

11. Incorporate good food education into the pre-K - 12 curriculum for all Michigan students.

INTEGRATING FOOD, AG INTO CURRICULUM OFFERS MANY OPPORTUNITIES

Joy Baldwin, Food Systems Project coordinator at NorthWest Initiative, a Lansing neighborhood organization, can share many stories about the positive effects that education about food — from gardening to nutrition science and cooking to math — has on children and their families.

The project brings hands-on food and gardening education to four elementary schools the project serves in Lansing's 'grand neighborhoods,' the area of the city that the Grand River borders on the north, east, and south. Nearly 1,100 students are enrolled in the project's School Garden-Based Nutrition Education program, which takes place in the classroom and after-school garden clubs. It involves students in planning, planting, tending and harvesting gardens; preparing and sampling food from the gardens; and marketing produce at student-run farmers' markets.



Photo courtesy of NorthWest Initiative

The purpose is to move children toward eating more fresh fruits and vegetables and taking charge of their food futures with gardening skills and more. One of Baldwin's favorite stories about such outcomes is about a sixth grade boy who attends garden club.

"Once when the group made hummus, he said he knew his mom would really like it," she said. "The following week he came back to club and told me that his mom had made the recipe and his whole family was now eating fresh hummus from our recipe in garden club. ... He is now interested in how he can grow his own garlic for his hummus!"

Baldwin and Northwest Initiative are valuable resources for schools working not only to improve dietary choices but also teach basic math, science, and language arts. Learning how to grow and prepare healthy food fits into every learning objective. In fact, Northwest Initiative's Food System Project has developed a new guide, "Growing Minds: The School Garden-Based Nutrition Education Curriculum," based on the Michigan Department of Education Grade Level Content Expectations. The curriculum enhances the learning needs of students from Kindergarten through eighth grade, with 15-20 activities for each grade in language arts, mathematics, science and social studies.

Need

Michigan's youth may be paying a high price for the larger culture's move away from homegrown food and at-home food preparation. Between 1963 and 1970, just 5 percent of youth ages 12 to 19 were classified as overweight in the U.S, according to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey.¹ In 2009, the most recently published results of the Michigan Youth Risk Behavior Survey show that 26 percent of Michigan high school students are overweight or obese.² This trend ultimately costs Michigan dearly in lost potential of its next generations due to diet-related diseases that affect learning, achievement, and quality of life.

Furthermore, from farmers to school food service directors to agri-business managers, many food system sectors are suffering from a shortage of young people entering the field. By failing to expose young people to the food system and its associated careers in school, Michigan misses out on opportunities to create pathways to these important roles, which will be critical for our regional food systems in the future.

Opportunity

Helping young people become more aware of their food choices, and engaging them in addressing the many social, economic, and environmental factors involved, is a fundamental step toward empowering them today and in the future. They are Michigan's future farmers, parents, and community leaders; a solid understanding of and engagement in the food system will help them help themselves in the future. Yet most school systems do not integrate curriculum about food production, preparation, culture, and business into their everyday work. Good food education is fragmented at best, if it exists at all.

In its school system, Michigan has an ideal venue for introducing young children to good food concepts and building skills in age-appropriate ways. Integrating these concepts through all grade levels could result in high school seniors graduating with exposure to a vast array of currently little-known career opportunities. Even those not interested in pursuing agri-food-related careers, would gain the knowledge that they can help shape communities so local, healthy food is accessible for everyone and farming is a respected and rewarding vocation.

Action

Many communities are already working to develop school gardens and other methods for introducing children to healthy food and how they can make it a part of their lives through skills in food production, shopping and preparation. Local and state leaders can leverage this solid start into significant change by:

- *Encouraging schools to integrate food and farming education into their everyday language arts, math, science and other curricula, to link with any existing food and farming extra-curricular activities and to share information among schools about best practices.*
- *Helping schools connect with and use the knowledge and resources that groups like Northwest Initiative's Food Systems Project³ and the Center for Regional Food Systems' Youth and Community Food⁴ have to share, including learning activities designed around state standards.*
- *Promoting the role of a good food coordinator in each school district who might be a district staff member, a teacher, a volunteer parent or even a designated high school class. These coordinators can serve as points of communication between school districts and those in the community with valuable information and insights.*

1-2-3 Go!

Real-life examples are often the best for showing young people how the world works. Teachers can always use them. Look around your community and gather up examples of people, businesses, watersheds and more that can demonstrate the benefits of making sure food is healthy and affordable for all. Talk with administrators also about the value of food and farming for teaching a broad range of skills and required competencies.

¹Michigan Department of Community Health (2009) "Michigan Critical Health Indicators" Topic: Risky Health Behaviors #3: Pediatric Obesity and Overweight. http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mdch/Critical_Health_Indicators_2007_198949_7.pdf

²Michigan Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). www.michigan.gov.yrbs

³<http://www.nwlansing.org/foodsystems>

⁴www.miyouthandfood.msu.edu