

Wisconsin Farm to School success stories

Vernon County:

Youth get active with school lunch



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As farm to school grows in both popularity and maturity in Wisconsin, schools are looking for ways to develop increasingly comprehensive programs that will thrive for years to come. In order to accomplish this goal, student involvement and community engagement are essential. When students take leadership in farm to school programs, peer education and reaching out to families becomes a priority. Involving youth and families in farm to school leads to the community as a whole feeling pride, ownership and a sense of responsibility for maintaining its farm to school program. Community members recognize the many benefits of farm to school for the youth and the community as a whole. This is a story about the farm to school experience in one Wisconsin county.

In 2009, the Vernon County Farm to School initiative created the “Harvest Challenge,” a menu planning and cooking contest for high school students highlighting the many benefits of including fresh, nutritious and locally grown foods in school lunch programs. The Harvest Challenge team guidelines are that lunch menus must meet all National School Lunch Program regulations, utilize local products, show culinary and aesthetic sophistication, and taste delicious—all at a cost of under \$1.00 per meal! This is no easy task, even for those familiar with school kitchens. In the words of a Kickapoo School District Harvest Challenge student team member, “I never knew how much preparation went into making our school’s lunch. I now appreciate the lunch program and our cooks so much more.”

In the first year of the Harvest Challenge, four Vernon County high school cooking teams joined the pioneering experience and spent weeks preparing their menus, conducting nutritional analyses and going “back to the drawing board,” with the support of volunteer community chef mentors. Final menus were served to a panel of eight local celebrity judges, approximately 200 attendees and their own student peers at the Harvest Challenge Gala. Students presented themselves and their menus professionally, and the judges labored over nuances between the stellar entries. Three awards were given out that first year: one each from the panel of judges, students and the community. The students and community were encouraged to cast a “popular” vote for their favorite menu after receiving samples from all competing teams. The judging panel scored according to professional criteria (provided to teams ahead of time) and received a private presentation and tasting from each team. During this time the judges were allowed to ask questions to challenge the depth of the students’ knowledge. “I was so impressed. The students reveled in the challenge. It really showed in their presentations and the meals they created were excellent beyond my expectations” – Tim Eddy, Harvest Challenge judge 2013, WVRQ radio programmer.



“The Harvest Challenge is the heart of our county’s farm to school program — we keep it going every year and it keeps us going ALL year!”

– Diane Chapeta, Fifth Season Cooperative and Vernon County Farm to School Coalition member

The first year of the cooking contest helped promote and initiate community support for the county's fledgling farm to school program. The Harvest Challenge succeeding in pulling together all aspects of community involvement; from local politicians as speakers, to community businesses as financial sponsors, parents as volunteers, school food service personnel and local chefs as mentors, farmers as heroes, and of course students as leaders and competitors! In the first and in following years, the Harvest Challenge has also found success as a fundraiser. Generous community donations fuel the event and proceeds from a large silent auction help fund the recurring AmeriCorp Farm to School position that provides coordination support to the Vernon County Farm to School Program. Funds raised also contribute to Harvest of the Month nutrition education tasting activities that take place throughout the county, where young students learn about and sample at least one Wisconsin and locally produced food each month.



The Harvest Challenge has grown into a highly anticipated county-wide annual event, bringing together up to six area high schools and their communities to compete, learn, grow and eat together. Attendance has topped 300, cash and in-kind sponsors have grown to include over 75 local businesses, and event revenue has doubled since the first year. Over 35 local personalities and experts have had the honor of serving on the distinguished judging panel, and over 50 volunteers have worked behind the scenes over the years to ensure a smooth, memorable and successful event. But perhaps the most important growth figure is the over 100 high students who have now taken up the Challenge, some more than once,



Viroqua's Laurel High School Harvest Challenge team entered a national healthy school meal cooking contest, Cooking Up Change. From a field of 13 teams nationally, they were selected to compete against two other winning teams in the final competition.

Hosted by the National Farm to Cafeteria Conference in Detroit, Michigan in May of 2010, the three teams competed in a cook-off and presentation for a distinguished panel of 21 judges. Although the Laurel team did not take first place, all of the competing students were winners to have been offered the opportunity to attend a national conference, have over 600 people fed from their winning menus, speak in front of a large crowd, and receive a standing ovation for providing leadership in their communities.

“It was an incredible experience to be in front of everyone at the conference, but it was also a great chance to thank them for caring about what kids across this country eat every day. Kids are learning to care too, and that is the most important aspect to change.”

**- Laurel High School team member
Anders Lewis**

to work side by side with professional chefs and teammates as they contend for one or more of the three annual awards, and the judges top award of the traveling trophy. Future plans include the addition of a cash prize for the top award, to give students even more of an incentive to strive for excellence and bring youth-driven resources to their school's farm to school program.