

Sun April 20, 2008

Program dishes up healthier students

By Bryan Painter, Staff Writer

Maybe they've seen the fields and the gardens.

Undoubtedly, they've seen the food on a table.

But have Oklahoma students made a connection? And really, why should they?

Oklahoma's Farm to School Initiative is answering that question at more and more schools throughout the state.

Terry Peach, Oklahoma's secretary of agriculture, said, "We're excited about being one of the leading states in bringing locally produced foods to our school lunch programs.

"I believe this is the best tool we have to help fight childhood obesity by altering our children's eating habits."

So The Oklahoman recently did a question-and-answer interview with Chris Kirby, program administrator for the Farm to School program at the state Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry about the past, present and future of the program.

Q: What year did the program originate?

A: The pilot program took place in 2004. The Legislature actually created the program within Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry in 2006.

Since 2001, the Oklahoma Food Policy Council, which includes many key partnerships, has done the following toward making the Oklahoma Farm to School program become reality on a statewide basis with legislative support:

- Created major partnerships including the state Department of Agriculture, Food & Forestry, state Department of Education, Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, state Department of Human Services, state Department of Health, growers, school superintendents,

child nutrition directors, produce distributors, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Defense, Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension, faith-based groups, child-advocacy groups and others.

- A survey was developed and mailed to all state public institutions including school districts, universities, hospitals, parks and prisons. The survey looked at buying habits, interest in purchasing local, what they perceived as barriers to buying local, etc.

The council received a 69 percent response rate, which is a phenomenal return with a mailed survey. That, alone, indicated there was an interest in locally grown and fresher nutritional offerings. An in-depth report was written on the results of the survey and a food connection directory was published.

- Based on the report and the interest, the next step was to do a pilot project to help develop how the program would work logistically and monitor the interest in the program. In 2004, we worked with a local grower and a local distributor to deliver crisp, sweet, locally grown seedless watermelons to four school districts that ranged from small in size to large and included 70 schools.

Along with the delivery of the watermelons, fun hands-on curriculum was developed by Oklahoma's Ag in the Classroom program. Melons were delivered for four weeks to the school districts. The next year, 144 schools in six school districts were included in the pilot program. Once again, the pilot was a smash hit, and many schools were calling to see how they could get involved.

The Farm to School program became a statewide, full-time program of the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry in 2006 with the passage of House Bill 2655, the Oklahoma Farm to School Program Act.

Q: What is the size of the program as of the end of 2007?

A: Four hundred schools in 42 school districts and the University of Oklahoma are participating in the program. There are nine growers/farms participating.

Q: Why has the Farm to School program grown?

A: The demand for fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables is huge, and schools are continually looking for ways to provide healthier offerings to the students. Farm to School provides an excellent resource to help schools achieve their nutritional goals. By having a full-time program administrator, the necessary time and energy have been committed to develop more growers and school connections, along with promotional and educational materials and the hands-on learning activities that can be a part of the program.

Q: What foods are delivered?

A: Any fresh fruit or vegetable that can be grown in Oklahoma, whole wheat flour and products — pizza rounds, cookie dough, all made from whole wheat grown in Oklahoma — cheese and there will be other items as the program grows. The priority right now is fresh fruits and vegetables.

Q: How does the process work? Discuss distribution partners and why they are partners.

A: There are several models of distribution that we will work with, but I will discuss the two main models here.

Under the statewide model, a farmer grows many acres of one produce item and has enough produce to supply most of the schools in the state. But, it would be impossible for the farmer to deliver to each school, so we work with many distribution partners.

That meant building partnerships with produce and food service companies in a very short period of time and asking them to participate in a program they were not familiar with and asking them to do things that they had not done before.

We wanted to tie in with the normal deliveries the food companies were taking to the schools to be more efficient and keep costs to the schools down. I was very proud of the many companies that stepped up and decided to be a major community partner in helping students get access to

fresh, locally grown produce.

Under the other model, a local farmer within a community grows and delivers produce directly to the schools. The school is able to get a more diverse palette of produce, and the relationship of the farmer and school has additional positive attributes that are social, environmental and economical.

Q: How do you determine what producers supply to what schools?

A: Right now, the demand for fresh, locally grown produce through farmers markets, food coops, Community Supported Agriculture, restaurants, schools and others is so great. There are 540 school districts in the state. As farmers decide to participate in the program, we will be able to match them to the distribution model that fits their farming operation. The schools get very excited when there is a farmer in their area that will grow for their school. As far as what produce is supplied, the schools and the farmers discuss what they would like to have grown, how much, pricing and when it will be available.

On the statewide program, we plan to have seedless watermelons, cantaloupe and honeydew melons available the first eight weeks of school in fall 2008. The school districts participating in the Farm to School program can order and the produce will be delivered to them through their food service company.

Q: You have many different goals with this program. First, why do you have the goal of using Oklahoma produce?

A: First, it's fresher. It's vine-ripened and it tastes much better than a produce item that is picked green, shipped 1,500 miles and takes many days to get on the plate. Second, it's social. Do you know who grows your food? Our students will know through the program. Third, it's environmental. On average, food travels 1,500 miles before it reaches your plate.

With Farm to School, food can travel as little as a few miles or as much as 350 miles. This impacts fuel, refrigeration etc. Containers can be cleaned and re-used. Fourth, it's economical. You are keeping your dollars within your community and your state is spending a lot less in transportation.

Q: You have the goal of providing these foods to Oklahoma children. Why?

A: Only 15 percent of our students are getting the recommended five servings of fresh fruits and vegetables a day. We need to make those foods accessible and make sure they taste great.

Q: Is it a goal to teach children about the importance of agriculture?

A: Yes, this is a major goal. Our children have gotten disconnected from where their food comes from. We want to help them see that connection again through hands-on learning activities such as school gardens, farm and farmers market visits, indoor learning labs where they grow food in the classroom, educational and nutritional curriculum. We are working very closely with Ag in the Classroom and partnering in many activities.

Q: What difference has the program made already?

A: It has added a lot of excitement to eating more fruits and vegetables and makes them accessible to the schools.

Q: What difference can it make that we haven't seen yet?

A: The program is not in all 540 school districts yet.

The hands-on learning component will continue to result in increased consumption.

We will truly see the many positive results of the program as we have more gardens in the schools; entrepreneurial farms for high school students and science credit; grants for farm field trips; grants for more fruit, vegetable and healthy local product purchases.

Knowledge of nutrition, taste, identification, access, who grows it, how is it grown will increase.

The difference that it can make in our farming community is economical and a way for communities to connect back to their agriculture roots.
