FoodCorps is a win-win for American children and American farmers

By Karen Van Epen, NCAT Agriculture Specialist

In 2006, NCAT agriculture specialist Crissie McMullan founded the nation’s first FoodCorps as a state-level program in Montana. It has since blossomed into a vibrant movement to improve children’s health and get fresh local produce into school cafeterias.

Building on the success of the Montana project and similar initiatives, several nonprofit organizations banded together in 2009 to create a national FoodCorps, which now has more than 90 service members and fellows working in 12 states.

FoodCorps aims to address an epidemic. If present trends continue, one-third of American children will become diabetic. For minority children, that rate is one in two. One of four children in the United States are hungry.

FoodCorps service members fight these trends by teaching children that fresh, healthy food can be delicious. They cook with students and teachers. They build and tend school gardens that serve as outdoor classrooms for hands-on nutrition education. They locate high-quality local food to bring into public school cafeterias.

Since August 2012, service members have reached more than 60,000 children, created 225 garden projects, harvested 23,000 pounds of produce for kids, and recruited more than 2,500 community volunteers to help with projects.

With strong partnerships between AmeriCorps, local schools, and state-level host organizations such as NCAT, FoodCorps members are able to create meaningful change, often in communities where the need is great, such as schools where more than half of the students qualify for free and reduced-price lunches.

Competition is fierce for FoodCorps positions. Current members were selected from a pool of more than 1,000 applicants. Those selected receive health insurance, student loan forbearance, training, mentorship, a $15,000 living allowance, and a $5,550 Segal AmeriCorps Education Award.

In addition to NCAT, founding partners of FoodCorps are Occidental College, the National Farm to School Network, Slow Food USA, and Wicked Delicate, a documentary and advocacy firm founded by the creators of the film King Corn.

The FoodCorps Vision

We envision a nation of well-nourished children—children who know what healthy food is, how it grows and where it comes from, and who have access to it every day. These children, having grown up in a healthy food environment, will learn better, live longer, and liberate their generation from diet-related disease. We envision a bright future for our Service Members: emerging leaders who, having invested a year of public service creating healthy food environments for children, will go on to become farmers, chefs, educators, and public health leaders. These visionaries, armed with the skills to improve school food, will improve all food.
School Garden Resources
• Agriculture in the Classroom
  www.agclassroom.org
• Alliance for a Healthier Generation
  www.healthiergeneration.org/schools.aspx?id=5513
• American Community Gardening Association
  www.communitygarden.org
• Creating and Sustaining Your School Garden
  www.csgn.org/csysg-trainer
• Edible Schoolyard
  www.edibleschoolyard.org
• Growing School Gardens
  www.edweb.net/schoolgardens
• How to Grow a School Garden: Complete Guide for Parents and Teachers,
  www.timberpress.com
• Kids Gardening
  www.kidsgardening.org
• Life Lab, www.lifelab.org
• The Lunchbox: Healthy Tools to Help All Schools
  www.thelunchbox.org
• Super Kids Nutrition
  www.superkidsnutrition.com
• School Garden Wizard
  http://schoolgardenwizard.org/wizard
• Starting a School Garden
• USDA Team Nutrition
  www.teamnutrition.usda.gov

Farm to School Resources
• National Farm to School Network
  www.farmtoschool.org
• Farm to School Toolkit
  http://toolkit.centerfornutrition.org
• USDA Farm to School
  www.fns.usda.gov/farm-school
• Washington State Farm to School Toolkit
  www.wafarmtoschool.org

Local Food System Resources
• Center for Environmental Farm Systems, www.cefs.ncsu.edu
• The Food Project
  www.thefoodproject.org
• National Good Food Network
  www.ngfn.org

FoodCorps Founders
• National Center for Appropriate Technology, www.ncat.org
• National Farm to School Network
  www.farmtoschool.org
• Slow Food USA
  www.slowfoodusa.org
• Wicked Delicate
  www.wickeddelicate.com

New and Updated ATTRA Publications
• Bringing Local Food to Local Institutions IP242
• Community Orchards IP452
• Plums, Apricots, and their Crosses: Organic and Low-Spray Production IP386
• Keys to Success in Value-Added Agriculture IP172
• Local Food Directories, online only: https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/local_food/search.php
• Marketing Tip Sheets IP394
• New Markets for Your Crops IP328 SP*
• Selling to Restaurants IP425 SP*
• Tips for Selling to Aggregators/Grower Marketing Co-ops IP434 SP*
• Tips for Selling to Institutional Markets IP427 SP*
• Tips for Selling through CSAs: Community Supported Agriculture IP422 SP*
• Tips for Selling to Restaurants IP425 SP*

Great New ATTRA Resource Now Online: www.attra.ncat.org/aasdf

Beginning Farmer Business Planning Toolkit
Extensive and easy-to-understand marketing and business materials for producers of crops, poultry, sheep, and goats

Are you a beginning or immigrant farmer? Want to expand your markets? Interested in adding sheep, goats, or pastured poultry to your operation? Here is a toolkit for you. These written and audio resources will help you develop a simplified business and marketing plan. You’ll find information and worksheets to help you meet your farm goals.

• Find what new farm businesses need to know about record keeping, leases, contracts, taxes, business structures, budgeting, cash flow
• Sheep and goats: production, herd health, breeding, fencing, marketing
• Pastured poultry for eggs or meat: production, processing, regulations
• Recursos en español también: negocios, mercadeo, aves de corral

ATTRA Resources for Farm to School
The following ATTRA publications and resources include useful information for farm to school programs. These resources and many more can be found in the Local Food Systems and Direct Marketing sections of ATTRA’s website, www.attra.ncat.org.
Call 800-346-9140 for a printed copy. Prices vary. Many resources are free. SP* titles are also available in Spanish.

• Adding Value to Farm Products IP141
• Bringing Local Food to Local Institutions IP242
• Community Gardening IP376
• Community Supported Agriculture IP289
• Direct Marketing IP113
• Entertainment Farming and Agri-Tourism IP109
• Food Miles: Background and Marketing IP312
• Illustrated Guide to Growing Safe Produce on Your Farm IP382 SP*
• Keys to Success in Value-Added Agriculture IP172
• Local Food Directories, online only: https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/local_food/search.php
• Marketing Tip Sheets IP394
• New Markets for Your Crops IP328 SP*
• Selling to Restaurants IP255
• Social Media Tools for Farm Product Marketing IP435
• Start a Farm in the City IP350 SP*
• Tips for Selling to Aggregators/Grower Marketing Co-ops IP434 SP*
• Tips for Selling to Institutional Markets IP427 SP*
• Tips for Selling through CSAs: Community Supported Agriculture IP422 SP*
Garden Dreams  By Teena Thompson, FoodCorps Service Member in Rocky Boy, Montana

As recently as 50 years ago, the prospect of having their own school district was a mere dream for the Chippewa-Cree nations on the Rocky Boy Reservation in northeast Montana. However, in 1970 the reservation's petition was finally approved and the school district now serves hundreds of students, mostly Native Americans living on or near the reservation.

Since its inception, Rocky Boy School District has taught reading, writing, and arithmetic and has also helped students understand the sacrifices, hardships, and dreams of our ancestors, to understand what it means to be Chippewa-Cree.

As a FoodCorps member, I work regularly with Rocky Boy School District on nutrition education and school gardens. By helping children plant, grow, and harvest their own food, learning through experience about the land our ancestors knew well, I believe I’m contributing in some small way to this larger mission.

As I walk through the halls of Rocky Boy Elementary, I am warmed by the bright smiles of students eagerly asking when they can begin building our school garden. “Ms. Teena!” A young second grader exclaimed just the other day, “Can we grow vegetables from our garden for our end of the year barbecue?”

Another student eagerly expressed his desire to plant an apple orchard around the garden so he and his family could eat all the apples they wanted and never have to buy one from the store again!

Their enthusiasm is contagious, and I, too, dream big. I dream that the school garden that we build this spring will be a lively hub for the whole community.

I dream that the garden will spark a lifetime of learning that can pass from student to student no matter what time of year. I dream that the food we grow will nourish their minds and fuel a passion that keeps them coming back season after season.

And I dream that every child I serve has a dream, and the seeds and soil and sun to nurture it to life.

Local Beef is What’s for Lunch  By Katie Wheeler, FoodCorps Service Member in Kalispell, Montana

Currently, there’s a movement in Montana to connect K-12 schools with local cattle ranchers. The basic idea is that we live in Montana, a state known for its beef, so why not serve local beef in cafeterias across the state?

In the simplest terms, it makes sense to support local ranchers and get healthier beef into the stomachs of our students.

Here at School District #5 in Kalispell, we’re approaching the one-year anniversary of serving local beef burgers in our cafeterias. We couldn’t be happier.

In the fall of 2011, we looked into making the switch to local beef but couldn’t find a meat processor with the necessary equipment. In March 2012, our Food Service Director asked that I again look into the possibility of switching to local beef.

The first call I made was to a family-owned state-inspected processing facility less than 10 miles away. I learned that they had just purchased a new machine that could form beef patties at the size we needed. With this simple change we could buy Montana beef for our schools.

We exchanged a handful of emails and phone calls and by the end of the next day, we scheduled a box of fresh local beef patties for delivery the following week! One year later we are purchasing 20 cases per week for our 11 schools.

One of the best parts of this story is that no monetary compromises were made. The processors didn’t have to lower their price tag in order to hit our budget, and the schools didn’t have to sacrifice money from a different part of their budget.

What did change is that we now serve exclusively Montana beef burgers that are never frozen. In fact, we’re saving a penny on each patty by purchasing this product locally, which equates to approximately $765 of savings per school year. With this deal, District #5 is putting upwards of $37,000 in the local economy each year!

There are many hurdles to sourcing local food, but FoodCorps is working everyday to build the infrastructure and relationships to get this food into our schools. Local beef in Kalispell schools is a great example of our success. If we continue to put in the hard work, we’ll keep money in our local economy and produce a healthy generation of young eaters.
NCAT Hosts FoodCorps in Montana, Iowa, and Arkansas

NCAT is the host site for FoodCorps service members in Montana, Iowa, and Arkansas. These young people have had terrific success in the schools and communities they serve. Over the summer, they’re continuing to work in the gardens with students. You can follow their activities on their blogs and websites.

Arkansas FoodCorps
- www.facebook.com/FoodCorpsArkansas
- http://arkansasfoodcorps.blogspot.com

Iowa FoodCorps
- http://desmoinesfoodcorps.tumblr.com
- www.facebook.com/FoodCorpsIowa

Montana FoodCorps
- www.montanafoodcorps.org
- www.facebook.com/FoodCorpsMontana

Arkansas FoodCorps service members had a very busy school year. On the left, Sophia Gill leads Holt Middle School students in a cooking lesson. On the right, Allyson Mrachek and two members of her Fayetteville project team welcome USDA Undersecretary Kevin Concannon, second from right, to the Fayetteville School gardens. Ally and her students gave the undersecretary a lively tour of the compost piles they built this spring. Photos: FoodCorps

ATTRAnews

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