Advancing Farm to School for Healthier Communities

Lessons from the Field

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Cover photo: Courtesy of Central Rivers Farmshed of Portage County

Students proudly display the (vegetable) product of their school gardening efforts.
Executive Summary

Food systems planning, which has emerged as a significant urban and regional planning focus within the last decade, has the potential to foster healthy communities and strengthen local and regional economies, among other potential benefits. Within the context of the major American health crisis of obesity and obesity-related health effects, the role of the planner and planning trained individuals could be not more critical to the development of improved food environments, most particularly for the young. Farm to school is a learning environment-based program focused on providing healthy, local food to children in conjunction with interactive nutrition and agriculture education. Furthermore, farm to school is a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended strategy for improving nutrition and reducing obesity rates.

In response to the call for planners to actively support healthy food systems work, *Advancing Farm to School: Lessons from the Field*, a mid-level farm to school resource was developed. This six-chapter resource guide, which was written primarily for farm to school practitioners in the state of Wisconsin, includes a collection of case studies, actionable tips in the form of 'Lessons Learned', and field-tested resource suggestions.
Providing Context: Urban Planning, Food Systems & Farm to School

The following introduction to food systems in urban and regional planning, and the role of farm to school in food system planning provides the context for the development of the six-chapter, Wisconsin-based farm to school resource guide: *Advancing Farm to School: Lessons from the Field*. The farm to school resource includes a series of case studies, topic-related helpful tips (‘Lessons Learned’) and a collection of the most salient resources, by topic. The guide is intended to provide actionable examples and helpful information to those individuals or groups that are interested in starting or expanding farm to school programming.

The Integration of Food Systems into Planning

Beginning with the American Planning Association conference in 2003, food systems work gained recognition as an official part of the urban and regional planning conversation in the United States. It was in this forum that University of Wisconsin-Madison Professor Emeritus Jerry Kaufman, challenged planners to incorporate food systems affairs into the regular purview of their work (APA, 2007). In the twelve years since this initial summons, fostering healthier and more sustainable local, regional and industrial food systems has gained significant traction in the planning world. Food systems topics are consistently featured as a track or major focus at planning conferences and workshops and planning departments are now dedicating either a portion of, or entire planning positions to food systems-oriented work (APA, 2007).

The APA’s *Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning* (2007) outlines the many ways in which a food systems focus is integral to furthering several core urban and regional planning objectives. The policy guide states in one of two overarching goals related to food systems planning, that planners should be tasked with helping to “build stronger, sustainable and more self-reliant community and regional food systems” (APA, 2007). Furthermore, the guide states that planners should recognize that food systems activities take place on a significant portion of urban and regional land, play a substantial role in local and regional economies and are intricately connected to human and environmental health (APA, 2007).

Food Systems & Health

A number of great successes have already been achieved in food systems planning, ranging from providing instrumental public engagement support in the development of public marketplaces, to helping preserve agricultural land and draft zoning ordinances that allow urban agriculture (APA, 2007). However, of particular relevance to the project described in this report is the work that is being undertaken to support General Policy #3 within the APA’s *Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning*, which calls for planners to improve the health of the region’s residents through food systems planning actions (2007).
With over 69% of adults (2011-2012) and 18.4% of adolescents aged 12-19 (2009-2010) obese or overweight, the nation is currently facing a national health crisis (CDC, 2015). Further, Wisconsin children are at higher risk of being obese or overweight as compared to the national average, as it is estimated that 25% of Wisconsin high school students, and 31% of low-income preschool-aged children are overweight or obese (CDC 2015). Being chronically overweight or obese is a major risk factor for heart disease, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, cancer and premature death (NIH, 2012). The combination of health conditions related to being overweight or obese is associated with over $190 billion of health care expenses, annually (Harvard, n.d.). Furthermore, recent studies have indicated that children who are obese are likely to also be obese as adults, and this pattern may begin as early as the age of 2 (CDC, 2014).

Carrying extra body weight is a costly personal, economic and societal problem. It affects personal and community well-being, and is associated with higher health care costs and a loss of work force productivity (Harvard, n.d.). Existing evidence does suggest, however, that providing healthy school and living environments for children, specifically as they relate to diet and physical activity, can have a meaningful impact on reducing the risk of obesity (CDC, 2014).

Food Systems & Regional Economies

As General Policy #2 within the APA’s Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning states, it is also the planner’s responsibility to help strengthen the local and regional economy by way of promoting local and regional food systems (2007).

Farm to School as a Strategy to Improve Health and Support Local Producers

Farm to school is a national movement that seeks to foster strong connections between children and their food and reduce rates of childhood obesity. The core elements of farm to school programs are local food procurement, school gardens, and nutrition and agriculture lessons. An additional component of many farm to school programs is familiarizing students with fresh, healthy and local foods through sensory activities such as fruit and vegetable taste tests and school gardening.

Figure 1. Core elements of farm to school
Source: National Farm to School Network, n.d.
A parallel goal of farm to school is to support local producers and local and regional food system infrastructure through the purchase of local food products. In addition, local producers are often invited to engage with students, families and school personnel through classroom visits and farm tours, thereby reinforcing both major goals of farm to school. Such activities increase student connection with their food and food system and bolster recognition and economic support of local producers.

Farm to school started as a small grassroots movement in California and Florida in 1996, and has since grown to having a presence in over 44% of public schools in the United States (USDA Farm to School Census, 2014). Currently, 59% of public school districts in the state of Wisconsin are participating in farm to school activities.

Fruit and vegetable gardens, a main programmatic area for farm to school, are a scientifically supported strategy for increasing fruit and vegetable consumption, improving nutrition and reducing obesity rates (What Works for Health, 2014).

General farm to school programming has shown some evidence for increasing the consumption of fruits and vegetables, improving nutrition and improving the local economy (What Works for Health, 2014).

Previous studies have trended towards the aforementioned positive associations, but not enough research has been conducted yet to assign the ‘scientifically supported’ rating. It can be challenging to accurately measure and assess the effects of such a broadly defined, non-prescriptive program.
Food Systems Planning and Farm to School Alignment

The following policies and responses outline how supporting farm to school and the development of the Advancing Farm to School: Lessons from the Field resource guide aligns with the specific policies outlined under General Policy 2 and 3 in the APA Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning.

Policy #2C: Planners support developing appropriate... planning policies and regulations to promote local and regional markets for foods produced in the region. 

Resource content supports the utilization and expansion of local and regional food system infrastructure.

Policy #3A, 3B: Planners support and help develop policies, plans, and regulations... to: increase access to food sources that offer affordable and culturally appropriate healthful foods (3A), and to encourage the availability of healthy types of food associated with reduced risk of or occurrence of obesity and poor nutrition leading to diet-related diseases like diabetes and heart disease (especially in and near schools and other predominantly youth-centered environments) (3B). 

Resource encourages and provides helpful tips for the development of school and community-based gardens, as well as the development of community-based partnerships to help support these initiatives. The resource also encourages the development of school-based policies that support healthy, local food purchases.

Policy #3C: Planners support, through... research tools and community-based organizations that develop demand for healthful foods. 

The entirety of the resource is intended to support school and community-based organizations in their pursuit of providing healthy food to students.

In addition, many of the method and topics featured in the Lessons from the Field resource guide parallel the following general planning themes outlined in the APA Policy Guide on Community and Regional Food Planning.

1. The importance of community participation in all aspects of planning:
   *Every case study highlights the importance of working with a community, or team. In addition, each chapter provides suggested strategies for how to leverage community, or team support for achieving desired goals.*

2. The usefulness to all general policies of common planning activities in research, plan-making, plan-implementation, conflict resolution, and consensus-building:
   *The resource guide includes specific chapters devoted to coalitions and capacity building, as well as a host of recommended strategies for plan-making and plan-implementation.*

3. Recognition that all planning occurs in a political context and that political support may be garnered more easily for some issues than others:
   *The case study and ‘Lessons Learned’ featured in the School-Based Policies*
chapter provides a prime example of the above theme in the school context, as well as suggestions for how to navigate politically challenging territory.

Project Background & Goals

Farm to school is a US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended strategy for improving nutrition and preventing chronic disease, among other local and regional food system and physical activity work (Khan, et al 2009). As such, the CDC periodically provides federal grants to help support this work. In 2011, the CDC awarded the state of Wisconsin with a $6.6 million Community Transformation Grant to support healthy community work in three main areas, including increasing access to healthy food systems.

The Wisconsin Clearinghouse, a division of the University Health Services of at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was responsible for distributing the grant funds to local Wisconsin communities through the Transform WI program. Communities were selected based on an application process, and received funding through a local coalition or non-profit organization that was already committed to developing healthy local food systems. The majority of these organizations had a county-level focus or reach. The Clearinghouse asked the final fourteen grant recipients to prioritize farm to school as their main strategy for achieving obesity prevention and healthy food system access.

Table 1. Transform WI Healthy Food Systems Grantee Organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wisconsin County</th>
<th>Transform WI Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Live54218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia</td>
<td>Columbia County Local Foods Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crawford</td>
<td>Driftless Wisconsin Grown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dane</td>
<td>REAP Food Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenosha</td>
<td>Healthy People of Kenosha County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Crosse</td>
<td>LaCrosse Healthy Living Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manitowoc</td>
<td>Healthiest Manitowoc County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marathon</td>
<td>Marathon County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monroe</td>
<td>Monroe County Schools on the Go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portage</td>
<td>Central Rivers Farmshed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock</td>
<td>Transform Rock County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vernon</td>
<td>Vernon County Farm to School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winnebago</td>
<td>re:TH!NK Winnebago’s Healthy Living Partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>Get Active Wood County</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following map displays the county of each of the Transform WI Healthy Food Systems grantee recipients.

![Map of Wisconsin counties](image)

**Figure 3. Transform WI Healthy Food Systems Grantee Counties**

Grant funding was awarded in September of 2011, for a project period originally intended to be three to five years in length, depending on the type of grant awarded to each community. Due to budget reallocations associated with the Affordable Care Act, funding was unexpectedly terminated before the end of the regular grant period. Organizations were notified in March of 2014 that funding would end in August of the same year.

Despite this unfortunate circumstance, a significant number of achievements and progress had been made in farm to school work in each of the grantee communities. As such, the Transform WI project managers were interested in capturing the experiences and lessons learned among Transform WI communities throughout the grant period. They hoped that the hard work and successes of these schools, school districts, coalitions, public health departments and non-profit organizations could provide an example for both new and experienced farm to school practitioners.
Based on the existing presence of many farm to school programs in Wisconsin, there was a need for a mid-level “Farm to School 2.0” resource. A resource of this form could move beyond basic conceptual farm to school details, but stop short of providing nuanced technical assistance. Thereby, the stage was set for the development of Advancing Farm to School: Lessons from the Field, which I had the distinct pleasure of developing between the summer of 2014 and the spring of 2015.

Methods & Limitations

Interview and Transcription Methods

The original intent of the project was to capture a series of case studies from across the spectrum of grantee communities. Thus, a series of semi-formal qualitative interviews were conducted with grant coordinators and farm to school practitioners from each county. In order to inform the selection of interview candidates, the structure of each interview framework, and the probable topics for the resource, the two Transform Wisconsin project managers (housed at the UW-Madison Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems) first shared their knowledge of current projects and successes in the Transform communities. In addition, the project managers provided access to a collection of notes that had been taken during annual check-in meetings with each grantee community. Further, once interview candidates were selected and contacted to arrange a meeting time, they were asked to share program-related websites, media mentions and other program materials so as to also help inform the interview preparation process.

A total of fifteen interviews, with twenty-five individuals, were conducted in the summer months of 2014. The above information and materials formed the basis for the semi-structured interview framework. Each interview started with a thorough explanation of the project and the opportunity for interviewees to ask any clarifying questions. Next, relevant background information was gathered, such as interviewee roles in farm to school work and the history of farm to school in that respective community. The interview then progressed to questions surrounding specific stories that were identified as strengths of the program prior to the conversation. Key questions were typically framed in an open-ended manner so as to leave space for the interviewee(s) to explain projects from their own perspective, and connect projects to other relevant initiatives within their region. With frequency, the most powerful case studies were those that arose organically in conversation.

Each interview was between one and two hours in length. All interviews were conducted by phone, with the exception of a single in-person interview. To be able to accurately capture the quantity of content and level of detail contained within each conversation, all interviews were recorded with the permission of interviewee(s). Upon completion of each conversation, recordings were transcribed using quasi-formal transcription techniques. Exact wording was transcribed only for the purposes of possible quotes for the resource. The remainder of interview content was informally transcribed by noting all events and details, but did not
capture the exact wording used by interviewee(s). Interview transcriptions, once complete, were then divided by topic and placed into separate Microsoft Word files for each proposed chapter.

Resource Content, Structure and Design

The initial goal was to develop a 12-chapter resource containing a single case study and a short resources section for each chapter. However, the interviews revealed recurring notes of advice or 'lessons learned' from the farm to school practitioners, which translated into highly actionable tips. The advice was relatively easy to categorize by topic, thereby inspiring the creation of the 'Lessons Learned' portion of each chapter. In response to the richness of the high volume of interview data, supplementary case studies were also added to each chapter. This decision was supported by the advice of Wisconsin Clearinghouse staff, who recommended that it is most effective to offer communities case studies of either easily replicable successes or stories of achievements that were hard-won through persistence and/or creative means. In this manner, communities can walk away from a case study feeling empowered or inspired, instead of daunted. The addition of several stories and a 'Lessons Learned' section to each chapter did, however, necessitate a decrease in the number of chapters written for the resource.

The final chapters that appear in Lessons from the Field were selected based on the following factors:

- Frequently cited concerns and/or an area with a lot of interest in how others are either achieving success or learning how to approach the topic (Purchasing, School-based Policy Change)
- Lack of extensive, or specific coverage in existing statewide farm to school materials (Coalitions & Capacity Building)
- Inclusion of a programming area with low barriers to entry, so as to provide an approachable mechanisms by which a school or district can begin farm to school (Harvest of the Month)
- Representation of a secondary strategy for encouraging the growth of healthy local food systems, as outlined by the Transform WI grant (Community Gardens)
- Response to the organically cited main concern of interviewees (Program Sustainability)

These criteria were selected in an attempt to ensure that the resource included at least one relevant topic for farm to school practitioners representing all levels of farm to school experience.

Each chapter of the resource underwent two rounds of edits by the Transform WI project managers. Following these initial edits, interviewees were asked to provide accuracy-related corrections for the case studies in which their communities were featured, after which the author completed a final round of edits. Each grantee
community was asked to provide photographs from farm to school programming in their region. Accordingly, nearly every photo in Lessons from the Field represents the Transform WI farm to school community. Although the layout and design of the resource was initially to be completed by the Wisconsin Clearinghouse, capacity within the organization quickly decreased as the funding cycle came to a close. As a result, the author completed the layout and design of the resource.

The Advancing Farm to School: Lessons from the Field resource has been presented at the Wisconsin Local Food Network of 2015, distributed to Transform WI grantee communities, and will soon be posted on the UW-Madison Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems website. It will hopefully be posted to the National Farm to School Network resources page and will likely be distributed at future statewide farm to school conferences.

Findings

Major findings related to the state of farm to school in Wisconsin, as elucidated by the creation of this resource guide, are captured in the ‘Lessons Learned’ portion of the Advancing Farm to School: Lessons from the Field.

Discussion: Process Critique

Several valuable lessons of my own were gained throughout the process of assembling this resource. Perhaps the most salient of which is borrowed from lean, or agile development principles, in which the needs and demands of the end “customer” are assessed prior to product development (Ries, 2011). Although farm to school practitioners have provided positive feedback on the resource, it remains unclear whether a resource of this specific structure and format best suits the most significant needs of the majority of statewide farm to school stakeholders. In retrospect, a short survey of Transform WI grant coordinators and/or statewide farm to school practitioners immediately prior to interviews may have resulted in the development of a more practical resource.

Second, the development of this resource quickly extended beyond my individual capacity as the content list grew exponentially at the same time that extended team support, in the form of design assistance, dissolved. In retrospect, it would have been advantageous to build in more calculated internal (personal) and external (the team) checks on feasibility. For instance, developing alternative courses of action, in correlation with pre-determined timeline check points, could have helped keep the project more manageable.

Finally, in direct correlation with the above lesson, I learned afresh the value of a team with a diverse skill set. The Transform WI project managers were an incredible resource and sounding board in helping steer the final form of the resource, both in terms of overarching structure and specific story content. In retrospect, however, I believe that a team of at least two people be heavily involved
in the development of such a broadly defined and community-focused resource. A larger core team can provide more consistent content, design, accuracy and quality checks on the project, which would hopefully ensure a better end product.

Future Opportunities

Although Lessons from the Field was written for a farm to school practitioner audience, the state-level farm to school support team (CIAS, DATCP) is hopeful that the resource can provide a thorough, yet approachable introduction to farm to school for legislators and legislative aides. Although specific dissemination strategies have not yet been determined, this could be a unique opportunity to influence local and statewide legislators in Wisconsin as they vote on items that either directly or indirectly impact the viability of farm to school. This can include anything from providing farm to school grants to schools to voting for larger meal reimbursements through the Child Nutrition Act, which would make purchasing local produce a greater possibility.

In the same manner, the guide may prove useful to urban and regional planners as they develop plans, ordinances and policies that support local and regional food infrastructure, as well as healthy communities.
References


