

# Farm to School

## The Health of the Next Generation



BY LE ADAMS

Farm to School is seeking a community fix to a community problem. They're working to combat childhood nutrition concerns while providing access to locally-grown foods.

### Introduction

Poor eating, sedentary lifestyles, overweight - these are all part of one of the newest concerns of health providers, the media, the USDA even, and just plain folks from around the nation. And especially as these risk behaviors are affecting our future: the next generation. One third of US children are overweight or obese. As this trend continues, this has been declared as the first generation of children who will not live as long a life as their parents. Nutrition-related diseases such as diabetes and heart disease are being seen in a younger and younger population. Eating in an unhealthy way affects discipline and the ability to learn in school.

What is to blame for this mess? Too much screen time allowed in the home. Lack of physical education at school. Commodity-driven and just plain yucky school food. Schools don't have the money to buy good foods. The most affordable food in our communities is also the least nutritious.

Subsidies for more and more high fructose corn syrup. The lack of awareness about and appreciation

of the food that we ingest. The loss of farmers and farmland.

All of these things and more play a role in children not knowing where their food comes from and in less and less reliance on fresh wholesome produce both in our schools and in our family meals.

### What is this 'Farm to School' anyway?

Farm to School programs throughout the country are bringing local farmers' foods into school cafeterias (farm to cafeteria), into college cafeterias (farm to college), and are providing a myriad of educational activities that correlate with a change in food choices. Farm to School enables every child to have access to nutritious food while simultaneously benefiting communities and local farm economies. The foods getting into the cafeterias are mostly fruits and vegetables, but also include dairy, grains and meats. These purchases are from local or regional farmers, thus expanding markets for farmers. Other aspects that are frequently in farm to school programs include: taste tests, nutrition lessons, cooking classes, school gardens, farm field trips, and schoolroom visits from farmers. Any educational activity that connects children with local farms can be considered as part of farm to school. Such experiences help children understand where their food comes from and how

their food choices affect their bodies, environment, and community.

The National Farm to School Network sprouted from the desire to support community-based food systems, strengthen family farms, and improve student health by reducing childhood obesity. With funding from the WK Kellogg Foundation, the Network coordinates, promotes, and expands the farm to school movement at the state, regional, and national levels. Eight regional lead agencies and national staff provide free training and technical assistance, information services, networking, and support for policy change, media, and marketing activities. Farm to Table and the Southwest Marketing Network are the lead agency for five states in the Southwest. Currently, there are more than 2,000 farm to school programs in the country and chances are there is probably one happening near you.

### Farm to School Activities

**In New Mexico** - There are innovative cooking programs happening in a number of schools. Children learn to use knives and prepare meals with a multi-disciplinary approach, while learning about agriculture and nutrition. Some of these menus are prepared in the school cafeteria and recipes in English and Spanish go home with the students. A

directory was produced which links farmers who have food to sell to the schools with the school



Schoolchildren visiting Harmony Farms.



food service buyers who want to buy it, including a local produce seasonality chart and farmers' market list, all of which helps the buyer venture into this new world of buying direct. Proposed legislation, known as Healthy Kids, Healthy Economy, has been introduced into the state legislature to ask for additional funding to provide two additional fresh fruits/vegetables per week, New Mexico grown when available, to all the state's children. A group of 6,000 students from 12 schools is piloting the program with great success. In a large urban school district, a new group is forming to coordinate and train garden teachers from all the city's school gardens. A Produce Needs List was developed that outlines how much of what kinds of products are needed to provide local foods for all school districts.

**In Colorado** - A Southwest Colorado school district is buying local produce, grains and grassfed ground beef. It is one of the few districts in the country that is buying meat from local growers. Policy councils are forming around the issue of healthy kids and improving school foods. The major metro area is gearing up for a school food service overhaul, which is being accomplished by a large collaboration of organizations.

**In Utah** - A collaboration between one of the state's universities, the student farm, and the Nutrition Department has brought on many changes. Elementary age children visit the college farm; the farm's produce provides for taste tests in the schools; schools purchase produce; there is sharing of produce and recipes for families; and, parent/child food preparation classes are provided.

**In Arizona** - Several schools and school districts buy local foods. Training is being offered for both farmers and food service directors

to help get them connected in the marketplace. Several taste tests, school gardens and other farm to school activities are continuing.

### What can you do?

You can follow the lead of the state programs that are listed above. You can work big or small. Or you can slice off one small piece of the pie, start with one step, and:

- Teach your kids to both cook and enjoy fresh produce.
- Work with the PTA in your school to build a school garden.
- Volunteer to take care of the school garden in the summer months.
- Share your gardening knowledge with the children in your local school.
- Talk to your legislators and policy-makers about getting more local fresh produce and additional monies to help improve school food.
- Talk to any farmers that you know and convince them that they want to grow and sell food for their local schoolchildren.


- Take a look at these resources, talk to people, and make it happen! ●

### About the Author

Le Adams is a former farmer of organic vegetables from northern New Mexico. She is the Co-Director and the Farm to School Program Director of Farm to Table, a nonprofit educational organization working in farm to school, policy, and agricultural marketing.

### Author's Picks for Further Reading


Farm to School

 [farmtoschool.org](http://farmtoschool.org)

Farm to College

 [farmtocollege.org](http://farmtocollege.org)

Farm to Table New Mexico

 [farmtotablenm.org](http://farmtotablenm.org)

Southwest Marketing Network

 [swmarketingnetwork.org](http://swmarketingnetwork.org)

