

STORIES *from the* FIELD

FRESH IDEAS AT WORK | 5 GRANTEE EXPERIENCES



PENNSYLVANIA
FARM TO SCHOOL
NETWORK

INTRODUCTION

Farm to School connects children to local agriculture through:

PROCUREMENT: Using locally grown foods in meals, snacks and Child Nutrition Programs like the National School Lunch Program. Our network uses the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as our definition of local. While this is the network's definition of local, the network acknowledges that schools, child care centers and summer programs have their own definitions of local.

SCHOOL GARDENS: Helping educators and students grow their own food.

HANDS-ON LEARNING: Providing experiential education through farm field trips, cooking in the classroom and more.

In Pennsylvania, farm to school is supported by the Pennsylvania Farm to School Network, a collaborative that works to advance farm to school strategies and policies across the commonwealth. By bringing together state agencies, nonprofit organizations, higher education institutions, educators and school food service professionals, the network seeks to leverage and build upon our collective resources to cultivate farm to school and farm to early care and education (farm to ECE) initiatives that:

- **create opportunities** for all children across the state to grow, learn about and enjoy eating Pennsylvania foods;
- **increase market opportunities** for Pennsylvania producers; and
- **connect growers, schools, ECE sites and community members** around food

The network is in full support of the Pennsylvania Farm to School Grant Program, which closely aligns with these goals. The program was introduced as part of the Pennsylvania Farm Bill, a historic suite of legislation created to advance Pennsylvania agriculture. Since its inception, the grant program has funded more than 130 projects from Philadelphia to Erie and many places in between. These case studies highlight the stories of five grantees and illustrate the importance of the program.

Educators, food service professionals, administrators and community members should feel welcome to borrow ideas from the grantees to start projects at their own schools and preschools.



LAWRENCE COUNTY COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP

Creating a comprehensive farm to school program that touches the lives of preschool children, teenagers, caregivers and community members is no easy feat; but providing extensive community services that improve residents' lives is at the heart of what the Lawrence County Community Action Partnership (LCCAP) does every day. Wide-ranging services offered by the Western Pennsylvania-based agency include early learning programs such as Head Start, meal programs such as the Summer Food Service Program, and enrichment programs for at-risk youth.

Kristin Green, LCCAP's Community Supports Coordinator, and her team have been able to weave nutrition and agriculture education elements into these programs by leveraging community assets and various funding sources. LCCAP's farm to school work began years ago, when the agency created a hydroponics program at a drop-in center for at-risk youth. The older teens who were part of the program enjoyed learning to grow and harvest produce so much that LCCAP greatly expanded its hydroponics capacity and rehabilitated a greenhouse.

From there, a demonstration kitchen was built to provide ECE families with information and resources around nutrition, cooking and local agriculture. Furthermore, Kristin and her team have incorporated produce grown on site into the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) meals that are served to preschoolers. They began with lettuces and have expanded to include popular items like cucumbers and strawberries. Because LCCAP is able to produce high-quality fruits and vegetables on-site, children and families have access to fresh, healthy foods even in the midst of a pandemic that is disrupting broader supply chains.

And the children aren't just eating nutritious foods, they are also immersed in experiential learning in outdoor vegetable gardens. Thanks in part to the Pennsylvania Farm to School Grant Program, LCCAP has been able to maintain and expand this work. In August 2021, families came together for the inaugural Agriculture Learning Day. Community members and children got to see and experience farm to school in action firsthand. Every family planted a tomato to take home. Families also had an opportunity to "Meet the Farmer," a 12-year-old boy involved in 4-H, who raised the animals to make the sausage sandwiches that were served at the event.

Kristin's best advice to others looking to implement similar activities is to start small and build over time. This step-wise approach has served LCCAP well as it has been able to sustain what's worked and integrate it into operations. However, without funding from programs like the Pennsylvania Farm to School Grant Program that provide opportunities to communities to innovate and try new things, this work would not be possible. Says Kristin, "the community and students need to know where their food comes from, what community resources exist and how to prepare nutritious meals — this is critical for the physical and mental well-being of community members at every stage of life." The Pennsylvania Farm to School Grant Program has been important in helping LCCAP accomplish its goals.

- Learn more about the Pennsylvania Farm to School Network at www.pafarmtoschool.org.



DIOCESE OF SCRANTON

Many schools and childcare sites developed creative solutions to increase food access during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sandra Snyder, Director of Foundation Relations and Special Events with the Diocese of Scranton, wanted to provide families with a meal kit service. Utilizing funds from the Pennsylvania Farm to School Grant Program, Sandra and her team expanded the garden at their Catholic Youth Center and creatively addressed food access challenges.

The Diocese of Scranton's ECE program had already made strides around staff education, the learning environment, leadership and management, and family and community partnerships. Sandra and her team wanted to build on this foundation to create a program that addressed food access challenges during the pandemic. The project launched on June 30 with a restaurant industry partner who asked local chefs to develop basic recipes. The main goal was to provide families with enough pre-portioned ingredients to make a nourishing, enjoyable meal together at home and encourage parents and children to dine together more regularly. Other goals were to provide a sense of food parity while combating food insecurity and to increase both children's and parents' knowledge of nutrition, food and farm sourcing and healthy dining.

Meal kits were developed in partnership with Rowland's Pennsylvania Produce and Hillside Farms, which were then sent home to preschool families every two weeks from the Catholic Youth Center. The center operates a before- and after-school program, 24-hour daycare, and preschool. The meal kits included kid-friendly activities emphasizing family engagement, recipe cards and nutrition tips. The center also has a small garden, which Sandra is hoping to expand to supply ingredients for future meal kits and cooking in the classroom activities.

The families who received the kits were very enthusiastic about the project, and without funding sources like the Pennsylvania Farm to School Grant Program, it wouldn't be possible to continue this work. Sandra emphasized the importance of these types of programs: "When you get the opportunity to do something like this, it's so special. Introducing kids to fresh produce and recipes that they might have never seen or tried before is so wonderful — just to see how they react and how excited they are to learn more. Also expanding their knowledge and experience with things like farm field trips to see where their food comes from and how it's made is really important." Sandra and her colleagues with the Diocese of Scranton are determined to continue this important project.

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METHODIST SERVICES

Kathrine Martin, Executive Director at Methodist Services in Philadelphia, is no stranger to the enriching experience that food and agriculture programs can provide. Methodist Services is dedicated to providing housing, family services, early childhood education and food programming. Heritage Farm, located on Methodist's campus, is a revitalization of 3 acres that supports the growth of vegetables, flowers, berries, an orchard and a greenhouse. Residents and students at the site are active in the growing process, and before the pandemic, the farm was able to sell produce to restaurants in the city.

The Pennsylvania Farm to School Grant Program was able to help Kathrine and her team pivot during the pandemic, when these restaurants closed down and production at the farm slowed. The grant supported a part-time farmer and supplies for one of the outdoor classrooms at the site, which has a teaching garden. In addition to agricultural education, Methodist's cooking program "Kids in the Kitchen" uses farm-grown produce to teach students and their families cooking skills at their new teaching kitchen, which was donated by a board member. Farm-grown produce is also used in the site's Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) meals. CACFP is the federal child nutrition program that supports food service operations at preschools and ECE sites.

Kathrine has been able to expand by hiring a full-time farmer who has extensive early childhood education experience. The goal is to have farmers and teachers working together to co-create programming with students to emphasize the importance of knowing how to grow one's own food and seeing agriculture as a viable career path. Kathrine emphasized the positive impact that incorporating farm to school has had: "We want to demonstrate to the kids that farming is a career option. One of our prior students ended up going into the farming industry because of his experience with our farm, so it's not just the food connection, but it's also job training and STEM education." Inspiring projects like those happening on Methodist Services' campus need funding and support from programs like the Pennsylvania Farm to School Grant Program in order to continue their important work year after year.

- Learn more about the Pennsylvania Farm to School Network at www.pafarmtoschool.org.



PENNRIDGE SCHOOL DISTRICT

Gina Giarratana has long been a proponent of incorporating farm to school programming into Pennridge School District's sites. As the Director of Nutritional Services at Pennridge and Food Service Director of Upper Bucks County tech school, Gina is "a firm believer in trying to give our students the freshest food possible, and what better way to do that than by utilizing school gardens? Students get to learn where their food comes from and be part of the entire process from planting, tending, harvesting and seeing the product in their school cafeteria."

Originally, there were three school gardens across Pennridge's 11 sites, but things slowed down as a result of the pandemic. When school is in session, students are involved with the garden through curriculum connections or afterschool clubs. Funding from the Pennsylvania Farm to School Grant Program helped Gina and her team revitalize one of the gardens at West Rockhill Elementary, which was originally started in 2015. Grade 3-5 students in life skills classes tended the garden as part of their lesson plans, and there was a local newspaper highlight written about them and the garden's harvest.

High school student volunteers helped take care of the garden once per week by weeding, watering and harvesting. Some of the produce was also used to supplement meals for Pennridge's summer camp program. Additional produce like kale and tomatoes were frozen and used for spaghetti sauce and other recipes at the start of this school year. The cafeteria manager includes signage when serving produce from the garden, which always gets a positive reception from students and staff.

The positive feedback has inspired plans for further programming and even a new cafeteria position. The Assistant Director of Food Production will be tasked with utilizing more fresh ingredients and providing training for staff about cooking with fresh produce. There are also plans to partner with local farms, especially now that Pennridge has been awarded the Harvest of the Month recipe grant and chosen cabbage to highlight in its cafeteria. As for the gardens, West Rockhill is still running and Gina hopes to have all three ready for this upcoming spring.

The Pennsylvania Farm to School Grant Program has helped Pennridge to set many exciting projects in motion. Gina explains that funding like this can make a huge difference: "It's important to connect the classroom and the outdoors and the cafeteria — bringing it full circle for students to be able to see the entire process. Putting a seed in the ground, nurturing it, watching it grow, and in x amount of time they can get a food product to sustain them. It's such an amazing teaching tool and is critical for the health and wellness of our young people growing up. That's one of the biggest things that I've taken away from getting these grants; the teaching aspect of it is just so impactful." Gina and her staff enjoy seeing the positive results and are excited for future programming.

- ▶ Learn more about the Pennsylvania Farm to School Network at www.pafarmtoschool.org.



USCRI ERIE

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) provides vital services for newcomers to the United States. Dylanna Grasinger is the Executive Director of the field office in Erie, and like many others was challenged to pivot programming during the pandemic. One of the programs that Dylanna oversees comes from the office of refugee resettlement, which includes childcare centers for refugee and immigrant children. The Pennsylvania Farm to School Grant Program was a natural fit to help Dylanna and her team utilize more outdoor space and expand their community garden.

The aim was for the garden to provide a designated safe space for children to grow food and incorporate outdoor experiential learning into curriculums. There are also beehives and composters. Funding programs like the

Pennsylvania Farm to School Grant Program have helped Dylanna and her team expand the community garden to include farm to ECE activities and incorporate their fresh produce into classrooms. Dylanna explained the impact of these grant programs: "They create connections for the children to the land and people like farmers. We also want to show the children a diverse array of careers, and farming is important to Erie. It's sometimes overlooked as a career, and we want to introduce the children to a diverse array of skills. It's also familiar to a lot of these families."

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CONTACT INFORMATION

For those interested in implementing farm to school in their communities, resources, technical assistance and connections are always available at www.pafarmtoschool.org.

State legislators and decision makers who would like to learn more about farm to school or arrange a site visit may contact pafarmtoschool@thefoodtrust.org.



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