

ALASKA'S FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAM



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Preparing the Ground

Farm to School Program: Preparing the Ground

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A Process Evaluation of the First Year of Alaska's Farm to School Program

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Executive Summary

Farm to School is a national program run by the United State Department of Agriculture (USDA) whose primary goal is to increase the amount of local food served in schools. Alaska's Farm to School Program (AFTSP) was created by legislation in May 2010. The bill authorizing the program came with a sunset date of June 30, 2013 so the program needs to demonstrate results by that time. Per the legislation the top priority of the program was local procurement in schools and has been divided into four stages; assessing interest, planning, action, and sustainable practices. To date the program has already begun to move into stage three, action, seeing local product move into schools.

AFTSP is broader than this and includes any activity that connects students, teachers, and the school food service with product grown and produced in Alaska. This includes, but is not limited to, increasing Alaska Grown food sales to the school meal programs, providing information for school garden development, promoting Alaska Agriculture in the Classroom curriculum/education, participation in programs that educate youth about the food system, promoting farm visits, facilitating discussion between school food service and food producers, state-wide contests promoting farm to school activities, harvest of the month promotions, resource / marketing development, and regional meat / fish to school efforts.

Alaska's Farm to School program is housed within the Department of Natural Resources, Division of Agriculture, and collaborates with a number of state and university agencies: the Department of Health and Social Services, the Department of Education & Early Development, the Cooperative Extension Service, and the Department of Environmental Conservation.

During the first year of the program which just concluded, the AFTSP Program Coordinator did a great deal of work to lay the groundwork for the program. She educated the state about the existence and purpose of the program and helped people participate through a variety of means. The list of activities is lengthy and includes everything from farm tours for school food personnel to school kitchen tours for farmers, school gardens, mini-grants, and taste-tests for school children. People involved included students, teachers, parents, farmers, food distributors, school food personnel, child nutrition experts, and many more. All of it—the connections and the activities—leading toward a goal of getting more local food into schools, improving eating habits of youth, stimulating local economy, positively impacting the environment, and reducing reliance on imported foods.

Given that the program, (initially consisting of one staff person) was in its infancy and that Alaska does not have an ideal climate for agriculture, evaluating the program's outcomes after one year was inappropriate. This report details the results of a process evaluation. The goal of the process evaluation was to determine if the AFTSP was meeting the expectations of the stakeholders and whether it was being established in a way that would ensure success of program goals outlined in the strategic plan.

The evaluation included data collection by the AFTSP Program Coordinator regarding her activities—contacts, tours, presentations, mini-grants, etc.—and key informant interviews with a dozen people who have different roles in the Farm to School process.

AFTSP is absolutely meeting the expectations of stakeholders. Based on the key informant interviews, stakeholders are very pleased with the direction of the program is taking, its goals, and its implementation methods. The expectations of stakeholders for the future will be focused on outcomes, and the program did an excellent job of laying the groundwork so those expectations can be met in the future.

The evaluation was to determine if the AFTSP was being established so that it can yield successful future outcomes. The strategic plan contained five goals that incorporated the specific legislative priorities as objectives within each goal; tasks were assigned under each goal to identify how the goal would be accomplished. While not all tasks were 100% completed, progress was definitely made toward all goals. The lack of success on all tasks actually reflects good judgment on the part of AFTSP. A strategic plan should be a living, dynamic document that can be adapted to new circumstances or when new information is gained. The plan was developed and then as the program was embarked on, some ideas that sounded promising at the beginning of the year were abandoned for better ones.

Having made progress toward all these goals demonstrates that the program engaged in a broad array of activities working together toward the overall goal of having more local food served in Alaskan schools.

- Goal #1: Having statewide data about schools and districts engaged in Farm to School activities for baseline and ongoing evaluation;
- Goal #2: Having necessary resources and tools to facilitate the availability of Alaska Grown or produced foods in the school food environment;
- Goal #3: Strengthen relationships between food producers/harvesters and school food services;
- Goal #4: Increased awareness of nutritional, environmental, and economic benefits of products grown and harvested in Alaska and that the AFTSP is a networking hub for interested stakeholders; and
- Goal #5: Enhance program through grants and funding for state Farm to School program

AFTSP got off to a strong start. This year was about laying the groundwork to allow for the next step of actually getting local food into Alaskan schools on a broader, more consistent basis. There were many necessary tasks that needed to happen in order to move down the road toward the goal of local food in Alaskan schools.

Background Information: Defining Farm to School

What is the Farm to School Program?

Farm to School is a national program housed within the USDA. 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. Nationally, Farm to School activities vary from community to community depending upon demographics, geography, and community resources; however, the basic goals remain the same. From the USDA Farm to School website, those goals are:

- To meet the diverse needs of school nutrition programs in an efficient manner.
- To support regional and local farmers and thereby strengthen local food systems.
- To provide support for health and nutrition education.

Since the passage of the National School Lunch Act in 1946, key legislation has played an essential role in providing children with access to healthier meals. Programs like the National School Lunch Program and the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program have provided--and continue to provide--nutritionally balanced and low-cost or free meals and snacks to children each school day.

The USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is focusing on Farm to School efforts that incorporate regional and local farm products into school meal programs. Schools and communities may initiate and support a variety of Farm to School activities, including nutrition education, agriculture-related lessons and curriculum, school or community gardens, farm tours, taste testing, and parent/community educational sessions. Nearly every state has a Farm to School program; the scope, goals and activities of each of those programs is slightly different and tailored to adapt to the local situation.

The USDA's Farm to School Team was established in September 2009 to support local and regional food systems by providing linkages between schools and their local food producers. Interest in Farm to School has increased as the USDA has been promoting its "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" initiative to encourage consumers to obtain more local produce and farmers and consumers to connect.

Farm to School continues and expands the tradition of improving children's school nutrition started in 1946 with the National School Lunch Act. It also helps USDA expand its efforts to grow the market for farmers' products. These dual goals can also be seen in Alaska's Farm to School program.

Alaska's Farm to School Program

State legislation was passed authorizing the program during the 2010 Legislative session. House Bill 70 was signed in May 2010. The bill came with a sunset date of June 30, 2013. Per the legislation the top priority of the program was to increase procurement and use by public

schools of food grown in the state. Other legislative priorities for the program include assisting stakeholders in purchasing and locating local food sources, promoting curricula and publications about local food, supporting efforts of other farm to school activities like school gardens and farm visits. Using the legislation as a guide, the first thing that the program set out to do was define itself and come up with a strategic plan that key stakeholders were in agreement with.

The Farm to School Program in Alaska was defined as follows: any activity that connects students, teachers, and the school food service with product grown and produced in Alaska. This includes, but is not limited to, increasing Alaska Grown food sales to the school meal programs, providing information for school garden development, promoting Alaska Agriculture in the Classroom curriculum/education, participation in programs that educate youth about the food system, promoting farm visits, facilitating discussion between school food service and food producers, state-wide contests promoting farm to school activities, harvest of the month promotions, resource / marketing development, and regional meat / fish to school efforts.

Alaska's Farm to School program is housed within the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Division of Agriculture, and collaborates with a number of state and university agencies: the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), the Department of Education & Early Development (DEED), the Cooperative Extension Service (CES), and the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). The Farm to School Program has an advisory committee, consisting of members from these departments and other relevant stakeholders.

After discussion and input from all of the stakeholders and a state-wide public presentation for final approval, the purpose of Alaska's Farm to School program was outlined as follows:

- To offer expertise and support to all areas of the state to pursue farm to school activities and interests.
- To get youth exposed to or involved in ANY part of the food system.

Since the program began it has been moving very fast and making inroads in many areas of the state.

Evaluation Methodology

This is a report on the evaluation of the process used to develop Alaska's Farm to School Program. The Alaska Farm to School Program (AFTSP) put high priority on demonstrating program effectiveness to ensure responsible use of the program funds and that it would be able to demonstrate its effectiveness. In support of that effort, AFTSP contracted with Information Insights to conduct an evaluation.

Conducting an evaluation by necessity helps define goals and determine what data will be needed to assess progress toward a goal. Conducting the evaluation allows a new program to see progress during a time that may be frustrating or which yields only limited progress toward overall goals. Additionally, having access to data collected as part of an evaluation can provide needed information when applying for additional grants or support in the future.

Process Versus Outcome Evaluation

Given the parameters of Farm to School in Alaska, and its recent beginning, it made sense to consider whether to conduct a process or an outcome evaluation. A process evaluation documents and analyzes the early development and actual implementation of the strategy or program, assessing whether strategies were implemented as planned and measuring the work of building awareness and connections for the Farm to School program. When the program was just starting and so much work was required to prepare the ground to achieve a small outcome, it is worthwhile to track the process to show the quantity of work input. Not surprisingly, an outcome evaluation investigates whether the program caused demonstrable effects on specifically defined target outcomes. Those desired outcomes were defined in the strategic plan along with outcome goals and a timeline in which it seeks to achieve results.

Identifying what reasonable outcomes might have been after one year was unrealistic at the beginning of the program. Achieving any measurable outcomes after just one year seemed an unreasonable goal to set when so much was unknown. After much discussion about the most effective *type* of evaluation to conduct, our recommendation was to conduct a process evaluation rather than an outcome evaluation.

The Process Evaluation

Good ideas do not always yield good results. Likewise, hard work and lot of effort may initially yield limited outcomes. Given that starting point for the program was truly ground zero, a process evaluation was much more appropriate. It would not be reasonable to expect that in one year, the program could progress from introducing itself to both school food service personnel and producers to getting food into school cafeterias on any sort of scale. Yet in the absence of that achievement, it would not be fair to discount all that has been done this year.

The level of interest, capacity and enthusiasm for such a program were unknown at the beginning of this effort. In addition to needing to introduce all parties to the program and its goals, a process evaluation was also appropriate given Alaska's limited agricultural resources. Certainly, Farm to School is an easier concept in California where fresh produce is available year-round and all communities are easily accessible. The capacity of producers to provide the produce and of schools to use it was an unknown.

The evaluation sought to measure how Farm to School was making an impact as it got started. This was done by collecting data about all the contacts the AFTSP Program Coordinator was making as she introduced the program to residents of the state and helped people as they expressed an interest in particular Farm to School activities. The evaluation tracked presentations she made, materials she handed out, locations she visited, telephone contacts with people and similar activities. In addition to these efforts, key stakeholders for the Farm to School program were interviewed; farmers (large scale and small), school food service professionals, advisory team members, state agency collaborators, industry partners, non-profit partners, youth leadership staff, and national FTS mentors. In all a fairly complete picture of the program was compiled.

Key Findings

The Alaska Farm to School (AFTSP) program had an amazingly successful first year. The program has touched many people and hundreds and hundreds of children. By this point, the program has been in touch with the vast majority of those involved in food production or school food in the state.

Activity highlights (presented to the Legislature in 2012)

- The AFTSP has done a number of projects engaging schools, food producers, and community members:
 - Developed a 'School Garden Food Safety Guideline'.
 - Started a mini-grant for funding projects on a local level.
 - Launched a FTS challenge during the National FTS month of October.
 - Done a product feasibility study and local product recipe development.
 - Mentored, outreached, and contributed both in state and nationally.
- Through all of the efforts in the past year the FTS program has worked both directly and indirectly with:
 - A total of 29/53 (55%) of the school districts; including approximately 20% of the schools (~100), and getting exposure with approximately 20% of the K-12 student enrollment (over 27,000).

Lessons learned

- People are excited about AFTSP and want to participate.
- The program has many, many facets including: education, school gardens, resource clearinghouse, granter, networking, facilitator of getting local food into Alaskan schools.
- There are challenges to getting local food into schools including: school food service budget, reliable supply of product, product form and quantity, food safety, storage capabilities, and distribution.
- There are many benefits to using local food in schools including: economic, health, environmental, food security, educational, and freshness.
- Based on key stakeholder interviews, there is consensus that the AFTSP is a great program and those interviewed appreciate the Program Coordinator who has found the right balance between pushing the program and being the cheerleader while also understanding the challenges and participants' desire to proceed with caution; the program has the opportunity to make a real difference in what Alaskan school children are eating.

Specific Program Examples

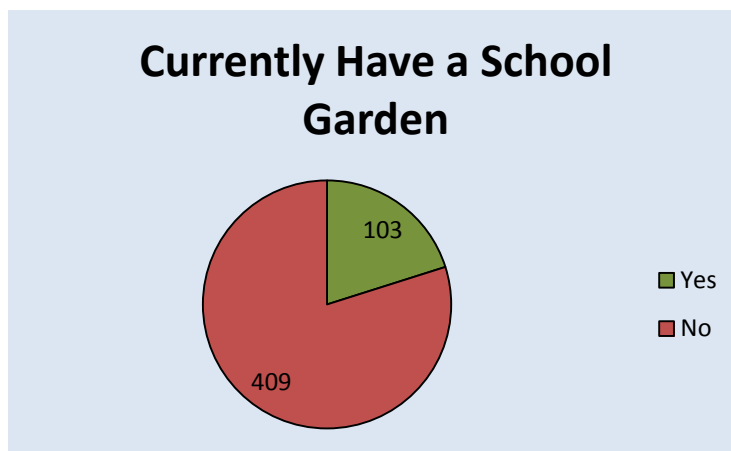
2011 Farm to School Grant (FTSG) program

- The FTSG program received 24 applications and awarded funding to 17 projects, throughout Alaska. A brief description of three of the projects follows.

School/District	Alaska Gateway School District	Talkeetna Elementary / Matanuska Susitna School District	Chugiak High School / Anchorage School District
Project Description	Hosted a field trip with over 50 students visiting the Bison farm; purchased bison meat for use in the school lunch.	Launched a salad bar at school using local product; hosted a community event to raise additional funds to extend the salad bar.	Hosted a school event with local producers educating students about their product; a local wholesaler educating students about distribution; a local chef teaching preparation techniques and students preparing food for staff.

Alaska School Garden Food Safety Guidelines

- Offers guidance for those managing a school garden with the intent to utilize the school garden-grown food in the school meal program; also could be referenced if you have a small farming or gardening operation that is interested in selling product to a school.
 - Guidelines have been requested and distributed to 68 schools and community partners. This represents 20 school districts (38%) and over 19,000 students, almost 15% of statewide K-12 student enrollment.
 - In addition to distributing the guidelines we also did a state-wide assessment on the number of school gardens that are active in 512 schools, this did not include pre-school or private schools. Out of 512 schools surveyed there were 103 that reported currently having a school garden (20%).



School / Farm tours

- The FTS Coordinator has hosted multiple tours (5+) bringing school food service staff to the farm and farmers to the food service kitchens to initiate dialogue about desired product, address perceived barriers and identify potential opportunities. These discussions have resulted in the following:

Local Product	Mat-Su SD	Fairbanks SD	Sitka SD	Alaska Gateway SD
Historical use	Carrots Milk	None	Fish	None
Beginning to use	Zucchini Broccoli	Barley flour** Cabbage**	More fish*	Cabbage** Bison*

*Projects supported by Farm to School Program mini-grant award

**Initial trials complete, plans for purchase next school year

Product development and feasibility studies

- The Farm to School Program, Cooperative Extension Services at UAF, and the Fairbanks Nutrition Services (FNS) have worked together to make a recipe for rolls using barley flour. The staff at FNS is very pleased with the product and the recipe is current with the new guidelines requiring grains to be 51% whole grain rich.
- Working with a small farmer in Delta and the Fairbanks Nutrition Services we looked at the feasibility of using local cabbage compared to pre-cut cabbage from the lower 48. We accounted for distribution, labor costs, product yield, and batch needs.

Outreach

- Created the FTS listserv to keep interested individuals apprised of relevant information including grant announcements, contests, resources, etc.
- Created the FTS logo to raise awareness.
- Launched a Facebook page to raise awareness and increase communication about the program.
- The FTS Coordinator has been an invited presenter at multiple conferences both in state and nationally and, in 2011, presented the program 43 times and reached over 1300 people in this capacity.
- Launched the Farm to School Challenge to engage students, parents, teachers and others and raise awareness about the program.

The Findings: Progress Toward Goals in the Strategic Plan

The strategic plan was created by AFTSP program staff with input from the advisory group. The plan was approved by the public and the advisory group in the spring of 2011. Some goals have more than one objective. Tasks were designed to carry out all objectives listed under a goal.

Goal #1: Having statewide data about schools and districts engaged in Farm to School activities for baseline and ongoing evaluation

Objective: Establish an accurate baseline assessment of Farm to School in the state and the capacity for potential growth of the program

Task 1: Conduct the Farm to School census survey in Alaska utilizing the National Farm to School Network (NFSN) census survey developed by NFSN in collaboration with the USDA Economic Research Service

Status: Delayed & Modified

- The NFSN and USDA have not yet released the census.
- *AFTSP teamed up with DHSS, DEED, and UAF to conduct a smaller survey of the School Food Service Professionals in March of 2012.*

Task 2: Gather data from various stakeholders about what Alaska has or does not have to facilitate utilization of Alaska Grown or produced foods

Status: Partially completed

- Relevant data were collected in the key informant interviews on the challenges of AFTSP participation.

Goal #2: Having necessary resources and tools to facilitate the availability of Alaska Grown or produced foods in the school food environment

Objective 1: Coordinate with school procurement officials, buying cooperatives, and other appropriate organizations to develop uniform procurement policies and procedures as well as materials and practical recommendations to facilitate the procurement and use by public schools of product produced and/or harvested in Alaska; these policies, procedures, materials, and recommendations shall be made available to school districts to adopt at their discretion (HB 70, AS 03.20.100, Section 2, Article 2, b. 1)

Objective 2: Assist producers, harvesters, distributors, and food brokers in marketing food grown in the state to public schools by informing school districts of food procurement opportunities, bid procedures, purchasing criteria, and other relevant requirements (HB 70, AS 03.20.100, Section 2, Article 2, b. 2)

Objective 3: Assist public schools in connecting with local producers and harvesters, by informing the schools of the resources and availability product produced and/or harvested in the state (HB 70, AS 03.20.100, Section 2, Article 2, b. 3)

Task 1: Create a resource guide for schools that includes relevant information for use of school garden or local produce in school meals.

Status: **Completed**

- A document outlining food safety for school gardens was created and distributed.

Task 2: Annually increase of two school or community gardens state-wide. The AFTSP will assist with the planning phase, toolkit, and resource / curriculum development. AFTSP will pilot a 'Garden to Cafeteria' project.

Status: **Completed**, but ongoing

- Additional school gardens came online this year.
- The food safety document, when followed, allows school garden food to be eaten at schools. The actions happened, but there was no project called 'Garden to Cafeteria.'

Task 3: Inform stakeholders of available resources to facilitate connections and assist with process. Information and assistance will be provided at conferences, through student projects, and as requested.

Status: **Completed**, but ongoing

- The AFTSP listserv helps meet this goal by sharing information and making connections. In just 9 months there were 315 people that signed up to be on the listserv.
- AFTSP Program Coordinator made 43 presentations to over 1,300 people.

Task 4: Kick off the 2011-12 school year with *Seasonal Harvest* pilot project in the Mat-Su school district featuring produce from the Mat-Su valley farms. Provide marketing materials and curriculum to schools in the district and develop a media plan with the student.

Status: Delayed

- This idea had a volunteer graduate student lined up but the student did not receive funding and she took advantage of other opportunities.

Task 5: Conduct at least two training workshops for stakeholders; food producers and school food service professionals. For the agricultural food producers a good agricultural practices (GAP) / good handling practices

(GHP) certification workshops and for school food service, training for handling fresh product.

Status: Partially completed

- AFTSP Program Coordinator worked with food producers on GAP standards, helping them conduct trial audits to assess areas needing improvement.
- Materials have been given out via the mail and listserv and interested producers have been identified.
- No workshops were held for producers and school food service personnel but funds have been secured to do so.
- AFTSP attended the USDA Produce Safety University in March , 2012.
- The first two 'On Farm Food Safety' workshops are scheduled in Fairbanks on June 28th and 29th. Over 10 farmers are signed up to attend.

Goal #3: Strengthen relationships between food producers/harvesters and school food services

Objective 1: Identify and recommend mechanisms that will increase the predictability of sales for producers and the adequacy of supply for purchasers (HB 70, AS 03.20.100, Section 2, Article 2, b. 4)

Task 1: Conduct tours of school food facilities for farmers and farm tours for school food service professionals in five regions (two of which will be rural)

Status: **Completed**, but ongoing

- AFTSP conducted several tours, but as personnel turn over and the players change, the tours will need to be conducted again as needed.

Task 2: Create a summary document about product needs, product availability, and priority needs to accomplish a match between the two.

Status: Partially completed

- As information was gathered there were key limitations and circumstances that presented themselves. To name a few; there are only four districts with the buying power necessary to drive production, the best matches were made with very few products (potatoes, carrots, flour, and cabbage), and distribution for small but frequent quantities will be difficult until minimal processing barriers are overcome.

Task 3: Hold tri-annual (January, April, and October) in-person and web based FTS summits in various locations

Status: **Completed** and redesigned

- Two AFTSP Summit were held, the October summit was changed into an Alaska Farm to School Challenge due to the time of year and stakeholder needs.
- Due to the diverse interests of stakeholder groups summits will be held for program goal re-alignment only (bi-annually). Webinars, conferences, and workshops will be announced on the listserv to better meet everyone's needs.

Goal #4: Increased awareness of nutritional, environmental, and economic benefits of products grown and harvested in Alaska and that the AFTSP is a networking hub for interested stakeholders

Objective 1: Assist public schools in connecting with local producers, by informing the schools of the nutritional, environmental and economic benefits of purchasing the product produced and harvested in the state (HB 70, AS 03.20.100, Section 2, Article 2, b. 3)

Objective 2: Identify and make available to public schools existing curricula, programs, and publications that educate students on the nutritional, environmental, and economic benefits of preparing and consuming product produced and harvested in the state (HB 70, AS 03.20.100, Section 2, Article 2, b. 5)

Objective 3: Support efforts to advance other AFTSP activities, including school gardens, school farms, and farm visits (HB 70, AS 03.20.100, Section 2, Article 2, b.6)

Task 1: Connect stakeholders and serve as a resource and information center

Status: **Completed**, but ongoing

- AFTSP has a listserv with 300 subscribers that it uses to distribute relevant information.
- AFTSP has a Facebook page.
- AFTSP Program Coordinator has facilitated networking among all the key players in reaching Farm to School goals.

Task 2: Create a resource guide adapted from Vermont FEED publication *How Do We Feed Vermont's School Children* for schools, parents, and the general public

Status: On hold

- This project was primarily slated to be completed by a graduate student and no such person was available to complete this project.

Task 3: Create fact sheets/talking points to educate for schools, parents, the general public about the benefits of using products produced and/or harvested in schools.

Status: on hold

- This project was primarily slated to be completed by a graduate student and no such person was available to complete this project.
- There are many resources available from the National network and are currently used until Alaska specific resources are made.

Goal #5: Enhance program through grants and funding for state Farm to School program

Objective 1: As resources allow, seek additional funding to leverage state expenditures for the program (HB 70, AS 03.20.100, Section 2, Article 2, b.7)

Task 1: Apply for grants and help other stakeholders apply for grants.

Status: **Completed** and ongoing

- AFTSP applied for the USDA People's Garden Grant (PGG) but did not receive the funding. A group on the Kenai Peninsula was awarded \$110,000 for the USDA PGG, has collaborated with AFTSP to leverage resources.
- Grant opportunities are announced on the listserv and facebook page.
- AFTSP has been a collaborator on a salad bar grant for \$15,000 that was awarded. The collaborating agencies are the AFTSP, Division of Agriculture, Obesity Prevention and Control Program, Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), and Child Nutrition Programs, Department of Early Education and Development (DEED).
- A number of other grant applications have been written and submitted with a component going toward AFTSP related efforts.

Task 2: Create a Farm to School Grant program that will provide funds to existing farm to school efforts around the state.

Status: **Completed** and ongoing

- The AFTSP 2011 mini-grant program received 24 applications and awarded 17 grants. The Obesity Prevention and Control Program (DHSS) contributed \$5000 to this grant cycle.

- The AFTSP 2012 mini-grant program received 25 applications and awarded 17. The Obesity Prevention and Control Program (DHSS) contributed \$10,000 to this grant cycle.
- AFTSP has teamed up with Child Nutrition Programs (DEED) to offer a farm to child care grant for Adult and Child Care Program facilities. This grant is being run using funds from Child Nutrition Programs, \$20,000.
- Child Nutrition Programs (DEED) nominated the AFTSP project coordinator to attend the USDA Produce Safety University. Only one person from Alaska is allowed this nomination.

Task 3: Utilize money from state agencies that provide funding to the farm to school program.

Status: **Completed** and ongoing

- Total money leveraged with grant money where farm to school related activities resulted are \$50,000. [We have also been a team player with the People's Garden Grant that was awarded \$110,000 in Homer, Alaska. We provided the Alaska School Garden Food Safety Guidelines to hand out and consulted on running a mini-grant]
- Total money leveraged for resources that resulted in farm to school related activities are \$2000.
- To date total travel and training money leveraged for farm to school staff has been around \$6,000.
 - Child Nutrition Programs nominated the program coordinator to attend USDA's *Produce Safety University*, paid for by USDA, in Fredericksburg, VA.
 - The National Farm to School Network provides \$1500 annually for travel expenses for the program coordinator to attend the national farm to cafeteria conferences.
 - The Obesity Prevention and Control Program has provided travel funds for the program coordinator to attend strategic planning sessions and conferences.

Interviews

Methodology

The key informant interviews were conducted in the fall in order to accommodate the schedules of school food service personnel and farmers. Sixteen names representing various categories of respondents were provided by the AFTSP Program Coordinator. Twelve people were interviewed. The remaining respondents were never able to be reached or to find a workable time to be interviewed. As noted above, potential respondents included Farm to School program mentors, a mini-grant recipient, state child nutrition staff, youth environmental agency staff, a Farm to School Summit attendee, school garden participants, and food distributors, food producers, and school food personnel. In an effort to get candid responses, respondents were told their comments would remain anonymous. However, many times the nature of the responses makes it fairly obvious who the respondent was. There was not a great deal of concern about masking identities since everyone was very positive about the project and the staff.

The questions were developed by the evaluator and then reviewed by Farm to School staff. The full list of questions may be found in Appendix A.

Awareness of and participation in the program

Respondents were asked about the length of their involvement with AFTSP and when it began. Most respondents had not heard of the program until the AFTSP Program Coordinator contacted them. Although several respondents had been following or supporting an expansion of the program into Alaska prior to the Legislation being passed. Respondents were overwhelmingly supportive of the program and want to see it succeed.

Respondents were also asked about the extent of their involvement in AFTSP. Given the variety of roles our respondents fill related to AFTSP, the manner in which people had been involved with the program varied a great deal. Some respondents had received assistance with school gardens, others with creating recipes to incorporate local barley into a school meal plan, or had discussions of how local cabbages could get into schools and the logistics needed to make that happen just to name a few. Individuals mentioned working with school gardens and highlighting how the harvest is used. Others mentioned working to get barley into the schools, but expressed a desire to increase AFTSP involvement on a gradual basis. Others mentioned the challenge of the quantity requested by the schools and that it is a challenge to meet that need. The range of ways AFTSP reaches and interacts with schools food services personnel, farmers, producers, students, parents, teachers, and community members is remarkable. A lot of education was needed to nearly all these parties to get them interested and involved with AFTSP and that has happened in this first year.

Getting food into schools, challenges

One important question respondents were asked is whether they had either sold food to a school or bought local food for their school. Several food district respondents mentioned cabbage and the challenge of wanting to use local food, but having an inability to pay any sort of premium for local goods. [Although the results turned out to show that local cabbage was less expensive than other cabbage.] Many school districts are required to put food purchasing out to bid and then required to use the lowest price bidder. Others have budgets that don't allow much flexibility, so using the cost savings from less expensive local food to hire more staff to process that local food is not an option. Another challenge for schools is a need for a consistent source of food. Using local food for one or two meals of the hundreds and hundreds served every year is more trouble than it's worth.

Those respondents on the other side of the food equation—the food producers—have a different problem and that is getting their food into a form that schools can use. Currently some schools opt for produce that has been processed to some degree—at least washed and in many cases washed and processed into servable sizes (broccoli florets instead of whole broccoli, sliced potatoes, etc.). Growers don't foresee having the resources to store the quantity of foods that do keep in order to supply schools for much of the year. Both sides of this equation agree that more food processors are needed to make local food more of a reality for schools.

The need for a fresh pack market was identified and perhaps more greenhouses to extend the growing year. A number of respondents suggested that greenhouses can be heated with waste heat so there are little heating costs involved with operating them.

Another challenge for food growers is food safety. The AFTSP Program Coordinator has been working with growers to get them ready to apply for GAP assessment. Once growers are certified, it opens more school district markets to them as many districts require their suppliers to be GAP certified.

Other ways to expand the ability of schools to use and serve local food involve schools doing more of the processing. Currently many schools purchase rather than bake buns for hamburgers. If schools are open to baking buns or pizza dough, then local barley flour can be incorporated into those items. Other issues are whether or not school districts have a central processing facility. One large school district with a central facility noted that they just can't serve zucchini or squash because they get mushy between the central kitchen and the schools. It may be easier to introduce local food into smaller school districts. They need smaller, more deliverable quantities of an item and tend to cook in the individual schools which eliminates the transportation issues noted above.

A portion of the cost equation which would be more challenging to quantify is the amount of food waste. If the food tastes better--and the carrot taste test revealed that kids like Alaska

Grown carrots better--then kids will eat more of it and waste less. In Tok when locally made coleslaw was served using local cabbage kids loved it and ate more.

What food should be next

Respondents were asked what food they thought would be a good choice to be the next local food to try to move into the schools. Many people noted it matters what kids will eat. It's great to get local food, but if it all ends up in the trash because it's something kids don't like then it's not a good use of the school's resources. One respondent said, "[I'd like to] see carrots program expand past Anchorage and Mat-Su. That's an easy food that kids universally like, we can grow tons of carrots. Potatoes need processing, not all schools are set up to handle that. Carrots—expand that effort." Another respondent had a different idea. "Rutabagas--grow them so sweet they are like candy. We eat them raw. Once kids started eating them, there'd be no stopping them. And they keep all winter."

Other ideas included cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, potatoes, and onions as these are all crops that can be grown in quantity in Alaska. It was noted that a flash freezing facility would help enormously with this effort since these items can be grown in large quantities, but not during the school year. As one person noted, "Cost, the lack of middle men, not having someone to take food and clean it and box it up and send it out. A lot of districts would take carrots, but there's no distributor. Then the next thing we need is a processor."

Quality of AFTSP program

In discussing the quality of their experience with AFTSP and whether respondents would recommend participation to others, everyone mentioned the quality of the AFTSP Program Coordinator. People praised her enthusiasm, knowledge and hard work. Several respondents mentioned that she is grounded in reality and understands the limitations and the challenges to making this work and really appreciated those qualities. Respondents had nothing but glowing things to say about the AFTSP Program Coordinator. She deserves a lot of the credit for making the program as successful as it is.

"Johanna's networking resources are leveraging the resources everyone has. She's doing a fantastic job. There is interest in all these things, local food security, obesity, using local food; she's maximizing the benefit of what existing entities are already doing. Kids in schools are getting that much more connected to food sources. And that feeds into lifestyle changes."

"That's been the challenge. AFTSP before Johanna was not realistic; it's just one more thing on my already full plate. AFTSP was on the back burner, [it was] a feel good thing. [I was] just not going to get around to it. That's been the real benefit of Johanna--she listens, hears, and understands the challenges. And she keeps it off the back burner."

The broader impact of AFTSP

Several respondents expressed concern about the small food supply in-state at any time and our vulnerability if food resources from Outside are cut off; many Alaskans are familiar with the statistic that we have three days of food in-state at any one time. He or she felt that growing and consuming more local food would be an excellent first step toward addressing that issue. As one respondent said when describing the program, “I feel like there’s lots of benefits. One is health, diet, nutrition—that’s long term. Another is the community economic benefit. Increase sales and marketing opportunities for the local market. Shorter term impacts are less broad.”

Educating children about where food comes from and how it’s grown is another important part of the program in several respondents’ opinions. One stated, “If you know where your food comes from you make better choices.” Another respondent noted that local food, with fewer food miles involved means food can have fewer preservatives.

Other issues were raised by respondents including the economic impact on local communities of buying local food. Keeping those dollars in the community will have a greater impact than purchasing food from Outside. One person noted that Alaska agriculture is still facing the same issues it faced 100 years ago and that it is time to move the field forward and into the 21st century.

Two final quotes from respondents really sum up the benefits of the program. “I think this is a great program. It has a lot of potential. It is really good for the State of Alaska, a good investment for our economic base for the future. I hope to see the program continue.”

“I’m thrilled that the Division of Ag has a person working on this. [I’m] thrilled that the legislature supported it. I hope they are able to continue funding for it. I’m proud of Alaska for having this here.”

Summary

The Alaska Farm to School has had an amazingly successful first year. The program has touched many people and hundreds and hundreds of children. By this point, the program has been in touch with virtually everyone involved in food production or school food in the state. Farm to School is in a good position to move forward this next year. The year of preparing the ground has ended and next year the program is ready to plant and begin to reap the positive outcomes from this year’s hard work.

Appendix A: Full Interview Questions

Not all questions were applicable to all respondents so frequently the number of comments does not total twelve.

- 1. I know you've been in contact with the Farm to School program, when did that contact start?**
- 2. What has your involvement with Farm to School been so far? Has it been a good experience? Would you recommend it to other farmers/producers/schools?**
- 3. What kind of involvement has it been? An advisory role, working to get product in the school meal program, educating youth about how food gets to their plate, school garden, something else?**
- 4. Have you bought any food from a local source as a result of this program? Do you plan to in the future? (Or-have you sold any food your produce to a school? Do you have plans to expand that?)**
- 5. Do you have plans for further involvement? If so, what? If not, why not?**
- 6. What food item would you most like to see included in the school meal programs? What do you think are the next steps to get local food into Alaska schools?**
- 7. What are barriers to your participation in the program? How could it be easier? What would make participation more attractive?**
- 8. What do you see as the benefits of participation in the program?**
- 9. Had you heard of the program before Johanna contacted you?**
- 10. Anything else you want to add?**