local and regional foods from their distributors – is needed. Purchasing local products through broadline distributors need not dilute product identity. Sourcing beyond hyper-local, yet within Michigan, can still provide key food location identities, such as South Haven peaches, Dundee potatoes, Oceana County asparagus, and dry beans from the Thumb.

On both sides of the equation, breaking into new distribution channels and working with existing broadline distributors can be a challenge. Both require forming relationships, and figuring out which products in which forms can go on the final school menu and all the logistics between. Understanding the process a Michigan-based grower or processor needs to follow to enter into the school food system is necessary. With regard to broadline distributors, participants wanted to know the process for getting Michigan-based growers, producers and processors into their purchasing systems to make more local foods available to schools. In any case, it is critical for everyone along the food supply chain to know his or her costs at every point in the process and be able to explain those costs to others. This is the only way that everyone can come to the table with the concrete numbers necessary to forge an agreement that will work for all parties.

Some participants in this conversation agreed that for-profit food service management companies wield great power with Farm to School. They may be able to balance some school costs with their hospital and/or college business. If a large company like Chartwells (a contracted food service company with many school accounts in Michigan) demands Michigan food products, the broadline distributors will provide it because they know the products will be purchased. The company has the ability to move Farm to School forward by instructing their staff to make Farm to School a goal or priority for the school year. School boards can also spur the food service director to action.

Group members provided a number of specific suggestions to propel Farm to School in Michigan:

- develop a Michigan school produce collaborative for collective purchasing;
- work with and through Michigan's school food purchasing cooperatives to facilitate purchasing Michigan/local products;
- capture and communicate lessons learned about

Farm to School more effectively, perhaps through a Michigan Farm to School blog;

- facilitate additional Farm to School mentoring and networking;
- plan, provide and evaluate a Michigan Farm to School Conference that goes beyond the "what" and focuses on the "how", including operations and implementation, particularly for school food service directors;
- initiate and support specific campaigns such as "Closing the I-96 Gap" (between the western and eastern sides of southern Lower Michigan) with common school menus; and
- provide examples of and support for forward contracting with farmers and school contracts with broadline distributors that promote use of Michigan/local products.

BATTLE CREEK FOCUS GROUP

This focus group was held on March 6, 2013, with seven participants. Two additional confirmed participants were unable to attend. As a result, this group's composition did not heavily represent school food service and a number of questions that were raised went largely unanswered. Problems that participants perceived in dealing with schools included lack of menu flexibility, lack of demand for healthier foods and budget challenges. The group expressed strong interest in better understanding the world of school food service directors and brainstormed about how they might do that, including specific ways they could reach out to area school food service directors, perhaps through Good Food Battle Creek. (Good Food Battle Creek is part of the Fair Food Network that, according to their website, is designed to assist residents and organizations in Battle Creek in organizing around common goals for the community's well-being).

Given the group's composition, the discussion focused more on specific local issues and Farm to Pre-K opportunities. Some key childcare factors surfaced in this conversation.

- Childcare programs vary considerably in terms of what they consider to be healthy foods, with some seeing packaged cheese crackers as healthy compared to cookies.
- Many Great Start Readiness Programs (GSRPs), which are state-funded, are provided with food from a local school district's food service operation. It would be feasible to check on where GSRPs source their food and survey childcare centers, if that would be helpful.
- Among childcare centers in general, most prepare food on-site, but some source it from local school districts. The centers differ dramatically in their food preparation facilities, with some having virtually none.
- Many early childhood programs use the Preschool Program Quality Assessment (PQA) from HighScope for evaluation and assessment. (The PQA covers 63 dimensions of program quality in seven domains: learning environment, daily routine, adult-child interaction, curriculum planning and assessment, parent involvement and family services, staff qualifications and development, and program management.) The state's licensing for early childhood programs uses PQA standards. Examining existing quality standards in the PQA and, if necessary, working to better incorporate healthy food into those standards, would cause early childhood centers to look for healthier foods, some of which may be local. Standards could also encourage centers to incorporate more food-focused educational activities.
- We need to better illustrate the costs and benefits of early childhood food choices. Although healthy, local food may cost more to purchase than processed food. In the long run, the benefits of improved health and school performance are likely to far outweigh those costs, which need to be built into early childhood budgets. Both quick fixes and long-term systems changes are important.

On the supply side, group members believed that established farmers may generally have their distribution channels set and, unless they are looking for a new revenue stream, they are not likely to change. However, new and beginning farmers may be more interested in selling their food products to local schools. Additionally, interest was expressed for farmers to help students grow some of their own food, expose students to farming as an occupation, and help schools develop food policies. One farmer mentioned that, "in addition to

being interested in supplying [food], I'd like to get into setting schools up with hoophouses and season extension, giving them the power to grow their own food for the time that they're there" during the school year. Discussion also indicated that several parts of the puzzle for entering the school food market were missing for local farmers.

In one case, schools could not come close to meeting the prices a local farmer gets at local hospitals, farmers markets and restaurants. "When I can sell every tomato I can raise for $2 per pound, I cannot afford to sell them to anyone for $.45 or $.65 per pound." The farmer also did not have time to develop and nurture the relationship with the school food service director that is critical for Farm to School to work. Neither the school nor the farm had the ability to store product. Going forward, the farmer needs to understand the school's wants, needs and constraints, and the school needs to understand what the farmer can and cannot provide, including seasonal availability. If farms need to meet additional standards in order to sell to schools, such as USDA GAP audits or other food safety assurances, time and money are required for farmers to understand the necessary processes and comply with them.

Other growers in this area are also selling to local restaurants and they already have some experience with institutional markets with local hospitals. They have found "there's a lot of demand locally, even in our hospital, and not enough supply yet or not enough coming at the right times…There's definitely a place for farmers' food if they want to put it in institutions." Both a local farmer cooperative and a nonprofit that has organized a sort of small-scale virtual food hub may be good sources of food for local institutions including schools, and schools may be a good market for both. Individual farmers often lack the time and energy to deal directly with schools, but one person could represent and coordinate a group of farms to aggregate, market and distribute their products to schools. However, in order to realize this potential, these farmer groups will need to find ways to deal with:

- economies of scale;
- packaging;
- pricing;
- food safety; and
- identifying crops that schools can use without extensive processing.

In this area, community organizations already support schools through school and student gardens and hoophouses. Their work is already integrated with science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) curriculum and has potential for additional curriculum integration, possibly through the Battle Creek Area Math and Science Center. (The Battle Creek Area Math and Science Center is a resource clearinghouse for educational materials and information and fosters community involvement in math and science.) The group acknowledged, however, that getting additional food systems education into classrooms will be challenging given the current focus on core curriculum and meeting standardized testing targets, which are already placing pressure on classroom time. Extracurricular engagement through community gardens is also important, as is skillful use of media to inform and explain activities. Whatever the mode, working with and through kids is important, as kids can and do have a huge influence on their schools and families. By starting the message from the bottom up and making kids aware of the need for good, local food, "not only will it move up through the school system…but they'll also be talking about it with their parents."

GOING FORWARD

Much of the Farm to School work in Michigan to date has focused on educating and supporting farmers and food service directors. It remains unquestioned that they both play critical roles and are also the most visible actors. Focus group conversations highlighted the importance of considering and better addressing Farm to School's multiple levels, time frames and actors. For example:

- To make progress, we need both quick fixes and long-term systems change; neither is sufficient on its own.
- District school boards and administrators make critical budget decisions and set priorities, which may include Farm to School.
- State licensure requirements for childcare rely on Program Quality Assessments that may have the potential to include aspects of meals and snacks.

- Some community groups and parents are very interested in working with schools on food issues, including school gardens, food waste, and connecting with local farmers.
- Contracted food service companies could prioritize Farm to School or place a greater focus on it to increase and expand local food purchasing programs at their school sites.

What conclusions can we draw from these three focus groups? We know that people have heard of Farm to School. Many are interested, learning more and trying to figure out if and how it might work for them. Some are trying it on a limited scale, working out the details and logistics. A few are pushing hard to find ways to start, ways to expand and ways to make long-term changes on both sides of the Farm to School equation. Some food service providers agree that "if I have a choice, if all is equal, of course, why wouldn't I choose something local?", while Michigan farmers may promote that "when you purchase something from me, you're not only providing me with a way to make revenue, you're providing me with a way to make my employees revenue, and the people that sell the cardboard revenue, and the people that sell the tires revenue…" and so on. Creating space and opportunities for these Farm to School practitioners and supporters to network and to learn from one another is critical in order to put together the rest of the puzzle, creating a whole that shows us the bigger picture of the positive contributions Farm to School can make in communities around the state.

AUTHORS

Colleen Matts
Farm to Institution Specialist
matts@msu.edu
517-432-0310

Susan B. Smalley, PhD
Evaluation Consultant
smalley3@msu.edu

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