

A Working History of Farm to School Legislation in Oregon August 2009

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Farm to School Programs

Farm to school programs are typically defined as those practices that connect local food producers and processors with the school cafeteria. Effective programs also combine food and garden-based education with the classroom, lunchroom, and community through activities such as field trips to farms and on-site gardening [1].

Farm to school and school garden programs are a win for Oregon's kids and a win for Oregon's agricultural community. These programs have been shown to:

- Increase children's participation in the school meals program and consumption of fruits and vegetables, thereby improving childhood nutrition, reducing hunger and preventing obesity and obesity-related diseases [2-3];
- Improve children's and the communities' knowledge about, and attitudes toward, agriculture, food, nutrition and the environment [4-5];
- Increase market opportunities for farmers, fishers, ranchers, food processors and food manufacturers [6];
- Support economic development [6]; and
- Promote food security while reducing emissions of greenhouse gases and reliance on oil.

Farm to School Legislation in Oregon in 2007 and 2008

The Oregon Legislature first considered farm to school and school garden legislation in 2007 when a coalition of over 80 organizations representing hundreds of thousands of Oregonians endorsed a trio of farm to school and school garden bills. These bills proposed to:

- HB 3307 - Create a single focus position within the Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) to ready the Oregon agricultural community to work with Oregon schools;
- HB 3476 - Create a farm to school program in the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) and reimburse school districts that utilize Oregon agricultural products; and
- HB 3185 - Provide grants to schools throughout the state to start or maintain school gardens.

These bills passed unanimously out of the House Subcommittee on Education Innovation and the full House Education Committee. The Joint Ways & Means Committee took no action on the three bills, although a Farm to School Coordinator position was established in the ODA in the final iteration of the department's budget. Cory Schreiber was hired as the ODA's Farm to School Project Manager.

During the 2008 Supplemental Session, Oregon Legislators responded to an urgent need to fill an inter-agency gap in coordination related to farm to school and school garden programs between ODA and ODE. Though ODA had the coordinator position to work with the agriculture community, ODE is the agency that oversees school food. In response, legislators unanimously passed HB 3601A, thereby creating position authority for a Farm to School and School Garden Coordinator in the Oregon Department of Education Child Nutrition Program who would:

1. Assist school districts in utilizing Oregon agricultural products and produce from school gardens;
2. Promote food and garden-based educational activities;
3. Coordinate farm to school and school garden activities with school district wellness policies;
4. Report to the 75th Legislative Assembly on activities conducted as part of the pilot program; and
5. Coordinate the Oregon Farm to School and School Garden Program with ODA's farm to school activities.

In July 2008, ODE hired Joan Ottinger as its Farm to School and School Garden Coordinator.

Importance of school food for children

In Oregon, 43% of the meals served in schools go to children participating in the USDA's free or reduced meal program. For many of these children, school meals may be their primary source of food and nutrients all day. The significance of school meals cannot be overstated. Research shows that children who eat breakfast do better in school and get better grades [6]. Increasing participation rates in school meal programs is relevant in the fight against obesity because children who eat school lunch are known to consume twice the servings of fruits and vegetables and greater amounts of grains and dairy than students who don't participate in the school meal program [7]. Students who eat school lunch may have significantly reduced rates of overweight [8]. Research also shows that procurement of local agricultural products for the lunch line, when coupled with food and garden-based education, also increases student participation rates in school meal programs [1]. Only one fifth of Oregon's 11th graders consume the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables [9]. Increasing access to and availability of fruits and vegetables through farm to school and school garden activities will contribute to the health and well being of Oregon's youth, and help combat obesity.

Economics of school food

After schools have paid their fixed costs, there remains an estimated \$1.09 for school food services to spend for food on the plate. To ensure that students get a balanced meal, USDA regulations stipulate what must be served. As a result, schools spend approximately 22% of their food dollars on milk, 28% on fruits and vegetables, 10% on grains, and 40% on protein. One might say school food services operate on a "fixed income." When food prices go up, as they are currently, USDA does not adjust reimbursement rates for the cost of food. Additionally, schools rely heavily on the USDA commodity program to provide them with low cost foods. Last year, however, because of food shortages and rising gas and food costs, USDA commodity prices jumped 50%, and many orders were simply cancelled. As a result, schools do not know where they are going to get some of their food for next school year and how they are going to pay for it.

Oregon is one of a handful of states that does not contribute additional funds to support implementation of the National School Lunch and Breakfast Program. There has never been a more important time for Oregon to fund the school meal programs. Existing state investment in ODA and ODE coupled with the urgent need for state funding of school food creates a unique opportunity for the Oregon agricultural community to meet that need.

Farm to School Legislation in 2009: House Bill 2800

For these reasons, in 2009, the Oregon Farm to School and School Garden Network submitted House Bill 2800 requesting \$22,580,000 from general funds to:

1. Reimburse Sponsors of the National School Lunch and Breakfast Program 15 cents per lunch, and 7 cents per breakfast to buy Oregon agricultural products:
 - a. 55,000,000 Lunches @ .15 = \$8,250,000 per year X 2years = \$16,500,000
 - b. 22,000,000 Breakfasts @ .07 = \$1,540,000 per year X 2years = \$3,080,000
2. Provide grants for complementary food and garden-based education
 - a. 150 grants of up to \$10,000 per school year for each of two years = \$3,000,000

Educational and outreach duties related to the reimbursements and grant program would be assigned to ODA's Farm to School Coordinator and ODE's Farm to School and School Garden Program Coordinator. A community process was used to solicit stakeholder input regarding reimbursement strategy and accountability including discussions about allocation requirements for fruits, vegetables, and center of the plate food items. This community process ensured that the 2009 legislative proposal had the optimal balance of simplicity, accountability, and results to ensure successful farm to school and school garden programs in the future. House Bill 2800 would not only ensure that Oregon's most vulnerable children have equal access to great food, but would promote economic development, and expand markets opportunities for Oregon agricultural products. It is estimated that the package would stimulate \$53 million in economic activity in Oregon's agricultural sector [10]. There are over 40 school districts that have already identified themselves as potential buyers of Oregon agricultural products if price and quality are competitive and sourcing is consistent [11].

Summer 2009: Update on House Bill 2800

Over 80 organizations representing tens of thousands of Oregonians formally endorsed House Bill 2800. The Policy Work Group of the Oregon Farm to School and School Garden Network, along with many concerned parents, children, farmers, food service staff, and other community members advocated tirelessly for the bill, including providing testimony to the legislature on two separate occasions. Although House Bill 2800 did not pass, momentum and statewide support for the bill grew exponentially. A testament to the value of the bill and the breadth of support it garnered, House Bill 2800 was very much in play until the last week of the session. Ultimately, the bill hit a budget wall: In response to a deep recession, the Legislature was tasked with decreasing government spending while still protecting essential services, and legislators had to make the tough decision *not to fund any new bills*. But there was one farm to school win in the 2009 session – the Oregon Department of Education's Farm to School Coordinator position was saved from the chopping block — no small task with the Department facing severe budget cuts.

The Oregon Farm to School and School Garden Network Policy Work Group is currently in the process of debriefing the 2009 session, evaluating lessons learned, and gearing up to make its next advocacy push for House Bill 2800 in either the 2010 supplemental session or in the next full legislative session in 2011.

References

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* The Policy Workgroup of the Oregon Farm to School & School Garden Network consists of more than 20 organizations representing agriculture, health, environmental, economic development and hunger organizations.