

Farm to School, Prison and Beyond

Descriptive Summary of Session

Farm to school is the practice of getting fresh local or regional foods into schools along with educational component to help kids understand the importance of eating fresh foods. Farm to School programs have a broad range of benefits, including improving child nutrition and public health, increasing marketing opportunities for small farmers, and expanding public understanding about agriculture and food production.

Farm to School has truly taken off in recent years, with a recent survey of local foods in schools (the first such survey ever) indicating that 42 percent of schools—more than 32,000—and more than 21 million students participate in farm to school programs which generated \$351 million in expenditures on local foods.

On the policy side, there are changes that can affect child nutrition and farm economics that are related to farm to school. Among these is the inclusion of farm to school in school wellness and city policies. At the state level, a mandate for a farm to school task force that requires state agencies and others to address farm to school can often have a large impact. The creation of a statewide program, as has been done in Oklahoma, is a step further, providing a point of coordination and contact for what can sometimes be very different institutional cultures. Moreover, states are finding innovative ways to provide support to agriculture producers to bridge some of the gaps that prevent local foods from the institutional market.

Oklahoma's success on farm to school dates back to the creation of a statewide food policy task force in 2002 that brought together key stakeholders in the state to survey interest in connecting schools and farmers and develop pilot programs to work out the procedural steps and identify hurdles across a range of district types. In 2006 the state legislature passed legislation that, among other things, established a position in the state department of agriculture to support farm to school programs, a vital key in establishing the relationships and partnerships that help to make farm to school work. The program also provides ancillary materials to support and promote the program.

The Washington farm to prison program is modeled after farm to school programs. The prisons do not have farms, but the system has a sustainability interest and the program operates as a cost saver for the state, largely through waste reduction.

While not wildly successful, the program has been able to increase local purchase, mostly fruits, potatoes and onions. Farms still do not perceive the prisons as a stable market because prisons are prohibited from direct contracting. If the prison system can secure a waiver from the state procurement process in order to establish predictable, stable purchase agreements with farmers, the prison system could play an important role as an aggregator for small farms that individually cannot provide sufficient, consistent products at the volume that the prison requires. Once established, this could help other institutions to increase their local produce purchases as well.