

Kansas Rural Center 2020 Town Hall
Farm to School
By Rick McNary

In celebration of October as Farm to School Month, the Kansas Rural Center hosted their fourth, and final, Town Hall meeting of 2020 - Farm to School.

On a national level, the United States Department of Agriculture, “awards competitive Farm to School grants that support planning, developing, and implementing farm to school programs. USDA’s Farm to School Grants are an important way to help state, regional, and local organizations as they initiate, expand, and institutionalize farm to school efforts.”

On a state level, the Kansas Department of Education states, “The 2008 Farm Bill amended the Richard B. Russell School Lunch act to direct that the Secretary of Agriculture encourage institutions operating Child Nutrition Programs to purchase unprocessed locally grown and locally raised agricultural products. The Farm to School initiative is an effort to connect K-12 schools with regional or local farms in order to serve healthy meals using local foods.”

Town Hall Attendees

How do you feel Farm to School benefits communities?

The answers fell into these basic topics:

- Connects farmers to community schools
- Connects the community to farmers
- Students learn how their food is grown
- Students can meet the farmers and learn how their farm works
- Nutrition programs are strengthened
- Nutritional food makes its way onto the student’s plate
- Gives farmers a new revenue stream
- Seasonal – takes off when farmer’s market season ends

Before the panel discussion, Barb Depew – the Farm to Plate Director for the KSDE gave a briefing on the initiative:

- USDA grants provide us with great opportunity to connect kids to how their food is grown.
- Up to \$10,000 is available to introduce or enhance local food sources.
- October is Farm to School month.
- Haven High School won the Kansas Can serve local foods award.

Panelists & Takeaways

The moderator for this Town Hall was Alicia Ellingsworth of the KC Food Hub, a grower-owned hub in Kansas City.

Mark Jirak is with Jirak Family Produce in Atchison. Mark, and his family, have been growing a variety of vegetables on his farm near Atchison for 17 years. They grow both in open fields and in four high tunnels. Previous to the pandemic, approximately 30 percent of his crops were sold into various schools.

Mark began this relationship with schools ten years ago when he had extra produce and decided to call Barb DePew. Over time, he now services five schools and is contacted by many more, yet their farm does not have the capacity to serve that number just yet. In addition to farming, Mark has a full-time job so most of the labor falls on him, his wife and family.

The virtue of this model is that sales of produce to schools happens at the same time of the year that sales at farmer's markets draw to a close. To adjust to that, Mark has to be careful to plant in such a manner that his produce is ready for that short window of time - 30 to 40 days - from August through September.

Although high tunnels help extend the growing season some, one of the key components for expansion is cold storage. He does not have that capacity yet so produced must be delivered, and used, quickly.

In working with schools, he's found that the biggest challenge is logistics, but one that is easily remedied with good communication. This collaboration has helped both he and the school experiment on best practices. One real value to the schools is at reduction in waste since they can order specifically the quantities they want rather than having to order it to the nearest case size, then throw the unused part away.

For the future, Mark would like to see more grants available to help with the infrastructure, such as cold storage, high tunnels and transportation to extend the growing season.

David Kirkendall is with USD 326, a small, rural school district NW of Hays in Logan. He's the principal of a K-12 school and the main person for the school lunch program.

Their Beef It Up program began five years ago when a farmer approached the school about donating meat for the school lunch program. Since then, farmers will also donate an entire beef for the school concession stands to use in their fund raisers.

However, the farmers have been specific in their donations to go straight to the students and want the beef cut up into usable things like hamburger, fajita meat or roasts. They do not want it cut up into steaks that will be used as a fundraising mechanism, but the beef to go straight to the students to eat or use in their concession stands. While this does make sense, it's also presented a problem they've had to find a workaround for: some meat lockers refused to turn steaks into hamburger.

The school rewards the farmers by giving them a pass for their whole family for school activities. A small token, but it means a lot to the families. Also, since 80 percent of the student body is related to agriculture, they often take a sports team down to a local farm to help out on a Saturday covering exposed grain crops with tarps.

In addition to the meat program, the FFA's program of raised bed gardening engages everyone down to the preschool level. This has not only engaged all the students, but effectively cut down on destruction and vandalism since there is ownership for everyone.

One of the most exciting things is a drone program they are developing to help farmers map their fields for a variety of needs. Their drone can lift a five-gallon bucket of water, so they are experiment with various uses not only in mapping but also the possibility of applying various insecticides and fertilizers.

One student went through the FAA training to become a certified pilot and, at 18 years of age, was offered a \$60K job straight out of high school.

They've also found the local ag community supportive of practical education about agribusiness opportunities. For example, one student went to a local ag company and the owner built a 3-week course teaching him the various aspects of the seed business from ordering, sales, the chemical side, the mechanical side, and the regulatory side. It was the full-spectrum of the business, so it was much more than just a student working in a labor-only position, it was hands-on learning.

Sondra Davis of USD 350 in St. John, has spent 25 years as the food service director. St. John has been doing farm to school for four years that began as a beef program much like the one at Logan.

They have found great success with their beef program and much interest in the community to support. They, as well, give the producers free passes to school activities which has incredible meaning to the families.

Hudson Flour Mill, which is part of the district, also came on board with their support of a Farm to School program and actually created a new product to meet the needs of the school's food service requirements. Their new 60/40 blend is premixed in a bag with 60 percent white whole wheat flour and 40 percent all-purpose white flour. This blend is great for schools and food service groups for higher nutritional content.

Many of their students are directly connected to agriculture and go to K-State to study various forms of agriculture so they can return to the farm to carry on the succession. This type of adaptability to technology and new practices ensures the return of children to the farm and the sustainability to their farming programs.

Lindsay Morgan is from USD 497 in Lawrence. The school district has raised bed gardens in 14 elementary schools and have an active Farm to School program with Mark Jirak's farm.

They began ten years ago when the kitchen manager got a grant to build and sustain a Farm to School program. Jirak Family Farms was the first farmer they purchased from and have learned, along with Mark, best practices in the logistics and relationships between the school and the farmer.

The high school is the main point of entry for the products and has provided numerous opportunities for education of staff and students. For example, what do you do when you get 2,200 pounds of watermelon?

The students prefer eating the fresh vegetables and fruit over the industrially supplied food products, especially as they learn more about how it's grown both in their schools and on field trips to local farms.

However, one size does not fit all so it's important that schools who want to do this find champions within their schools to do this. They can help build the bridge between farmers and communities and schools together. It's also important that the school's administration sees the real value.

Summary

While there is great success with a few Farm to School programs, the opportunities for more schools to engage with local farmers is exciting. However, the challenge is that there is no one-size-fits-all and merging the public and private sectors requires navigation since both groups function quite differently.

Those schools, communities and farmers that have navigated this relationship have found that much more than nutritious food is being introduced. In addition, there is a whole new framework for them to benefit their community both with connections and commerce.

SWOT Analysis: Farm to School Program

Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Connects farmers to community schools• Connects the community to farmers• Students learn how their food is grown• Students can meet the farmers and learn how their farm works• Nutrition programs are strengthened• Nutritional food makes its way onto the student's plate• Gives farmers a new revenue stream• Seasonal – takes off when farmer's market season ends
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Seasonal – only good August through September• Weather is always a factor• No cold storage – has to have quick turnaround• Logistics and communications a real challenge
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cold storage could help with more capacity• High tunnels would extend growing season• Educational opportunities abound at various levels• New revenue streams for local farmers
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Weather is also a factor• Covid-10 shut down demand for food from the farmer• A lot of risk to farmers to invest in labor and infrastructure for such a temperamental and seasonal business

Additional Resources

Haven School Video of Greenhouse (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxICwIAMiME>)

Kansas Rural Center On Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLHfd8ooMjd4vhuDrRT0Lbg>)

KRC Town Hall Meeting; Farm to School on Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k06BKrgvD48>)

Kansas State Dept. of Education Farm to School (https://www.kn-eat.org/F2S/F2S_Menu/F2S_Home.htm)

USDA Farm to School Grant Program (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cfs/farm-school-grant-program>)