Learn Fresh
Community Food Projects Planning Assignment

What is the project?
Learn Fresh aims to connect New York City public elementary empowerment schools with local farms and to integrate food-related education into the curriculum. This project will introduce fresh regionally grown produce in the lunchroom, organize trips to farms for students, and support school gardens. Furthermore, there will be a focus on implementing an education component on food literacy, local foods, agricultural systems, and ecology in the school curriculum.

Priorities addressed:
- Connecting elementary schools with local farmers for fresh regionally produced foods and educational opportunities
- Providing an innovative toolkit for educators to teach lifelong lessons on nutrition, health, and the environment
- Improving the health and nutrition of school-age children
- Strengthening the capacity of local and regional farmers, particularly those engaged in sustainable farming practices

Rationale/Change you can believe in:
Farm-to-school is a growing nationwide movement to source more foods locally and to provide complementary educational activities that emphasize food, agriculture, and nutrition. Farm-to-school is a broadly based term that encompasses efforts that bring local or regionally produced foods into school cafeterias, support school gardening, encourage farm visits, implement culinary classes, and integrate food-related education into the regular, standards-based classroom curriculum. Farmers can benefit from increased sales to local school districts, and the students and staff at these schools can enjoy meals made from fresh, local ingredients. This is important because “healthier school food could help address dietary factors related to the rise in obesity, early onset diabetes, and other diet-related conditions that have become major health risks for America’s youth.” Currently, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) supports such efforts through its Farm to School Program, which includes research, training, technical assistance, and grants.

Farm-to-school systems can bring benefits to many different groups within a community. They help farmers gain new markets for additional income, students can eat meals with improved nutritional...
quality and taste, and teachers can lead educational programs on local agriculture, food systems, and nutrition. In addition, bringing fresh produce to schools and educating students on the importance of nutrition can perhaps curb the burgeoning obesity epidemic. This is a concern because childhood obesity increases risks for other health issues such as premature onset of type II diabetes or other problems in adulthood such as adult obesity, diabetes, hypertension, cancer, heart disease, and stroke. Because many students eat one to two meals a day at school, improving the nutritional quality of school lunches with local farm produce is a great opportunity to promote healthy eating in young children.

One study that reviewed fifteen farm-to-school evaluation reports and studies found that across the board, farm-to-school approaches resulted in students consuming an increased number of fruits and vegetables per day in the cafeteria, classroom, or at home. Furthermore, there was an improved knowledge and positive attitude toward healthy eating and agricultural practices. Beyond the students, there were also marked changes in food service providers, as kitchen staff tried new ways of incorporating raw produce into meals and purchases of farm-fresh products from local farmers increased. For farmers, though most reported that school sales only amounted to less than 5% of total sales, enthusiasm in program participation and giving farm tours was recorded. Finally, parents found that family diet improved due to their child’s participation in farm-to-school programs and there were increased reports of purchasing local foods, increased interest in purchasing school lunches featuring local foods, and majority belief that classroom lessons on food, farms, and nutrition would affect their children's long-term food choices.

Farm-to-school is a growing nationwide trend to not only source food locally, but also to improve the health status of students. Learn Fresh is a project that embraces these values and learns from previous successful models to help bring about positive change in the New York City community.

Prior planning, scale, and scope:
Though many schools throughout New York City are investing in school gardens through recent upsurges in funding and interest from the Mayor’s Fund to Advance New York City, New York City public schools still lag behind in implementing other farm to school initiatives. The Learn Fresh team will target public elementary schools that employ the Empowerment Support Organization of the New York City Department of Education (DOE). Empowerment schools receive customized support and instruction on matters ranging from budget management to operational needs from Network Team leaders within their empowerment school networks. These schools are offered more autonomy in choosing the curriculum and have greater autonomy from the DOE, as long as students meet performance goals. Currently there are about eighty elementary level empowerment schools citywide.

This program specifically targets elementary school-aged students in New York City because obesity is an important public health issue in this population. According to the Student Weight Status Category Report, New York City, 14% of second and fourth grade students are overweight and 17% of them are obese. Furthermore, particularly high levels of obesity were found among Hispanic and Black children, which resemble national trends in adults. One study on childhood obesity in New York City found that school-based interventions designed to “improve nutrition [and] increase physical activity have been shown to decrease overweight, improve dietary intake, and reduce sedentary behaviors in children.” According to this research, focus on nutrition and
physical activity in schools and in the community is required to improve health status of New York City elementary school children.

**Leadership:**
Because Learn Fresh is a multi-disciplinary program, it will require coordination of personnel with a diversity of backgrounds, as well as leaders from all partnering collaborators.

- **Learn Fresh Team:** The Learn Fresh Team will consist of full-time employees with backgrounds in education, nutrition, agriculture, food management, public health, and program operations and evaluation. There will be committees (2-4 people each) that will take charge of the following responsibilities:
  - Education Curriculum Development
  - School Recruitment and Coordination
  - Farm Recruitment and Coordination
  - Community Outreach
  - Program Evaluation

- **Food Service Directors:** Existing food service directors at the public schools will work with their food distributors and local farmers to forge new connections in order to bring in fresh, local foods for students. They will coordinate with school chefs to design menus that feature farm produce in cafeterias. They will also be responsible for working with the Learn Fresh Farm Recruitment and Coordination committee to contact the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets or the Cornell Cooperative Extension for assistance in connecting with farms interested in participating.

- **Farmers:** Farmers from participating farms will provide food service directors with information on available produce and schedule weekly deliveries. They will also work with Learn Fresh's Farm Recruitment and Coordination committee to plan educational farm field trips.

- **School Administrators:** School administrators at each participating empowerment school will work with the School Recruitment and Coordination committee to produce a school network-wide monthly newsletter for parents regarding progress of farm to school activity that may also include recipe and activity ideas to do at home. School administrators will also work with the committee to schedule the farm field trips and to develop school gardens.

- **School Teachers:** School teachers will integrate food and food systems concepts into classroom learning using the provided guides developed by the Education Curriculum Development committee. They will also communicate with other Learn Fresh participant teachers and school administrations for support and potential collaboration efforts.

- **School Nurses:** School nurses will play an integral role in measuring weight and height status of all students every semester. This will aid the Program Evaluation committee in monitoring the effectiveness on fresh produce and weight status.

**Collaborators:**

- **NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets:** The NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets oversees the statewide farm to school initiatives. This department provides many funding and grant opportunities, events, forums, education materials, and resources. The Learn Fresh team will work with the local New York City representatives to develop its farm-to-school activities to meet statewide standards.
NYC Department of Education, Office of SchoolFood: SchoolFood provides public schools throughout New York City with free or reduced cost meals. Learn Fresh will work with SchoolFood to negotiate pricing options for bringing in fresh produce from local farm distributors.

Cornell Cooperative Extension: The Cornell Cooperative Extension has a well established farm-to-school extension and research program that is always interested in learning about new farm-to-school initiatives. They have many resources, contacts, and guides to consult that will be useful in developing and monitoring the progress of Learn Fresh.

Grow NYC: Grown NYC is a non-profit organization establishing a greater presence in all boroughs throughout New York City. They are the local expert on regional farms, starting school gardens, and environmental awareness. They could help bring greenmarkets and other local farmer initiatives to new areas in the city, and their focus on health and environmental education may be a useful resource for the Learn Fresh team as well as participating schools.

Community engagement:

Parents: Parents will have a key role in ensuring the success of the program. Once parents are informed of Learn Fresh activities in schools they will be invited to play a more active role by advocating for Learn Fresh, involving their children in grocery shopping and food preparation, and instilling lessons learning school beyond the classroom.

Local Food Stores: The Community Outreach committee will work with food markets to gauge interest in working with farms that are distributing to schools in the local area.

Local Farmers Markets: The Community Outreach committee will partner with Grow NYC to host interactive educational booths aimed towards elementary school aged children at farmers markets.

Operating Structure and Progress Steps:

1. The early stages of Learn Fresh involve development of a curriculum that covers nutrition, agriculture, food systems, and environmental education. This will incorporate lesson plans, activity guides, and handouts for all elementary school levels that will be created or assembled by the Education Curriculum Development committee.

2. The School Recruitment and Education committee will be responsible for engaging school administrators at empowerment schools throughout New York City. The committee will perform site visits to ensure that schools have industrial kitchens for food preparation, interest in incorporating the education components of Learn Fresh, and willingness to work with Learn Fresh to perform project evaluation. Optional components include the ability to install a school garden. Learn Fresh aims to recruit between twelve to twenty schools in its pilot year with plans to expand in consecutive years.

3. The Farm Recruitment and Education committee will contact local farms through Grow NYC with sustainable practices to develop a delivery system for participating public schools. They will also seek farms that are willing to host student field trips. Farms with best practices and most competitive prices will be considered and referred to individual food service directors of the schools. Farms must be able to deliver produce throughout the school year, and quantity and other purchasing details will be negotiated with the individual food service directors.
4. The Program Evaluation committee will be responsible for creating, implementing, and analyzing all surveys, evaluation, and feedback received from students, nurses, school teachers, and others at specified time periods.
   a. Baseline evaluations at the start of the school year will be conducted and analyzed by the Program Evaluation committee to assess food frequency, nutrition and health awareness, and agriculture knowledge of both students and teachers. Follow-up evaluations covering similar content will be distributed at the end of each semester. At the end of each month, a survey will be distributed during lunch time to evaluate the popularity and uptake of featured farmer produce at lunch.
   b. Deidentified age, weight, and height measurement of students will also be monitored by the Program Evaluation committee to assess possible effects of diet on weight status in schools.
   c. At the end of each semester, surveys will also be distributed to school teachers to evaluate their experiences with using the curriculum, to learn which lessons were most and least effective, and to invite any suggestions for improvement.

Outcomes:

Short term

1. Students in New York City public elementary empowerment schools will have increased access to fresh fruits and vegetables.
2. Teachers will have a rich resource for educating students on nutrition, agriculture and food systems.
3. Students will have an increased awareness and knowledge of nutrition, agriculture, and food systems.

Long term

1. Health status among students of New York City public elementary empowerment schools will improve, as shown by an increased percentage of normal BMI for age and decreased overweight and obese percentage of BMI for age.
2. Schools will have established connections with farms for continued distribution.
3. Schools will increasingly source products from farms to serve regularly in school cafeterias.

SWOT analysis:

Strengths: Many aspects of this program have been tested previously in other schools and institutions with varying degrees of success. Currently, there is a reasonable amount of federal and local support for farm-to-school initiatives, meaning there should be limited pushback on this programming.

Weaknesses: The success of the program depends on the compliance from the participating schools. If the School Recruitment and Coordination committee does a poor job on assessing and choosing schools for the pilot year, this could highly affect the sustainability of the program and the introduction of Learn Fresh to other empowerment schools in New York City.

Opportunities: Ideally, Learn Fresh will eventually gain community recognition and garner further community support and interest. This will aid in recruiting additional schools into Learn Fresh in consecutive years. There are also many funding opportunities for farm-to-school projects, which may aid in funding Learn Fresh operations.
Threats: Because of the growing popularity of farm-to-school programs, Learn Fresh may face competition. Schools with existing farm distributors or established nutrition and agriculture curriculums may not qualify to be part of Learn Fresh or may not have the interest in joining the Learn Fresh community.

Next steps:
After a full year of implementation, the Program Evaluation committee will review the parts of the program that need the most improvement and see that successful parts of the project are considered again for the following school year. As mentioned before, there will be careful consideration of survey results from regarding the knowledge and behavior changes of students as well as assessment of students’ anthropometric measures. Changes in BMI for age are not expected after the first year of the program, but it may still be worth to track the progress of students through their time with Learn Fresh.

It is imperative for the Learn Fresh team to continue researching farm-to-school initiatives and to learn what else is new or evolving in the field. This will ensure that the information Learn Fresh provides in the curriculum is up-to-date and relevant. Because farm-to-school initiatives are still sprouting up throughout the United States, it is also important to keep up with new literature released on the effectiveness of different farm-to-school programs. Learn Fresh can learn from the successes and failures of other projects to improve upon its own processes.

Works Cited


