

Farm to School program equals healthier kids

Program also equals healthier bottom lines for area farmers

BY JANE MYHRA
REPORTER

MADISON – Kids and farmers in Waupaca County are benefiting from the AmeriCorps Farm to School program in an effort to improve children's diets and producers' bottom lines.

Groups in 10 Wisconsin counties received federal grants administered by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. For most of the recipients, this is the second year of participating in a program that

touched 10,000 children during the 2008-09 school year.

In Waupaca County, the University of Wisconsin Extension received the grant to work with area schools.

"Our local partnership started with a call from a Weyauwega-Fremont School Wellness Committee member three years ago asking how to get more fresh local produce into the school menus," explained Marilyn Herman, UW Extension family living educator.

With the support of two AmeriCorps staff, Waupaca County UW Extension was invited into classrooms in all seven of the county's school districts with hands-on activities to learn about seasonal foods like cabbage, pumpkins, cranberries, spring greens, sprouts, carrots and apples, then preparing

simple recipes for tasting.

"The schools have all increased local food buying to support the local economy and find students that sample fruits and vegetables in the classroom are more willing to try them and enjoy them in the lunch line," Herman stated. "Kids eat vegetables if you give them vegetables."

Several classrooms in Iola-Scandinavia, Clintonville, Manawa and Waupaca worked with AmeriCorps last year and started tomatoes from seed, nurtured them and transplanted them to local community gardens or Community Supported Agriculture plots to be picked in the fall for the local food pantries.

Local growers in Waupaca, Iola, Scandinavia, Clintonville, Fremont and Weyauwega have

made quality produce available to school food service programs and with the help of students or food service staff have done the extra preparation to offer fruit or vegetable dishes made from scratch.

During December, the Farm to School program began distributing snack bags of vegetables to children at the Waupaca Learning Center (WLC). AmeriCorps volunteers hand out over 270 snack bags every Friday morning. Herman plans to expand the healthy snack program to the other Waupaca school buildings and to the Manawa School District. "With our wellness program, we encourage healthy foods," stated WLC Principal Boyd Simonson.

"The kids get so excited about the vegetable snacks," added Mary Musil, WLC learning dis-

abilities teacher.

Brenda Bushaw, food service director for the Manawa School District, commented on the longer shelf life of locally produced fresh produce compared to produce shipped in from other parts of the country. "It makes the cost and effort to buy locally worthwhile," she stated.

The program also provides real-world work experience for AmeriCorps members. AmeriCorps is a national service program that provides tuition or student loan payments in exchange for a year or two of community service that also pays a living allowance to participants.

This year's Waupaca County AmeriCorps staff are Andy Ceranske, food procurement member from Waupaca, and Linda Beres, classroom nutrition educator from Fremont. This

is Beres' second year with the Waupaca County UW Extension program. She teaches children about food and nutrition, and encourages them to try new things.

"Being an AmeriCorps volunteer is a good way to help out the community," Ceranske stated. He has been working in the program for three months and replaced Brent Wiersma, of Scandinavia.

Farm to School aims to combat childhood obesity by introducing children to more fruits, vegetables and other healthy alternatives. One way to do that is to connect local producer growers with school lunch programs.

"The local growers have been super," Herman said. "They have really stepped up to support this project."

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