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Farm to School in the Age of COVID-19

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to let farm-to-school initiatives
wither on the vine.



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Farm to School in the Age of COVID-19

BY KELSEY CASSELBURY

School nutrition teams
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initiatives wither on the vine.

October marks the 10th anniversary of **National Farm to School Month**, first designated by Congress in 2010. Across the nation, school districts large and small have built farm-to-school programs that celebrate area farmers and local ingredients through direct-from-farm procurement initiatives; school gardens, greenhouses and hydroponic stations; agricultural education projects; and school menus that feature more fresh fruits and vegetables than ever before. ▶▶▶

But 2020's National Farm to School Month takes place in a world that's markedly different than years past. The coronavirus pandemic has upended learning systems in many districts, and responding to continually changing approaches with appropriate meal service means that school nutrition operators are juggling a variety of high-priority challenges. No one would blame them if their farm-to-school initiatives, many of which rest on students being physically available for hands-on projects, fell by the wayside for this school year.

Despite the havoc that COVID-19 has wreaked, a number of school nutrition departments have reaffirmed their commitment to the principles that drive farm-to-school programs. They are pushing past obstacles, transitioning to inventive virtual opportunities, taking advantage of curbside meal pickups to distribute materials and conduct projects and doubling down on sourcing menu items and ingredients from local growers, ranchers, farmers and processors. *School Nutrition* shares the stories of six such districts that will not abandon farm-to-school initiatives in the face of the pandemic.

Mt. Diablo Unified School District Concord, California

Prior to taking his position with the Mt. Diablo Unified School District, Director of Food & Nutrition Services Dominic Machi worked for a system in Davis, Calif., which had a “phenomenal” farm-to-school program. When he arrived in Concord in 2017, however, “There had been some purchases from farms, but the program was basically starting out,” Machi recalls. Three years later, that's changed—so much, in fact, that Mt. Diablo was alerted on September 28 that the district had earned California's first certification from Eat REAL, a health advocacy group aimed at promoting responsible sourcing and healthful preparation of whole foods in school meal programs.

Mt. Diablo's farm-to-school program has two primary components: procurement from local growers, which has increased even as the pandemic has dragged on, and the development of school gardens. Currently, the district is building a 7,000-sq.-ft. warehouse that will feature refrigeration that boasts carbon dioxide (CO₂) evaporators, which will allow increased support of local grower purchases of fresh produce. “The vegetables and fruit release CO₂, and that's what makes them deteriorate quicker,” Machi explains. With the new refrigerators, “we can bring in more from the farms.”

As for the school gardens, there's a lot going on there, too. “We probably have one of the best programs that I have seen in any urban area,” Machi claims. “85% of our schools have gardens.” At 10 of the schools, the gardens, each with their own coordinator, are treated like outdoor classrooms. When schools shut down in mid-March, those coordinators continued to be responsible for growing and harvesting the crops. As the district shifted to curbside meal service, the coordinators distributed Growing Kits and Cooking Kits, the latter of which were funded by a grant. In some cases, the



school gardens' harvest was included in those cooking kits.

Although there have been so many challenges for his team to manage during the past six months, Machi says it was never a question that they would remain committed to the farm-to-school program. "You want to mentally break and say, 'I just can't do this,' but we said, 'No, we want to stick to our core values and beliefs,'" he affirms. "We know that COVID is not going to last forever, and we want to be as prepared as we possibly can for when students do come back into the classrooms."



Charleston County School District Charleston, South Carolina

Partnerships are at the heart of the farm-to-school program at Charleston County (S.C.) School District (CCSD), and a steadfast partnership between the Nutrition Services team and local nonprofit The Green Heart Project is what has kept the initiative on track throughout the trials and tribulations of the COVID-19 pandemic. "Sustainability is huge when it comes to farm to school," explains Kerrie Hollifield, RD, LDN, CCSD Nutrition Services Dietitian. "Partnering with a program like the Green Heart Project to make your effort sustainable really pushes your program to be better."

Prior to the start of the pandemic, the Green Heart Project was involved in multiple aspects of CCSD's farm-to-school efforts, says Program Director Amanda Howle. For example, when the Nutrition Services team promotes a "Harvest of the Month," focusing on locally grown fruits and vegetables, the "Green Heart staff would come in and do decorations, big celebrations, taste-testing and get students really excited about that fruit or vegetable," she shares.

At press time, just 25% of CCSD's students are in school full-time, eating in their classrooms after coming through cafeteria serving lines, while 75% of students are learning virtually and eligible to pick up bundled meals curbside once a week. Although pretty much all of the district's schools participate in the farm-to-school program to some extent during a "normal" school year, much of the team's current



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effort is focused on five Title I elementary schools that are located in high-poverty food deserts. “At those five schools, originally we wanted to get students access to the farms through field trips, experiencing a whole day with the farmers,” Hollifield explains. “COVID put a damper on that.”

But the partners are undeterred. Using funds from a \$99,965 USDA Farm to School grant received this year, they are adapting the Harvest of the Month promotion. Now, they are creating 10-minute videos about local produce items, including cooking demos, that are available for teachers to play in class or for students and parents to watch online. Additionally, they’re putting together recipe bags for the students at those Title I schools; one bag might include South Carolina-grown butternut squash, as well as a recipe for butternut squash soup. That same soup is also served to all in-school students and available on the cafeteria line, with signage promoting the local produce. September, for example, focused on green peppers, with a stuffed peppers recipe at the heart of activities.

Field trips are slowly returning to the schedule, too, with Howle sharing that Green Heart just hosted its first small outdoor workshop, emphasizing social distancing and face masks. The workshop, which was held at Green Heart’s new half-acre farm in downtown Charleston, welcomed seven children, ages 3 to 9 (and three adults), for a farm tour, along with hands-on activities and farm-fresh taste-tests. “Our main group activity centered around seasonal planting, and the families direct-seeded root veggies and transplanted leafy greens in our garden bed,” Howle reports. “It was a positive out-of-school experience,” she reports.

There’s no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenge for CCSD’s farm-to-school program, but Hollifield calls attention to a silver lining. “By transitioning online,



we’ve made our lessons more accessible,” she explains. Plus, Howle adds, it’s reaffirmed the mission of the farm-to-school program. “It’s been so crazy, but I think what we keep coming back to is that it’s taught us the importance of access to healthy foods and nutrition education,” she concludes.

Bernalillo Public Schools Bernalillo, New Mexico

When Dean Gallegos took on the role of Student Nutrition Director for Bernalillo (N.M.) Public Schools, he knew that he wanted to implement some sort of garden program in the district. That was seven years ago. It’s no simple matter to develop a farm-to-school or school garden program from scratch, but Gallegos was determined. Supported by a committee to help manage specific activities, he arranged for some of the district’s school principals, as well as staff from the Indian Education department, to attend conferences featuring farm-to-school best practices.

Soon, raised beds were installed at a couple of the elementary schools, and one school team broke ground on a community garden. The raised-bed gardens produced carrots and tomatoes that were featured on school salad bars, Gallegos says. He was stymied, however, by a lack of financial resources needed to expand the program, so he began to seek grant funding. When the team’s initial application to USDA’s Farm to School program was rejected, a state senator helped them secure a \$78,000 grant from another source. These funds are earmarked for four school greenhouses and the first was under construction when the pandemic was declared.

While that initial greenhouse was completed over the summer, materials for the other three are languishing in a warehouse. The extended school closures also led to the demise of the raised beds, Gallegos laments. “COVID



really, really hurt.” Another hit came in the retirement of the district’s facilities director, who had been an enthusiastic supporter of the team’s farm-to-school efforts.

All students in the district are learning virtually this semester, as school sites remain closed to classes. Nonetheless, Gallegos is ready to plant new seeds for his program. A second USDA Farm to School grant application was approved, and the \$73,000 award will be applied toward a drip irrigation system for the greenhouses—on tap to be built “imminently,” reports Gallegos. On top of that, the district just hired a garden coordinator who is “excited and ready to go.” The goal, he notes, is to grow enough produce in the greenhouses—and resurrected bed gardens—to supply school kitchens. There’s just one piece still missing: the students. “Being 100% virtual, the kids won’t be allowed to work in the gardens until they’re able to come back,” Gallegos notes, but he intends to be ready for the day they return.

Baltimore City Public Schools Baltimore, Maryland

The behemoth farm to school program at Baltimore City (Md.) Public Schools (BCPS) consists of “a lot of different factors,” according to Executive Director of Food and Nutrition Services Elizabeth Marchetta. Not only does Marchetta’s team prioritize procurement of local produce and other foods, but they also invest significant time and effort in supporting school gardens, including their very own 33-acre educational farm. The Great Kids Farm raises both plants *and* animals (goats, chickens, turkeys and sheep). “Pre-COVID, we would have thousands of students visit the farm throughout the school year,” Marchetta reminisces. “Obviously, the closure of



schools had some major implications as to what we could do.”

The issue wasn’t in maintaining the farm—the district employs four staff members responsible for its operation. The main challenge of the last seven months—and in looking forward—is how to transform the educational opportunities provided to students through field trips, farmer visits and other firsthand experiences into the virtual learning space. Marchetta is pleased to report that everyone jumped right in to make this transition work—even during the height of school closures and community lockdowns last spring.

Without missing a beat, the team implemented “FaceTime the Farmer” sessions, which ended up reaching more than 700 students. They also distributed 3,600 Plant a Seed kits (with plans to dole out 5,000 more in the months ahead), which allowed students to grow herb gardens at home. Plus, the school nutrition team continued to use the farm’s produce, as well as eggs, in the school meals that were distributed at 18 pickup sites throughout the spring and summer.

With the district expected to maintain a 100% remote learning model through the fall semester, Marchetta’s team is seeking to expand its online agriculture education offerings. For example, in lieu of the standard second-grade field trip, these students are now visiting the farm virtually, using the presentation software Prezi, and “attending” four learning stations focused on animals, planting, pollination and “Let’s Get Cooking.” Each station features three to four short, recorded videos, which were created with the assistance of summer interns.

“It’s easier to make farm-to-school education go virtual than it is to make a meal go virtual,” Marchetta admits, giving credit to her hard-working team for ensuring the program remains a success. “We’ve had to find new ways to connect



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with students. You can't really match the feeling of going to a site and being able to harvest your own food." But the educational goal remains unchanged: Get kids thinking about where their food comes from and link it to what's being served in their school meals.

"We can't assume that kids are home eating healthy foods," Marchetta says. "I see this as another way of connecting with kids around the importance of eating fruits and vegetables."

Missoula County Public Schools Missoula, Montana

Her district's farm-to-school program is a point of particular pride for Missoula County Public Schools Food and Nutrition Supervisor Stacy Rossmiller. Every school site but one has its own garden (and that last garden's construction is currently underway), and there are 16 raised beds at the central kitchen. The produce that's harvested from these gardens goes into school meals as much as possible.

The district's farm-to-school efforts aren't limited to the

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raising of fresh fruit and vegetable crops, however. Last year, one high school's agriculture department launched a meat-processing initiative, and participating students raised cattle and then processed the beef. "We were just really getting into that last year before COVID hit," Rossmiller says.



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In fact, when schools shut down last spring, the foodservice operation had to cook off 1,500 pounds of its own beef, which was used in the school meals distributed curbside.

During the pandemic shutdown, Garden City Harvest, a local nonprofit that partners with the school district, continued to maintain the school gardens, doing their best with limited resources to get those hyper-local crops to area students. “They would gather the produce and bring it over to us,” Rossmiller shares. “It would get cleaned up, bagged and sent out with notes about what it was and how to use it. This allowed kids to try different and unfamiliar items.”

At press time, Missoula County Public Schools was operating a hybrid learning model, with a target date of November 9 to commence 100% in-school learning. In the meantime, the school nutrition team does what they can to spur nutrition education by developing a series of postcards about school-grown produce that are packed into meals when appropriate. They also planned to celebrate the state-wide Montana Crunch Time event on October 5, encouraging all kids to bite into an apple at precisely 2 p.m.

Additionally, the district’s meat-processing plant is starting to pick back up again since students are slowly returning to school facilities. Soon, it is expected to bring in hogs from South Dakota. Eventually, that meat will be used to make hot dogs, which will be served in the district’s five high school cafeterias.

Although the foodservice, agriculture department and school garden teams all had to modify their activities both during the school shutdown and now within the hybrid model, there has never been a question about doing what was necessary to ensure the farm-to-school program would

continue to thrive. “Honestly, the farm-to-school program has become second nature,” Rossmiller concludes. “We’re hoping to return to providing the field trips to Garden City Harvest’s farm. We have to go back to normal at some point.”

Natomas Unified School District #1931 Sacramento, California

In 2012, the same year that Vince Caguin began as Executive Director of Nutrition Services & Warehousing for Natomas Unified School District #1931, the mayor of Sacramento declared the city the “Farm to Fork Capital of the Nation.” “That was pretty ambitious,” Caguin recalls, but his team took on the challenge of contributing to that reputation. “If we’re going to be the farm to fork capital, let’s do farm to *every* fork,” including the students’.

This commitment led Caguin and his team to visit area farmers’ markets and meetups to identify potential partners among local growers. It also led to the installation of two school gardens, built with support from a 2017 USDA Farm to School grant. “Pre-pandemic, we were buying from eight farmers, supplying our salad bars, celebrating Farm to School month each October and bringing a lot of local produce to our students,” Caguin recounts. At one K-8 site, the school garden was run by students, becoming a natural extension of the classroom. At one high school, the garden provided herbs for use in culinary classes.

In the early days of the pandemic, the uncertainty about how the virus was transmitted meant that the school nutrition operation at Natomas—like many others around

the nation—switched their meal prep model from a speed-scratch approach that highlighted garden harvests to use more prepackaged, shelf-stable items. Once it was clear that the virus couldn't be transferred through food preparation—and upon reading an article about one local farm that had plowed under its field—Caguin realized “I had to do something. That article literally made me pick up the phone, call every single one of my farmers and say, ‘What do you have that we can buy from you?’”

From those conversations, Natomas started buying a *lot* of produce, including items that his operation had never served before, such as cherries. “We got into the mentality of being OK with buying imperfect food,” Caguin explains. “The cherries had a weird split and weren't ideal for being sold at the grocery store. So we bought them at a price point that met our budget. None of the kids even noticed [that imperfection], and we were able to give each kid two pounds of cherries in a meal kit.”

Today, Natomas is buying more ingredients directly from farmers than it did *before* COVID. “If we were going to claim ourselves as a farm-to-school district, then we wanted to continue farm-to-school efforts during the pandemic and maintain that principle,” Caguin says. This means finding ways to adapt that work for farms *and* schools. For example, one local farm had dedicated more than half of its



acreage to growing lettuce for the district salad bars. Caguin refers to the closure of these bars as “one of the first tragedies of COVID.” His team wouldn't let that lettuce go to waste, though, finding ways to bring the items on the salad bar into curbside meals through various packaged salad entrées.

In the end, remaining committed to a farm-to-school program during the pandemic has been a “triple win,” Caguin summarizes. “Not only are we feeding kids, but we're supporting local farmers and we're putting our own staff to work. That's what building the economy looks like.” **SN**

Kelsey Casselbury is a contributing editor to School Nutrition. Photos courtesy of Baltimore City (Md.) School District, Charleston County (S.C.) School District and Natomas Unified (Calif.) School District.

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