

Healthier Meals, Healthier Income?

Serving locally grown food is gaining support in schools, but these farmers say there's a lot of work to do before you can punch your lunch ticket. **BY CLAIRE VATH**

When Larry Reiling was growing up in the 1960s, he remembers hot school lunches in the cafeteria.

But as his children have grown, the Iowa farmer has watched the evolution of cafeteria lunches. "Most school lunches are heat-and-serve these days," he concedes.

But concern over childhood obesity—and health problems associated from being overweight—is a hot topic on Capitol Hill. One solution being pushed by some lawmakers is to provide students with a more nutritious school lunch using farm-fresh products.

That's where Reiling comes in.

The Clermont, Iowa, farmer, who farms with his son-in-law, has joined forces with other area farmers to provide local food to area schools.

In the 1970s, the fourth-generation farmer began by renting small plots of land, growing conventional corn and beans. Today Reiling spends his days working his grass-fed cattle and checking the pigs and the farm's potato and onion crops.

Reiling's story isn't all that unique when you look at the growing number of farmers that have stepped up in the past decade to provide farm-fresh products—whether it's beef, poultry and pork, or fruits and vegetables—to nourish the nation's students.

There are hard numbers to back up the arguments for schoolchildren to have freshly grown food options on their plates. But data on whether this market can generate enough additional income for producers isn't as cut and dry.

"It's sometimes difficult to get income data from farmers," says Debra Eschmeyer, of One Tray, an organization that pushes for USDA funding for farm-to-school programs. She estimates that selling to schools can add 5 to 10% to a farm's income, depending on the locale, the school and how much the farm is involved. **IN FOOD'S DEFENSE.** The name and concept of "farm to school" is itself



Today's heat-and-serve school lunches look a lot different than their 1950s counterparts.

a paradox. But with today's students so far removed from the farm, this is what it's come down to: getting farmers and schools more involved in the food they produce and eat.

In 1997 there were only six farm-to-school programs in the United States, says Eschmeyer. Today, "the programs total well over 2,000 in the nation as the need for healthier school lunches and meals is being addressed in Congress."

But the school lunch debate is nothing new. The National School Lunch Program was signed into legislation by President Harry Truman in 1946 as a national defense strategy.

Post-World Wars I and II, many of the nation's soldiers were deemed unfit to serve due to malnutrition. The lunch program sought to nourish future generations of troops at school so they could one day protect and serve the country.

Then, in 1966, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Child Nutrition Act to expand the reach of federal school meal programs. The act requires reapproval every five years.

Last year's renewal was delayed, explains Eschmeyer, "because of health care, jobs and the climate bill."

The irony is that today's "future troops" are overweight—furthering the health care crisis—and school lunches hardly look like they did in the 1950s.

Sixty years ago, a typical school menu consisted of a meat, vegetable, fruit, milk and sometimes a small dessert. Beginning in the 1980s, when enrollment numbers climbed exponentially, lunches looked more like USDA surplus foods processed into pizza, nuggets, burgers and fries—with a soft drink on the side.

Today, of the 31 million students who eat school meals, roughly one in three is obese and will develop type 2 diabetes in his lifetime, says the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

To add to the problem, cafeteria

school directors are tasked with the challenge of creating meals for roughly \$1 a serving while operating in the black. Thus, heat-and-serve nutritional meals just aren't in the cards.

But thanks to some forward-thinking parents in the early '90s who watched the unhealthy lunch trends unfold, grassroots programs sprung up, pairing farmers with schools to offer healthier options.

HUNGRY FOR FUNDING. In 2004, a farm-to-school grant program was authorized in the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act. But no money was attached to the program and it never received funding.

That's why right now, One Tray—a campaign composed of grassroots food groups—is asking USDA for \$50 million over five years to help jump-start the program by educating farmers, food service directors and getting adequate cafeteria facilities. Recently, a USDA farm-to-school tactical team was formed, which Eschmeyer sees as a plus. "These programs take an initial infusion of funds and then they're able to run on their own," she explains.

PRODUCER PAYOFF? According to One Tray, as the number of family farms dwindles, the organization believes farm-to-school programs are a viable option for supplementing income. But, "today's family farmer doesn't have very good access to the market," says Eschmeyer.

However, One Tray estimates that were these programs given national funding to open up the school food market, there's a \$12 billion revenue potential. And, for every dollar spent on local foods in schools, one to three dollars would circulate in the local economy.

Iowa's Reiling isn't seeing the monetary payoff just yet though. "We've delivered food to nine schools in a 25- to 30-mile range," he says. "Right now, we're not making any

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money on this,” he adds, explaining that the amount of time it takes to harvest and process and get product to the schools in a timely manner is a real challenge.

Grown Locally, the group of Iowa farmers Reiling has joined, offers schools and other institutions everything from meat and eggs to fresh fruits and vegetables. Reiling himself provides beef, pork products, potatoes and onions.

Grown Locally began in 2000 and has increased its offerings exponentially since. School food directors and others can log on to the group’s Web site to see what’s available when (www.grownlocally.com).

But, Reiling says, farm-to-school programs are going to take time to establish, both from the schools’ end and the farmers’. “The goal is to find a way to get the product to the schools for about 10 to 12% of the sale, and farmers aren’t there yet,” he says. “I think a lot of farmers are interested in this type of thing, but they’re scared to make a change; it’s a huge change for a conventional no-till farmer.”

Another challenge, Reiling adds, is that the schools have been a difficult nut to crack. School lunch workers in the 1950s were trained to actually cook the food. Today’s food-service workers generally just heat up frozen goods. And with a lack of adequate kitchen equipment, cafeterias have largely turned into a heat-and-serve business.

Oklahoma has had success with its program, but director Chris Kirby

agrees with Reiling that the programs are not without challenges.

She points to one farm family who grows commodity crops and fruit on the side. “I have talked to them about farm to school,” she says, “but it goes back to supply and demand, and distribution—too much demand, not enough supply. And distribution on their scale would need to go through a distributor,” she explains.

She cites several other successful farming operations that aren’t involved in school programs for a number of reasons: the growing season doesn’t coincide with the school year, better prices selling at retail value, logistics of getting food to the school, etc.

But while the monetary payoff may not have come to fruition just yet, there is another benefit that some farmers are seeing: good public relations.

Paul Allen is a third-generation farmer who, with his partner Roger Hatton, farms 13,000 acres in Pahokee, Fla. Three years ago, he saw a market opportunity that hadn’t been hit on by area farmers: schools. Since they have the processing capabilities, R.C. Hatton Farms is able to serve schools in six or seven different counties with corn and bean offerings, increasing income by an estimated 3%.

“Most of our product is an open market where supply-and-demand marketing fluctuates,” he says. “Contracts with the schools add stability so we can better budget.”

But with an operation so large, the benefit is hardly monetary. “I wouldn’t be doing this if it weren’t profitable,” Allen laughs, “but it’s stability. It’s certainly not a get-rich thing. And there is competition.”

Still, Allen likes the idea that schoolchildren are eating foods that have been harvested a day or two prior. “If the kids start off early learning about where food comes from, we’ll end up with a healthier country,” he says, “and they’ll be supporting the farmers who feed this nation.” ●



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Larry Reiling



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