

MONTANA REGIONAL FARM TO SCHOOL GUIDE: A Story of Growing Farm to School in Two Communities



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Introduction

Thank you for your interest in farm to school! We are excited to share our lessons learned from our regional farm to school pilot project that was funded by the USDA Farm to School grant program. We hope you find our story inspiring and the resources useful. You will see that we have highlighted our "Lessons Learned" which were provided by the people who worked on these projects. We also have included "Bright Ideas," which are suggestions of easily replicable projects or approaches that you can try in your school or community while starting or growing your farm to school program. We tried to include suggestions and ideas that don't necessarily require the support of a specific grant, program or funds, although we were fortunate to have the support of the USDA Farm to School grant program for the two and a half years of this project.

Thanks to our Partners

National Center for Appropriate Technology in partnership with the Butte School District and Boulder School District with the support of the USDA Farm to School Grant Program.

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The National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT)

is headquartered in Butte, MT. The mission of NCAT is to help people by championing small-scale, local, and sustainable solutions to reduce poverty, promote healthy communities, and protect natural resources. NCAT serves as the Montana host site for FoodCorps, which is a nationwide team of AmeriCorps leaders who connect kids to real food and help them grow up healthy. The partnership between NCAT and FoodCorps was a natural starting point for farm to school efforts in these two towns.

In 2013, NCAT applied for and received a USDA Farm to School grant to pilot a regional farm to school project in Butte and its neighboring town of Boulder. These two communities shared resources and came together for trainings, as well as provided an opportunity to learn about and contrast specific challenges in farm to school based on size and location. Butte has just under 35,000 people and is located on two major highways, with a school district comprised of six elementary schools all served by one central food service program. Boulder has under 1,500 people living there and has one elementary school with its own kitchen and food service staff. Over the course of the project, NCAT staff worked closely with stakeholders and leaders in these two communities to start farm to school work in the case of Butte, and to support the farm to school work already going on in Boulder. Read on for the story of growing farm to school in these two communities, a summary of our biggest successes, and access to the resources we created for your use.



A second grade girl explained how Montana Crunch Time worked to five senior football players when they came to the elementary school for a lunch featuring local apples.

Getting Started

The story of farm to school in Butte and Boulder is just an example, and there are many excellent guides with plenty of technical assistance and information for planning out your farm to school work. For a more detailed guide, check out the USDA Farm to School Planning Kit at fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/f2s/F2S_Planning_Kit.pdf.

Here is an overview of how Butte and Boulder set about making some plans and progress for farm to school improvements with our **Lessons Learned** and favorite **Bright Ideas** included.

1. Assemble a Team

The first step that we took to start working on our farm to school goals was to assemble a team of community and school stakeholders. We learned that this step is an essential first step, but that it is also an ongoing effort. Over two years into our projects, we are still recruiting people to join the team, as parents learn about what we are doing or a teacher shows interest in utilizing the school garden. Our communities found that the team is so important to the success and sustainability of farm to school efforts, as one person cannot (and need not!) make all the changes desired. Based on the size of your community, you may want to have a city-wide farm to school committee that works with multiple schools, or you may want to focus on one school.

2. Create a Vision Statement and Action Plan

Initial meetings brought in teachers, parents, interested community members, and the school food service directors to the table. Participants created a shared vision for what the farm to school committee should be trying to accomplish and some goals to start working on. Both the Vision Statement and the Action Plans proved to be helpful throughout the course of the two years for reference, inspiration, and direction when energy waned or we wanted to remember why we were doing what we were doing.

Lesson Learned:

"It is really imperative for the committee to have members of all roles, teachers, program directors, garden coordinators, farmers."

— Butte Farm to School Committee member

Bright Idea: Recruit!

1. Put an ad in the paper for interested people to come to an open meeting
2. Reach out to individual teachers and school staff who may be interested
3. Attend a PTO meeting to recruit parents
4. Visit the local farmer's market to recruit area growers
5. Set up a meeting with the principal or food service director and cafeteria staff to invite their participation and support

Butte Farm to School Vision Statement

"We believe in connecting our school community to healthy foods and their origins. We envision a school district in which students, parents, and community members participate in nutrition and food system education and have opportunities to learn in school gardens and on food-related field trips. We believe in offering healthy, local foods in our cafeterias and increasing the consistent availability of such products by creating demand and foodservice staff involvement. We believe that no child should go hungry and that low-income families in our community should have access to healthy food."

3. Set Your Focus

Both communities chose to classify their goals into focus areas. Examples of these focus areas are Classroom, Garden, Cafeteria or Community. (Highlights from some of our focus areas are in the next section.) We invited people to join small working groups around each focus area to start working on the goals created during initial farm to school meetings. Here are few ideas for goals in these categories:

- **Classroom**

- Increasing the number of nutrition lessons or lessons about a locally-grown or seasonal food in the school
- Taking students on a field trip to a farm or ranch
- Conducting a cooking class with elementary school students with the help of middle or high school students

- **Garden**

- Building a new school garden
- Creating an after-school garden club
- Assigning a grade level to each garden bed and offering instruction to teachers on how to use the garden with their class are some garden goals.

- **Bright Idea:
Help with Lessons!**

- Classroom lessons can be done by the classroom teacher, a parent or grandparent volunteer, a visiting farmer or rancher, or you maybe a SNAP educator or Extension agent. In the **Resources** section, you will find access to lessons on a Montana food for ten months of the year as part of the Harvest of the Month program for elementary students.



Lesson Learned:

The Boulder school had great support from a community group that focuses on healthy living for garden support and beyond. "They are community members who are passionate about healthy living. It makes a difference that not everything falls to the school staff. We have regular volunteers; they have been great about expanding outside of just kids. They have done classes on baking and fermentation and target towards students' parents as well to give the whole community the same tools."

• Cafeteria

- Better signage for the lunch room.
- More local food items purchased or more scratch cooking items on menu.
- Changing names of some of the menu items to sound more appealing.
- Recruiting help from the Montana Team Nutrition or OPI Nutrition Specialists on restructuring the lunch menu to feature more healthy or local food items.



"Our salad bar is a hit! Kids are eating better." —Superintendent and Principal of Boulder Elementary School Maria Pace, shown here by the school salad bar.

• Community

This focus area captures any other goals, such as increasing awareness of farm to school work through press releases, getting farm to school on the Wellness Policy, and raising parental awareness through events such as "Bring Your Parents to Lunch Day" or a Montana Made meal event.



Bright Idea: Promote Local Food!

In the **Resources** section, you will find how to access free posters to use in your school cafeteria to promote local food items as part of the Montana Harvest of the Month program.

Lesson Learned:

Butte found that four groups were too many for the number of people we had involved in farm to school work, so we did not establish a working group or on-going goals for this focus area. Rather, we tried to involve the community within the other goals. For example, we found that the hospital turned out to be a good partner for farm to school; we involved a nurse and diabetes educator in our Classroom group, and invited a pediatrician to present on childhood obesity and disease to the whole group.

Bright Idea: Staying Power

When making goals, keep an eye towards changes that will last and help create a healthy school environment. Here is an example from Boulder of how they worked to make lasting change: "Farm to school has been built into culture. There are implied expectations and expressed expectations. We changed the job descriptions of the cafeteria staff to include scratch cooking and local sourcing. We built farm to school into job descriptions and school handbook so regardless of who comes along, it will stay."

4. Recruit Leaders and Delegate Tasks

Subsequent meetings focused on creating an Action Plan (see below in **Resources** section for an example) to come up with goals for each community, based on what members of the committees wanted. We broke the goals up into focus areas and invited people to choose an area to work on that they were most excited about or connected to. We recruited leaders to head up each of the goal areas, which was helpful so that all of the work did not fall onto one person. It also helped tap into the expertise of the committee members; for example the food service directors worked on the Cafeteria goals in both communities, and we asked teachers to participate on the Classroom committee.



5. Get to Work!

Once we had people committed to making positive change in the schools and identified some goals and leaders, we got to work on making things happen! Both communities had the support of a Food-Corps service member who could dedicate time and effort into leading some of the activities, such as classroom and garden lessons. However, many of our successes were thanks to school staff and community members bringing their creativity, time, energy to the table to try new activities and make changes in the school menu or cafeteria. (See the **Highlights** section for some favorite accomplishments!)

Lesson Learned:

"Make sure that you have volunteers who are prepared to commit to actual hours—possibly by holding multiple meetings leading up to any actual activities to find out who is dedicated."
—Butte Farm to School Committee member

Bright Idea: Start Small

If your group is small and funds are limited, pick one focus area or one goal for the year instead of trying to pick goals for all areas. One of our committee members recommended to "Start small at first; most things are a marathon and not a sprint." We found that accomplishing small goals and celebrating that success helped create momentum and excitement with volunteers. One member commented that "Long term change is very difficult. Getting committee members from all areas is challenging." We found that working on goals in areas where we had champions and invested people led to more progress.



Lesson Learned:

Once we set our goals, we found how important it was to have good support in the schools. As one Butte committee member stated, key ingredients for success were "Administration and board buy-in. Food service personnel support," while another recommended "Make sure key community people are involved."

6. Assess and Evaluate Progress

One of the ways we kept ourselves accountable was by meeting with the large group every other month and making time for "Updates and Successes" from each group. At the end of each school year, we also took time to review the successes over the last school year and then talked about what goals made sense to keep working on, which ones had been accomplished, what needed to be changed or let go, and what new areas for improvement we had identified.

7. Celebrate Success!

We found that it was really important and motivating to take time at meetings to review successes, such as recruiting a new volunteer, having parents and families come to a garden work day, or serving a new item on the lunch line. We shared success stories in meetings (small and large) and in email communications with pictures. At the end of each school year, we also held a gathering to share food and celebrate the progress we had made that school year, which was a nice way to go into the summer.



The Butte Farm to School Committee one year into the project: thumb's up for successes so far!

Lesson Learned:

While we did a good job of celebrating successes within our groups and schools, we would like to work more on sharing those successes with the broader community moving forward. One committee member suggested "Communicate more with parents at the beginning. More PR-get the word out about what we are doing! Maybe have a sub-committee for communications." Another recommendation? "Take lots of pictures along the way!"

Lesson Learned:

The Butte and Boulder Farm to School Committees found that it was not the best use of time to have everyone gather each month as originally anticipated, as the working groups had little time to divvy up tasks for their goals and projects. The group decided to all meet together every other month instead, with the focus of sharing updates and hearing from a guest speaker. The alternating months were set aside to meet in small working groups to focus on steps needed to accomplish the goals of each focus area.

Bright Idea: Keep Recruiting!

While assembling the team may be a first step, we tried to keep recruiting and assembling a stronger and bigger team the entire length of the project. As one person put it: "Takes time. People may come and go, so keep recruiting other members."



Members of the Butte Farm to School Committee handing out candy alternatives at a Halloween event. We also brought a sign-up sheet for the Farm to School Committee and a donation jar for the school gardens.

Cafeteria

• Staff trainings



The staff from Butte and Boulder school kitchens participated in yearly skills trainings to help with some of the new recipes and foods being added to the menus.

• Harvest of the Month pilot site



One of our goals for this project was to work on creating farm to school materials and resources for other communities in Montana to be able to use. Materials for the Cafeteria, Classroom and to send home are available for FREE. See the [Resources](#) section for how to access all of the Montana Harvest of the Month lessons, recipes, and promotional posters.

• Special Event Meals



Bring in the celebrities! We held "Lunch with the Bulldogs" events where high school students ate lunch with the elementary kids. As one member of the Butte High School volleyball team said, "The kids look up to us, so what we do kind of makes them want to do it too. If we eat the salad maybe they'll think that they should eat it too!" The younger students learn about healthy eating from someone they admire and it provides a mentorship opportunity for the older students.

Bright Idea: Ask for Assistance!

Recruit a local chef, cooking teacher or someone else to prepare some new recipes with the school kitchen staff, or contact **Montana Team Nutrition** about doing some work with your staff on preparing fresh, healthy foods or improving your lunchroom environment.

Bright Idea: Repeat Exposure!

The combination of education, taste tests, promotional activities and repeated exposure to new foods through the Montana Harvest of the Month program has led to great success in growing and starting farm to school programming across the state. We are excited to share the program with new schools.



Garden

- **New School Garden and increased participation in existing gardens**



Volunteers, students, and school staff move donated soil into the newly built garden beds at West Elementary

- **Garden Resources for Teachers**



*Teachers learn about garden lessons and maintenance as part of the School Garden 101 class held at NCAT with help from our Extension Office. We also created a "Garden Guide for Butte Schools" as part of the Garden group's goal of more resources for teachers. (See the **Resources** section for this garden guide, which includes ideas for funding!)*

- **Garden Produce in the Boulder Cafeteria**



"Letting kids pick and harvest things in the garden that they bring home or then see in the cafeteria is huge. It shares the passion for gardening with the kids" —Superintendent Maria Pace



*"Kids are excited about healthy eating stuff that comes out of our garden. I have had kids who don't eat as much off the salad bar unless they helped harvest it in the afterschool program."
—Boulder FoodCorps service member*

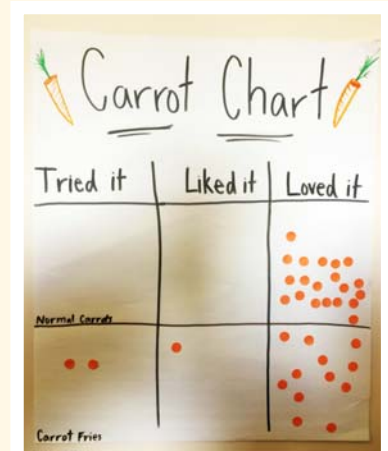
Classroom

- Harvest of the Month lessons in schools



Middle school students make beet hummus to try with garden carrots!

- Regular Taste Tests of New Foods



Both communities held regular taste tests of new foods with students, using a "Tried it, Liked It, Loved It" scale to find student approval and tie the food lessons with other skills, such as graphing.

- Harvest of the Month Cooking Classes with High School Students



Butte High School Culinary Arts students hosted various elementary school classes to cook a recipe featuring the Harvest of the Month item, such as squash pancakes and carrot muffins. The kids loved the field trips and the recipes. "I could eat this for the rest of my life!" said elementary student.

Resources

Harvest of the Month materials: NCAT worked very closely with the Office of Public Instruction, Montana Team Nutrition program, and other state partners to develop and pilot a “Montana Harvest of the Month” program for K-12 schools across the state. We are pleased that any school or after-school program can register to receive resources for ten months of farm to school programming. The Montana Harvest of the Month program provides each school with a poster for the cafeteria featuring the food of the month, a handout for educators with lessons, recipes, and fun facts about the local food, and a handout for cafeteria staff with recipes and tips on serving the food. There is also a handout for kids to take home, again full of tips, facts, and recipes for home for the Harvest of the Month item. To receive these materials and how to use them, please register for the Montana Harvest of the Month program at montana.edu/mtharvestofthemoth

Training Videos on Local Food Procurement: You can find information on buying local food from a training we held for producers as part of this farm to school grant. farmtocafeteria.ncat.org/2014/08/29/entering-the-institutional-market

Farm to Institution Webinar: Another Montana specific resource, this webinar covers considerations for selling to institutional markets. It can be found on the *Resources* page of the Farm to Cafeteria Network: farmtocafeteria.ncat.org/resources or viewed on youtube at youtube.com/watch?v=41b1_GFx0jl.

Garden Guide for Butte Schools: The Butte Garden group created a short Garden Guide that outlines the process for starting a school garden in Montana. It could be found as a PDF [here](#).

Action Plan examples: View the Action Plans from Butte and Boulder [here](#).

For more resources, guidelines, and information on Farm to School and Farm to Cafeteria, please visit the NCAT Farm to Cafeteria website at farmtocafeteria.ncat.org and the Montana Farm to School website at montana.edu/mtfarmtoschool.



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