Lessons Learned from a School Farm Stand Pilot Project
Working Towards a Healthy School Food Environment

As studies continue to show that childhood obesity is increasing in our country, schools across the nation are incorporating farm-to-school activities into their curriculum. Planting school gardens, introducing new fruits and vegetables through a Harvest of the Month program, and adding salad bars to the cafeteria are all contributing to a more healthful school food environment. In an effort to connect these school activities to the home and to the larger community, The Center for Healthy Communities developed a School Farm Stand Pilot Project. Using this booklet as a basic guide, we hope more communities can incorporate Farm Stands into their healthy school curriculum.
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Who

The USDA

This project was funded by a Farmers’ Market Promotion Program (FMPP) grant through the USDA. The purpose of the Farmers’ Market Promotion Program is to increase domestic consumption of, and access to, locally and regionally produced agricultural products, and to develop new market opportunities for farm and ranch operations serving local markets.

The Center for Healthy Communities

The Center for Healthy Communities (CHC) is a leader in nutrition education, food security and physical activity programs and policies addressing the needs of diverse populations locally, regionally, and internationally. CHC led this project, providing the infrastructure, personnel and vision.
Colusa Unified School District

Colusa Unified School District housed the activities of this project, providing locations to host the Farm Stands at two campuses in the district: George T. Egling Middle School and James P. Burchfield Primary School. Colusa’s Food Service director also contributed input and direction towards this project.

FoodCorps

FoodCorps is a national non-profit that serves the community food system by teaching kids about healthy food, building school gardens, and changing the school food environment. This Farm Stand project was assisted by FoodCorps Service Members whose participation increased the connection with the schools and students we worked with.
A small produce stand was set up on the school campus to sell fresh, seasonal, local fruits and vegetables to parents, students, staff, and the community. Along with produce for sale, each Farm Stand featured a free tasting of a seasonal produce item (eg: watermelon slices) and information about the CalFresh benefits program.
When

The Farm Stand project began in February of 2015 and continued through August of 2016. Farm Stands were set up during the after-school hours (year one: 2:30 pm to 5:30 pm, year two: 1:45 pm to 2:45 pm), twice per month throughout the school year. During the summer, Farm Stands were open once per week while summer school was in session. This provided a convenient time for parents to purchase produce for their families and allowed for consistency throughout the school year.
Where

Colusa County, a rural, Northern California county with a population of 21,674 has one of the highest rates of childhood obesity in the state of California and ranks first in the state in unemployment. This Farm Stand project focused efforts in the primary and middle schools in Colusa County. James P. Burchfield Primary school has an enrollment of 479 students, in grades K through 3, with 73.5% of those students identifying as Hispanic/Latino. George T. Egling Middle School has an enrollment of 527 students, in grades 4 through 8, with 69.3% of students identifying as Hispanic/Latino.

This community is rich in agriculture and specialty crops, however, there is a significant lack of full-service grocery stores and markets providing fresh fruits and vegetables.
Why - The Socioeconomic Environment

Colusa County ranks first in the state with a current unemployment rate of 24.2%, significantly higher than the California state average of 8.4%. 15.2% of the population lives below the poverty line, and 1,820 residents receive CalFresh benefits. (State of California, 2010) At George T. Egling Middle School, 60.6% of students qualify for free or reduced meals. (California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System, 2013) In 2010, 45.7% of Colusa County’s children were overweight or obese, according to research by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. This is one of the highest rates in California, where the state average is 31%.
Limited access to fresh, nutritious foods, especially fruits and vegetables, is one factor that contributes to this high rate of obesity. This limitation can be attributed to a lack of both physical and financial access. The geographical area is rich in agriculture and specialty crops, however, there is a significant lack of full-service grocery stores providing fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as limited access to farmers’ markets in terms of location and availability of transportation. This lack of access to nutritious food likely affects the overall health of the community and contributes to the high obesity rate in Colusa County. Addressing the lack of access to fresh fruits and vegetables is one way to impact the high rates of childhood obesity in Colusa County.
How

Tastings

Each week, the FMPP team chose a tasting to provide at the Farm Stand. This tasting corresponded to the Harvest of the Month program that was active in Colusa School District. For example, the Harvest of the Month item for February was carrots, so the tasting offered during the first week of February was carrots with a hummus dip. Tasting supplies were purchased, then prepared on-site at the Farm Stand. Students, staff and families were offered a free sample, along with a recipe card so they could prepare the item at home. Students used a sticker to vote on the tasting.
How

Produce for Sale

Each week the Farm Stand Coordinator purchased local produce from area farmers. Several procurement methods were tried, including using a local Food Hub, a CSA program, and purchasing from a weekly Farmers’ Market. The Farmers’ Market method proved to be the most efficient as it provided a more diverse selection and the ability to make one trip to purchase produce. The produce was then displayed at the Farm Stand and sold to staff and families at cost, or less.
Lessons Learned

Secure Support from the School

Support from school administration and staff is invaluable, including superintendent, principal, school board, food services director, janitor/maintenance staff, and teachers. These people will be necessary in planning, executing and troubleshooting the project. Consider fostering involvement either by creating a farm stand club or partnering with teachers who are interested in becoming a classroom stakeholder. When students participate in the project, parents are more likely to participate as well. Organize groups of students to be in charge of different parts of the farm stand (Finance Team, Advertising Crew, Farm Stand Hospitality and Tastings Squad). This could be a perfect project for an after-school program!
Lessons Learned

Know What Sells

Pay attention to what the community is purchasing. We found that during the after school hours, students wanted quick, easy snacks before their activities began. They loved to buy small bags of strawberries, almonds and snap peas or easy-to-eat fruit like apples and kiwi. Parents were also interested in these quick snacks for their kids to eat on the way home.
Lessons Learned

Set Easy Prices

Keep pricing simple and affordable by breaking things into smaller portions. Sell a bag of strawberries for $1 or an apple for $.50. Often students have some change in their backpack or parents will gladly hand their kid $1 for a healthy snack.
Lessons Learned

Align With Another Program
Multiple exposures to fruits and vegetables has been shown to increase the likelihood that a child will eat fruits and vegetables. When students see the same produce in the cafeteria, in the classroom with the Harvest of the Month Program, and after school at the Farm Stand, they are more likely to participate and choose more healthful options. We coordinated with the Harvest of the Month program, so students saw the same produce from the same farmer multiple times per month. They loved being able to recognize “Matthew’s carrots” or “the kiwi from Debbie!”
Lessons Learned

Promote, Promote, Promote!

Promote your Farm Stand as much and as often as possible. Put the dates on the school calendar, on the school’s website, in newsletters to parents, on the marquee outside, in local newspapers and on fliers at the Farm Stand. Use social media to remind the community and to share pictures and stories!
Lessons Learned

Promote SNAP Benefits
Farm Stands are a great platform to provide information about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Provide a flier with information that families can take home with their produce purchase.

Procure Wisely!
Consider purchasing produce through a local CSA or buying produce at the end of a Farmers’ Market that may go to waste. Explore the option of using a local Food Hub or purchasing directly from farmers in the community for affordable, fresh produce.
Lessons Learned

Offer Free Samples!

Cooking demonstrations and free tastings are a must! They draw people in and get everyone excited about what the Farm Stand has to offer. Often kids will try produce they might not usually touch if they see it being prepared in front of them. Kids might also surprise you by insisting their parents try something new!
In Summary

School Farm Stands have the potential to be a simple project that contributes to a healthy school food environment, however, in order to be sustainable, school ownership is essential. Using this basic Farm Stand model, schools and communities could make easy adjustments to be most effective in their unique situations.