

USDA Farm to School Team Site Visit: Independence Community School District in Independence, Iowa

What is this “Farm to School thing” all about? That is the question the Independence Community School District, and its many partners, have enthusiastically set out to answer.

On May 4–5, 2010, the USDA Farm to School Team visited with school administrators, farmers, teachers, and community partners at Independence Community School District in Independence, Iowa. Independence was the first stop on the Team’s tour of fifteen school districts across the country to learn more about Farm to School initiatives.

The Independence Community School District is located in rural, north east Iowa and enrolls approximately 1,400 K-12 students in six schools. On average, the district serves just over 1,000 meals per day using four kitchens with a head cook at each site. In the 2009–10 school year, 35 percent of the students received free and reduced-priced meals.

In 2007, the Independence Farmer’s Market Manager approached the District’s Food Service Director about this “Farm to School thing,” and that was how it all started. With support from school personnel, state agencies, and many community partners, just two years later the District proudly works with ten local farmers to serve students a variety of local products in their lunch program, including asparagus, strawberries, sweet corn, rosemary, mozzarella cheese, and more. In total, twenty different local products were used in the 2009–10 school year.

Adding fresh, local food to the school lunch menu is just one part of the District’s Farm to School initiative. Teaching students about where their food comes from and how it gets to the plate is also a top priority. For example, in 2010, several raised bed gardens were built for use in an afterschool program designed to give students opportunities to learn about how food is grown and to, hopefully someday soon, produce food for the school meal programs.

What is this “Farm to School thing” all about? For the Independence Community School District, it is about helping students learn about where their food comes and how it gets to their plate. It is about promoting health and wellness to students, school personnel, and the community. And finally, it is about engaging the community and supporting local farmers by serving fresh, local food in the lunch program.

Kelly Crossley is the School Food Service Director for Independence Community School District. Kelly’s tips for getting started with Farm to School include:

1. Don’t be afraid to ask your staff to learn new skills and to do more in the same amount of time. Provide training opportunities to support these changes.
2. Plow ahead in spite of resistance...it will lessen.
3. Plow ahead if initially participation lowers...it will come back up.
4. Take time to ask for help and delegate what you can.
5. Use recipes and learn to use herbs and spices with your vegetables. (Don’t forget different preparation for different age groups.)
6. Get local paper, magazine, Ag-news, radio, and TV involved. Let them know when you are having an event. It may draw more farmers your way and the positive publicity is good for both the school and the farmer.
7. Word of mouth is very important. It will bring in people to help and encourage you, as well as the growers, to continue your Farm to School efforts.

Below are some pictures the Team took while on their visit. Local asparagus was being served that day.



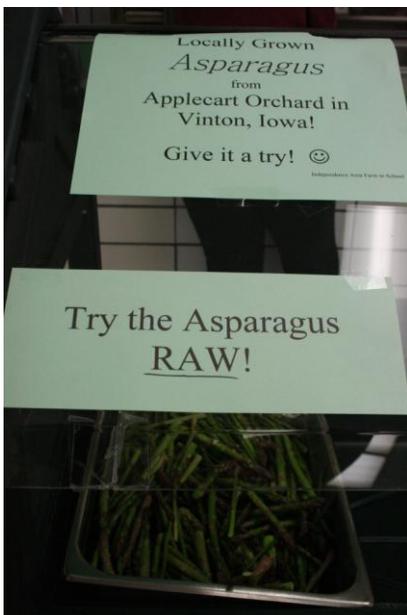
School sign of Independence Community School District (IA)



Signage at elementary school for locally grown asparagus at Independence Community School District (IA)



Student at Independence Community School District (IA) with local asparagus



Signage at middle school for locally grown asparagus at Independence Community School District (IA)



Local raw asparagus at Independence Community School District's (IA) middle school