

# Building A Successful Farm To School Movement: One Person, One Plot, One Policy At A Time

Lisa Harner, Elena Kuo, Lisa Malde, and Kelly Landau

August 12, 2015

<http://healthaffairs.org/blog/2015/08/12/building-a-successful-farm-to-school-movement-one-person-one-plot-one-policy-at-a-time/>

What does it take for a school district to be able to offer fresh, local, unprocessed food to its students? Chaffee County, Colorado found that the key ingredients are supportive school district administration, a strong school wellness policy, a food service director and staff passionate about incorporating locally grown foods into school meals, and buy-in from local residents, businesses, and nonprofits.

## Farm To School

The term “farm to school” refers to efforts that bring local or regionally produced foods into school cafeterias and provide hands-on learning activities such as gardening, cooking classes, and food-related education in schools. Farm-to-school strategies are gaining momentum across the country as a way to both improve student wellness and boost local economies.

These initiatives require sustained collaboration between policymakers, the business sector, and community stakeholders to support changes in food access and student dietary behavior. The farm to school efforts in Chaffee County, Colorado provide an example of just such a successful collaboration.

## LiveWell Chaffee County

Chaffee County is a rural community in the central Colorado Rocky Mountains. The largest city is Salida, with a population of just over 5,200. The Salida School District serves roughly 1,050 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. Approximately 70 percent of students take advantage of the school lunch, and the district reports that 42 percent of students are eligible to receive it for free or at a reduced cost.

In 2009, community stakeholders established LiveWell Chaffee County, an initiative that engages city officials, local business, the school district, students, and community residents to educate and promote awareness of healthy eating and active living. Funding was provided by Kaiser Permanente’s Community Health Initiative, a multi-dimensional obesity-prevention effort that supports communities in implementing policy, environmental, and programmatic change.

In 2010, student body mass index measurements completed by the Salida School District indicated that 36 percent of third and fourth graders were overweight, and of the ninth grade students measured, 22 percent were overweight, and 4 percent were obese. This prompted LiveWell Chaffee County to explore strategies for improving school food and nutrition education for students. Farm to school was a prime candidate.

## Community Engagement As A First Step

Before LiveWell Chaffee County initiated farm to school efforts, they met with the school district's food service staff to better understand the parameters and constraints around ordering, processing, and serving school meals. The school district was committed to having a positive influence on students' nutrition knowledge and eating habits, and there was administrative support for incorporating more fresh fruits and vegetables into school meals. These initial conversations led to a better understanding of what changes were realistic for building a healthier school food system, and informed the subsequent farm to school action plan.

To get things rolling, LiveWell hired a facilitator to work with approximately 40 residents, community organizations, the school district, and government entities to identify how the farm-to-school strategy could be implemented. For example, in the early stages of the initiative, one of the district custodians had concerns about garden maintenance, produce storage, and pests. The group brainstormed about how these issues could be tackled, and as a result, more people became engaged, partnerships grew, and the collaborative exercise was a valuable learning experience. After seeing successful produce production, the initial critic now states "it's exciting to watch progress, overcome my fears, and see the rewards." What could have been a stumbling block that stalled efforts became a spark that fueled project momentum.

## From Policy To Production

In 2010, in advance of the new USDA school lunch requirements, the Salida School District revised its wellness policy to include stronger language about healthy eating and active living, and to require that 100 percent of foods sold from vending machines, individual cafeteria items, and other school venues meet or exceed the district's nutrition standards by the end of the 2012-2013 school year.

In 2012, the district launched the farm to school initiative through the collaborative efforts of LiveWell Chaffee County, the school district, community residents, and Guidestone, a local non-profit organization dedicated to growing a vibrant local food economy in Colorado. Collectively, these stakeholders contributed over \$200,000 of in-kind support that included volunteer hours to build the garden infrastructure (prepare the soil and help with seeding, transplanting, weeding, and harvesting), provide educational programs for students, and obtain additional grant funds to continue supporting the farm to school efforts.

A four-acre plot of land became the hub of the initiative, supported by the school district through water, utilities, and a renewable three-year land lease. The farm-to-school site currently houses one acre of production that includes an orchard, raised and in-ground produce beds, a hoop greenhouse (garden beds covered with a polyethylene tunnel that helps extend the growing season), a produce washing station, and a tool shed. The full site lease was renewed in 2015 and is ready for increased production. Guidestone oversees farm operations and maintenance and works with various organizations to engage young people in farm-to-school tasks.

## Overcoming Challenges

Of course this work was not without challenges. The food service staff needed training on raw food preparation to replace the traditional heat and serve method; the school district was reluctant to remove a profitable vending machine stocked with unhealthy choices; and, there were significant startup costs associated with preparing the farm site for food production. Some of the initiative's success in overcoming these challenges could be attributed to the rural community's unique set of circumstances: a small school district, the opportunity to incorporate healthy eating and active living into the design of a new high school, supportive school district personnel, and available land for gardening and farming.

The hiring of a new district superintendent who supported healthier foods in schools was also key, as was the presence of a food service director with training as an executive chef. Together, these leaders helped ensure wellness policy compliance and integration of produce from the school gardens into scratch-cooked meals. The new food service director eliminated individual sales of potato chips, ice cream, and other unhealthy items in the middle and high school cafeterias, helping to make the healthy choice the only choice. When the new high school was designed, the unhealthy vending machine was replaced with one that offered healthier snacks and drinks and included an electronic display with scrolling nutritional information and health tips.

## What's Changed?

Evaluators at Kaiser Permanente used a mixed methods approach to evaluate the initiative. For four years, we compiled information from yearly progress reporting and site visits, director updates, monthly evaluation calls, and key informant interviews that highlighted the development, implementation, and impact of the farm-to-school efforts. Quantitatively, we used a "population dose" method developed for evaluation of Kaiser Permanente's Community Health Initiatives — to assess outcomes of the efforts as they related to servings of fruits and vegetables and overall healthfulness of school food offerings.

The population dose measure is a combination of: (1) the number of people reached by a strategy; and, (2) the power of the strategy to change the behavior of those reached. In Chaffee County, the school district has incorporated approximately 3,000 pounds of garden produce into meals since the beginning of the program. We estimate that the

school food strategies created a 12 percent increase in daily consumption of fruits and vegetables and an overall 6 percent increase in healthfulness of food for district youth.

Qualitative information gathered through interviews, observation, and experiential learning opportunities with the Salida School District and greater community help us to better understand the impact of the initiative. The farm-to-school program manager reported that she repeatedly has parents tell her that they now let their kids purchase school lunch because of the healthier, fresher options. Food service staff reported that while getting school lunch after a field trip to the farm site, second and third grade students felt a personal connection to the food in the lunch — “That’s the carrot I picked yesterday, I recognize it! That’s MY carrot.”

## Moving Towards Sustainability

The impact of this initiative now reaches beyond the student population to local residents, businesses, and institutions. While nearly half of the produce grown in the school farm goes into the school meal program, the rest is sold through farm stands or directly to organizations such as the regional medical center, local grocers, and restaurants, to help sustain operations of the program.

At the beginning of the growing season, the farm-to-school manager meets with stakeholders in the community that want to purchase produce from the school farm to determine what to grow and how much is needed. In addition, crew members from AgriCorps, an organization connecting agriculture volunteers to experiential, school-based agricultural education intern at the farm, providing a much needed source of labor and education.

What began with a school wellness program has progressed into a community-wide effort. Kaiser Permanente’s Community Health Initiative spearheaded this work, but subsequent grants, support, and collaboration from residents, partners, and businesses have led to a sustainable, long-term community movement.