

Published Sunday | February 24, 2008

Iowa farm-to-school program gets fresh foods to students

BY ELIZABETH AHLIN
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Chris Kirby could hear the excitement over the phone.

"You'll never guess what we served today for lunch," Kirby recalled of her conversation with a public school employee in Stillwater, Okla. "Sweet corn and okra! My gosh, it was the best sweet corn I've ever had," she told me. She was so excited."

The sweet corn was fresh, picked just one day earlier by a local farmer.

That morning, the farmer delivered it to the school. By lunch, it was on the plates of students in the Stillwater public schools.

For Kirby, who runs the farm-to-school program in Oklahoma, it was a nice moment.

Iowa is now ramping up its own farm-to-school program, with the goal of getting fresh food to students and creating a new market for local farmers.

But the project is a daunting one. Program director Maury Wills and a seven-member council are trying to connect individual school districts statewide with area food growers.

The group wants to establish networks of educators, food suppliers and community members around the state who are committed to the principles behind farm-to-school.

Once a database is established, the group will work on getting community leaders involved in pushing the program locally.

The program has launched a Web site, and the Farm-to-School Council is developing a newsletter to send to schools and growers in Iowa.

Council member Denise O'Brien organically farms poultry, strawberries and apples near Atlantic.

For three to five months of the year, she said, students could be eating fresh apples, tomatoes, cucumbers, watermelons, cantaloupes, potatoes and winter squash — all grown by Iowa farmers.

One of the biggest barriers to the program's success could be cost.

Because of budget constraints, public school lunches need to be put together at minimal cost — as low as \$1 to \$2 per meal, which is less than profitable for farmers.

"If they can make a profit, they will embrace it," O'Brien said of the program.

Wills wants to establish a few pilot programs around Iowa before the end of this year. The details are still in the planning stages.

Other states have successfully launched programs that way.

Oklahoma's pilot program started with seedless watermelon. One farmer with a large watermelon operation agreed to provide the produce to 70 schools in 2004.

The next year, the program expanded from four to six school districts, or 144 schools. Once the Oklahoma Legislature passed a law supporting the effort, it expanded to 35 school districts.

The effort required cooperation from local produce distributors. In order to keep the cost low, distributors agreed not to mark up the cases of watermelon they delivered to schools.

"Everyone is coming together with the common goal of getting our kids healthier," Kirby said.

Wills is hoping to see that kind of cooperation in Iowa. If the program is going to work, growers, distributors, schools and processors all will have to "give a little bit."

Oklahoma has not yet started tracking dollar amounts of farm-to-school sales, like the sweet corn delivered directly to the schools in Stillwater. But Kirby frequently hears from schools that buy fresh greens and other vegetables from growers.

North Carolina's program, launched in 1998, bought \$475,000 worth of fruits and vegetables from local farmers in 2006.

Proponents of farm-to-school want children to eat more produce and say Iowa-grown produce is better than canned or processed fruits and vegetables. Because the produce is harvested when ripe and quickly delivered to schools, it will taste better and look better to students, they say.

The program isn't just about improving children's health and creating a new market for farmers. It's about reconnecting to food in an increasingly urban Iowa.

"It's important for kids to understand where their food comes from and make a real connection with that. Sometimes it's very difficult for kids to make that connection if the only place they see food is in the supermarket or on the shelves at home," Wills said.

O'Brien envisions students working in school gardens or involved in food preparation.

The Iowa Legislature provided \$80,000 last year to get the farm-to-school program started. Since then, two people took the helm without success.

The third, Wills, is an organic apple farmer from Adel who has spent 10 years working on the state's organic program for the Department of

Interested?

Learn more about the Iowa Farm-to-School program:

Call 515-281-5783

Check out the [Farm-to-school Web site](#).

Nebraska's option:

Nebraska does not have a farm-to-school program for the public schools.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln, however, started its Good, Fresh Local program in 2005 to introduce Nebraska-produced eggs, vegetables, fruits and meats into dining halls.

Agriculture and Land Stewardship.

"It's early in the project," Wills said. "We're going to learn as we go. This system, it takes time and patience, and it takes commitment and resources. That's what we're trying to pull together."

It's not going to happen quickly, but someday Wills hopes Iowa schoolchildren will feast on fresh sweet corn instead of canned corn, just like the students in Oklahoma.

Contact the Omaha World-Herald [newsroom](#)

Copyright ©2008 Omaha World-Herald®. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, displayed or redistributed for any purpose without permission from the Omaha World-Herald.