

HJR 8 Study: Childhood Hunger

Stakeholder Suggestion: Support Montana Farm to School Programs

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for the Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee
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Background

In November 2011, speakers presented the Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee with information on efforts to increase the use of Montana farm products in school nutrition programs. Speakers said such efforts benefit both schoolchildren, by providing access to fresh and healthy foods, and Montana farmers, by providing another market for their products. They also benefit local communities by keeping food dollars in the local economy.

Committee members also heard about barriers to these "farm-to-school" efforts. They included a lack of facilities in some schools or regions for processing raw products into items that can be used for school meals and an inability to purchase Montana products in large enough quantities to serve a school's student body.

The information was presented as part of the committee's House Joint Resolution 8 study of childhood hunger. Committee members asked for more information about a stakeholder suggestion to support Montana farm-to-school programs. The recommendation specifically suggested creation of a program that provides schools with money to buy Montana products, similar to legislation recently approved in Oregon.

This briefing paper provides information about current efforts in Montana, as well as the Oregon legislation and a new federal grant program. It also outlines the types of farm-to-school legislation approved in other states and presents options for the committee's consideration.

Farm to School in Montana

Farm-to-school efforts are underway around Montana, as the selected examples below show.

- A program based at Flathead Valley Community College works with farmers and schools in Flathead and Lincoln counties. The Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center also is working to create processed Montana farm products for use in schools.
- Gallatin Valley Farm to School is a nonprofit group formed in 2007 to connect the school district, local growers, and community members in order to increase the use of local agricultural products in school meals, increase the number of school gardens, and incorporate nutrition and agricultural education opportunities into the curriculum.
- The Montana FoodCorps has placed nine members in rural Montana communities. They work to increase the capacity of farm-to-school efforts in those communities by creating connections between local growers and school food programs. They also help to incorporate nutrition and agricultural education and activities into the curriculum.

FoodCorps communities are Boulder, Dillon, Ennis, Forsyth, Glendive, Kalispell, Livingston, Red Lodge, and Ronan.

- The Missoula County school district in 2005 undertook a series of meal events that introduced Montana products into school meals. Now, the program puts foods from 20 growers in 3 counties into 17 schools.

In addition, the statewide Farm to Cafeteria Connections serves as a communications hub to bring together food service professionals, farmers, ranchers, and leaders in Montana's local food movement to work on placing local foods in school cafeterias. And the Montana Team Nutrition Program works with the Office of Public Instruction to help connect students with the sources of their food and to provide training and technical assistance to school food service programs about using local, farm-fresh products in their school meal programs.

In Oregon: Putting More Local Foods in Schools

In 2011, the Oregon Legislature appropriated \$200,000 to be used during the current 2-year budget period for expanding farm-to-school efforts. The money is to be granted to schools to:

- buy food produced or processed in Oregon for use in school lunch programs; and
- create agriculture- and garden-based educational activities for students.

Schools that receive grants must use 87.5% of the funds to buy Oregon food products. The remainder funds educational activities related to farming and gardening. Schools will receive the lesser of 15 cents for every school lunch served or the amount paid per meal to purchase the Oregon food products. The legislation requires the Oregon Department of Education to work with the state Department of Agriculture to establish rules for the grant program and also to determine which school districts will receive grants.

The state expects to award grants to two school districts, but has not yet put the program in place. A hiring freeze has prevented the Department of Education from replacing the staff member who works on farm-to-school matters.¹

At the National Level

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 created a competitive grant program to increase the use of foods from small- and medium-sized farms in schools. Beginning in October 2012, the U.S. Department of Agriculture will award grants to schools, agricultural producers, non-profit organizations, and state, local, or tribal agencies. The grants may be used for training, planning, buying equipment, creating school gardens, developing partnerships, and implementing farm-to-school programs.

¹ Interview with Korinne McVeety of the Oregon Department of Education, Jan. 5, 2012.

The legislation requires that highest priority be given to projects that:

- make local food products available in eligible schools;
- serve a high proportion of children who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches;
- incorporate hands-on nutrition education activities into the school day;
- demonstrate collaboration between schools, nongovernmental and community-based organizations, agricultural producers, and other community partners; and
- appear to have a high likelihood of long-term sustainability.

The federal law appropriated \$5 million per year for the program and capped the federal awards at \$100,000 per project. Applicants must provide matching funds.

Efforts on Other Fronts

The National Farm to School Network has reviewed legislative efforts around the country and grouped them into the categories listed below.

Category	Activity
Project Implementation	Establish a statewide farm-to-school program
Task Force or Work Group	Establish a task force or multi-agency work group to assess ways to implement farm-to-school programs
Pilot Program	Establish a temporary program of farm-to-school activities in a limited number of school districts
Appropriation	Authorize funding for specific farm-to-school efforts
Grant Program	Authorize grants for starting farm-to-school programs
Reimbursement Program	Reimburse schools for serving local foods
Local Preference	Allow purchasing preference for state farm products
Promotional Event	Create a statewide promotional program or event
Database/Directory	Require a state agency to establish a Web site or directory to help match schools with producers
Wellness Policy or Food Security Policy	Encourage farm-to-school efforts as part of a broader policy
Resolution	Encourage use of farm-to-school programs

The Montana Legislature has already established a purchasing preference for Montana farm products, with passage of SB 328 in 2007. The law gives public institutions more flexibility to buy Montana products using an optional exemption to the Montana Procurement Act.

Options for Consideration

If the committee wants to support the expansion of farm-to-school efforts, members could consider the following options:

1. Approve the drafting of legislation similar to the Oregon bill, appropriating money for a grant program that reimburses schools for purchase of Montana food products and provides funds for agriculture- or garden-based educational activities.

Note: A bill draft could provide a fixed amount of money for the biennium. It could either be specific about the number of school districts that will receive funds and the amount each district will receive or could give a state agency flexibility to make those determinations.

2. Approve the drafting of other legislation, choosing from among the categories developed by the National Farm to School Network and listed on P. 2.
3. Approve the drafting of legislation to appropriate funds to provide local groups with matching funds to apply for a farm-to-school grant under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act.
4. Approve the drafting of a resolution encouraging school districts and state agencies to explore the creation of farm-to-school programs and the possibility of applying for a federal grant to support the programs.

Note: A resolution would serve merely as a suggestion to school districts and state agencies. It would not require them to undertake farm-to-school efforts.

5. Find that farm-to-school programs benefit Montana children by providing a source of fresh and healthy food and benefit Montana farmers by providing another market for their products. Include the finding in the final HJR 8 report.
6. Identify other options for committee consideration.