



Farm to School and the Child Nutrition Act

Improving school meals through advocating federal support for farm-to-school programs

SUMMARY

From 2009 to 2010, the [Community Food Security Coalition](#) advocated for more federal support and funding for farm-to-school programs as Congress considered reauthorizing the Child Nutrition Act. Farm-to-school initiatives aim to improve the quality and healthfulness of student meals through the inclusion of more fresh fruits and vegetables provided by local farmers.

The Community Food Security Coalition, based in Portland, Ore., encompasses nearly 500 anti-hunger, environmental, community development, sustainable agriculture, community gardening and social and economic justice organizations.¹ To pursue this project, the coalition enlisted support for farm-to-school programs within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA); among food activists inside and outside the coalition; and among food service staff, teachers, parents and students.

Key Results

In a report to and interview with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), the Community Food Security Coalition reported these results. Project staff:

- Secured USDA support for seven of 10 recommendations on food-to-school programs promoted by the coalition. A report on the recommendations is available [online](#).

For example, the USDA broadened its definition of "minimally processed foods" to include those washed, chopped or cut—allowing schools to use federal funds to procure local fruits and vegetables that meet their needs.

- Developed communications supporting farm-to-school and sustainable food programs that targeted food activists and the public.

For example, project staff helped edit a *Washington Post* op-ed by Michelle Obama; gained coverage of farm-to-school programs on "Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution" TV series and in a 20-page cover story in *School Nutrition* magazine; and distributed 24

¹ In 2004, RWJF funded the coalition in presenting workshops facilitating farm-to-school activities in Kentucky, Maine and Oklahoma. For more about this project, see the [Program Results](#).

policy updates to 2,975 members of the coalition's listserv and 60,000 members of Slow Food USA's listserv.

Funding

RWJF supported this project with a \$95,443 grant from October 2009 through September 2010.

CONTEXT

Federal funding for meals and snacks for K–12 students has helped the United States make impressive strides in improving nutrition and reducing hunger among children. However, soaring food and energy costs, the lure of fast food, tight state budgets and low federal reimbursement rates have prevented schools from providing healthier and tastier meals.

In 2009, researchers at Occidental College reported that students served farm-to-school salad bar lunches ate one extra serving of fruit and vegetables per day.² That same year the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identified farm-to-school programs as an effective vehicle for improving the quality of student meals and enhancing nutrition education (while also boosting students' ecoliteracy).

Congress created the National Farm to School Program when it reauthorized the Child Nutrition Act in 2004, but did not appropriate any funds. By 2009, 19 states had passed legislation or adopted policies that support procurement of local food for school meals. These and other states needed federal support and funding for these efforts.

RWJF's Interest in This Area

One of RWJF's objectives is to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic by 2015 by funding local, state and national efforts to change public policies and community environments to promote better nutrition and physical activity among all age groups.

Evidence suggests that ensuring that all foods and beverages served or sold in schools meet the strongest federal nutritional guidelines will have the greatest and longest-lasting impact on children. To pursue that priority, RWJF has supported the Healthy Schools Program—an initiative of the [Alliance for a Healthier Generation](#)—since its inception in 2005.³

In 2006, the alliance brokered an agreement with suppliers to curb sugar-sweetened beverages in schools. The number of calories in school beverages has dropped by 88

² Anupama Joshi and Andrea Azuma, "Bearing Fruit: Farm to School Program Evaluation Resources and Recommendations," 2009. Available [online](#).

³ For more information, see the [Progress Report](#) on Healthy Schools.

percent since 2004. In 2007, RWJF funded a multimillion-dollar expansion of the Healthy Schools Program that targets states with the highest obesity rates. The program now reaches more than 10,000 schools in all 50 states.⁴

THE PROJECT

The Community Food Security Coalition advocated for more support and funding for farm-to-school programs as Congress considered pending child nutrition legislation during 2009–2010. Farm to School connects K–12 schools and local farms with the objectives of serving healthy meals in school cafeterias, improving student nutrition, providing agriculture, health and nutrition education opportunities and supporting local and regional farmers.

The project focused on two areas:

- Gaining support for farm-to-school programs within the USDA
- Building an informed and empowered constituency for such programs among food activists inside and outside the coalition, as well as among food service staff, teachers, parents and students

The coalition did not use RWJF funds for lobbying, but it did use funding from other unrestricted sources to push Congress to reauthorize the legislation.

Other Funding

Four other organizations supported this project:

- Compton Foundation, \$25,000 in 2009 and \$25,000 in 2010
- Farm Aid, \$7,500 in 2009
- George Gund Foundation, \$25,000 in 2009
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation, \$45,000 in 2009 and \$11,500 in 2010

The coalition also dedicated the \$95,000 that it received as a subcontractor to Occidental College for co-hosting the [National Farm to School Network](#) to this project.

⁴ For more information, see the [press release](#).

RESULTS

In a report to RWJF and an interview for this report, project staff cited these results:

- **The USDA adopted seven of 10 recommendations in "What Can USDA Do?," a 2009 report by the coalition (available [online](#)).** Project staff also distributed some 800 copies of the white paper among farm-to-school advocates. The accepted recommendations are:
 - *Facilitate geographic preferences.* The USDA broadened its definition of "minimally processed" food to include those washed, chopped or cut—allowing schools to use federal funds to procure fresh fruits and vegetables that meet their needs.
 - *Build the USDA's capacity to support farm-to-school and sustainable procurement practices.* The agency agreed to create a Farm to School Team, spanning the USDA's Agriculture Marketing Service and Food and Nutrition Service, to disseminate best practices to all links in the school food supply chain.
 - *Post staff from the Farm to School Team in each regional office of the Food and Nutrition Service*
 - *Create a 5 percent set-aside in the USDA's Rural Business and Industry guaranteed loan program.* The set-aside would allow family farms to participate fully in regional production, processing and distribution of school food.
 - *Support mandatory funding for farm-to-school programs in Senate and House versions of the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act*
 - *Coordinate a national farm-to-school research agenda.* This would ideally include analyzing farm-to-school and sustainable school food procurement practices and research nationwide, creating mechanisms for planning and implementing the agenda, and directing the agency's Economic Research Service to work with the staff of [One Tray](#), which advocates for sustainably produced and regionally sourced school food.
 - *Collaborate with the Farm to School Team on marketing and outreach through webinars and the USDA's Farm to School [Web site](#)*
- **The coalition advocated for farm-to-school programs within the USDA and elsewhere in the executive branch.** Project staff:
 - Attended three meetings at the White House during 2009–2010 on reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act, and the February 2010 launch of [Let's Move](#), a White House initiative that includes providing healthy food in schools as crucial to overcoming childhood obesity.
 - Organized or co-hosted educational events on farm-to-school programs with the USDA. These included:

- A roundtable with USDA staff and food service directors about how the agency could support farm-to-school efforts. Thirty USDA staff attended the event, held in Washington in March 2010.
- Participated in a number of other meetings, webinars and conference calls with staff from the USDA, the White House and other national organizations
- Supplied the USDA with a list of farm-to-school program sites—of which the Farm to School Team visited nine
- **The coalition developed communications on farm-to-school and sustainable food programs targeting both food activists and the public.** For example, the coalition:
 - Helped edit "A Food Bill We Need," an op-ed by Michelle Obama in the *Washington Post* on August 2, 2010 (available [online](#))
 - Ghost-wrote "Child Obesity Called National Security Risk," by Philip Brasher, an op-ed in the *Des Moines Register* on April 21, 2010 (available [online](#))
 - Provided information for blogs and opinion pieces posted on the Huffington Post, Civil Eats, Obama Foodorama and the Ethicurean Web sites before the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act
 - Worked with "Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution" to showcase farm-to-school efforts in a three-minute segment on the final show of the TV series in April 2010. (Available [online](#).) The show also hosted a [petition](#) supporting farm-to-school efforts on its Web site. More than 600,000 people signed the petition, which included information on such programs in its e-newsletter.
 - Cultivated Web traffic on farm-to-school ideas on the Web site of One Tray (including a [petition](#) on healthier school food signed by 3,800 people); on Facebook (2,816 people); on Twitter (3,393 people) (all as of November 2010); and on the [Web site](#) of the Farm to School Network (11,000 unique visitors per month in 2010)
 - Helped convince more than 1,100 organizations to sign a letter urging Congress to reauthorize the Child Nutrition Act. Dated October 8, 2010, the letter featured information on farm-to-school programs
 - Provided information for "Farm to School," a 20-page cover article in the June/July 2010 issue of *School Nutrition*, the magazine of the School Nutrition Association (abstract available [online](#))
 - Helped conduct "Digging through the Farm-to-School Resources," a webinar co-hosted by the National Farm to School Network and the USDA Farm to School Team in October 2010 (description and video link available [online](#))
 - Conducted five workshops on farm-to-school efforts at the coalition's conference in Des Moines, Iowa, in October 2009, and three workshops at a farm-to-cafeteria

event in Detroit in May 2010, co-sponsored by the National Farm to School Network and the Center for Food and Justice at Occidental College

- Created and distributed 24 e-mail policy updates on farm-to-school efforts to 2,975 members of the coalition's listserv and 60,000 members of Slow Food USA's listserv
- Attended 19 meetings with the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, and the Child Nutrition Forum of the School Nutrition Association, to share information and coordinate strategies on reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT

Congress reauthorized the Child Nutrition Act, or the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, in December 2010, and requested \$5 million in annual funding for a farm-to-school grant program. The funding will begin in FY 2012 and continue for eight years, unless future legislation reverses that provision.

The program will provide a huge boost to the farm-to-school movement, according to Andy Fisher, the coalition director, who directed this project. The funding "sends a message to food service directors and school administrators that such efforts are USDA approved and not some fringe idea."

Because of the project, food advocacy organizations now also regard farm-to-school programs as a fundamental part of their agenda to improve nutrition, according to Fisher.

RWJF also supported advocacy for Farm to School through a partnership with Pew Charitable Trusts to create the Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods Campaign.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Before spending grant funds, be clear about whether the funders allow lobbying (RWJF does not).** In this project, new lawyers advised a major funder that some planned activities could be considered lobbying. Therefore, "We were not able to do as much outreach as we hoped," Project Director Fisher said.
2. **Clarify staff roles, especially when projects mix policy and communications work.** "We had a minor conflict over which staff should attend the White House meeting. One communications staff person had an "in" with the White House, while another staffer was the lead policy person on the farm-to-school grant program. We had not clarified how their roles would intersect," said Fisher.
3. **If you are lucky enough to have far-flung field support from other organizations, include them in your project.** "We could have communicated more with the regional lead agencies of the National Farm to School Network—each with its own

listserv and advocacy network—regarding how they could participate in the project," observed Fisher. "We underused them."

AFTERWARD

The coalition is developing recommendations on how the USDA can implement the farm-to-school grant program, and continues to work with the White House Let's Move campaign on farm-to-school efforts. The coalition is also continuing to issue policy updates on farm-to-school and related topics for its members and other interested parties.

The coalition is developing a farm-to-school policy platform for the next farm bill—part of a broader effort to gain government support for programs that help regional farmers transport their products to consumers cost-effectively.⁰

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