

+ Montana Farm to School Successes



Livingston grows a strong farm to school team

By: Greta Hensler, Montana Dietetic Intern

Livingston Farm to School has taken a strong team approach in integrating the “Three Cs” of farm to school—cafeteria, classroom, and community. This is largely due to work by several staff and community members including Abbie Bandstra, Farmer Educator, John Polacik, School Foodservice Director, and Ashley Newell, FFA advisor and Ag teacher. Organizations and local businesses have also contributed to Livingston’s successes.

The program received a USDA Farm to School grant in 2013, which has provided the funds for several outstanding projects. Ms. Newell, as well as retired Ag teacher Kevin Fochs, have led the students in many great farm to school practices in the last several years. They are preparing to raise Berkshire pigs donated from Mountain Sky Guest Ranch, which will be sold to local restaurants and businesses. This will give students the opportunity to develop valuable business skills. The FFA uses their greenhouse for raising and selling flowers and vegetables.

The grant has also allowed the school district to purchase kitchen equipment. One piece of equipment is a patty machine that makes almost 1000 burger patties in just two hours. This process

used to take several days to hand patty the burgers. This is a great tool to include grass-fed, locally grown and processed beef on the menu. Mr. Polacik orders over 8,000 pounds of beef per year, from Muddy Creek and Lazy S.R. ranches. The school foodservice program also has a pasta-making machine that allows them to make homemade noodles.



John points out that having his staff on board with these changes has been key to success. The foodservice staff works hard to deliver great meals to students. Head Cook Darcy states “we are trying to change the perception of lunch ladies.” They definitely have! John purchases meat and produce locally, and his foodservice staff make most food from scratch. Pasta and whole-wheat rolls are made from scratch using Wheat Montana flour, and pastys are made with homemade dough, grass-fed beef, local carrots, and Bausch Potatoes.

Abbie, Farmer Educator, teaches a farm to school-English hybrid class in the summers. This six-week course allows students to get hands on experience in gardening, as well as have the opportunity to visit local farms and ranches. This is mixed with outdoor English lessons, and also includes many fascinating documentaries.

Abbie plans to have farm to school activities available online soon, and has been

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More information available at www.opi.mt.gov/Farm2School

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Farm to School Team

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able to incorporate activities into several classrooms already. She focuses on grades two-five, but would like to expand to all grades. The grant provides funding for a Liv Young garden project, which partners with Links for Learning. This project provides an opportunity for high school students and college interns to work with farm to school, educate others, and sell produce at the farmers market. Abbie hopes to expand to students at Sleeping Giant Middle School and Park High School, teaching nutrition lessons one day a month, and dedicating another day each month to guests, including farmers, ranchers, and local gardeners. One challenge Abbie has faced is maintaining student participation from elementary throughout high school.

The seventh grade life science class is planning to convert the greenhouse to an aquaponics system. Produce grown in the greenhouse will be used for the school cafeteria's salad bar. The students would also like to grow micro greens for use in the school lunch, as well herbs sold as "herbagrams" for Valentine's Day.

Another component of the grant project is animal husbandry, which is the science of breeding and caring for animals. The FFA advisor and Ag teacher, Ashley Newell, plans to help the students build a barn, which will house pigs, chickens, and possibly goats. The sustainable livestock course would provide the opportunity for students to become certified egg graders, allowing the eggs to be served in school meals.

Several organizations around the community have been closely involved in the farm to school efforts in Livingston. Montana Roots and Shift Empowerment programs teamed up to design an aquaponics system. Their "Root Down" program provides seventh to twelfth graders the opportunity to engage in experiments and learn hands-on skills through the fish and aquaponics greens system and their composting system. Through this program,



high school and college interns are able to involve themselves with local agriculture, sustainable practices, and ecology.

The Livingston Food Pantry will soon open their new "Local Foods System Center" which will have the capacity of processing local foods for use in the school lunch program. The Pantry also supports the farm to school program by initiating the "Healthy Eaters Club" which distributes coupons from

Albertson's for free fresh fruit and vegetables to elementary school children.

Once the two-year grant from the USDA is complete, Abbie hopes to increase healthy fundraisers to raise finances for the programs. She wants to have homemade beef pastys, kale chips, Tumblewood teas and fresh

juices on the menu. The Yellowstone Food Fest and an annual fun run will also help raise funding. A recent *Governor's Lunch* brought over 150 people, which allowed the program to showcase the produce from the gardens and raise awareness to community members and teachers. It was also a "thank you" to the community members, organizations, businesses, staff, and parents who have helped out in the process.

Many students, school staff, community organizations, and businesses have been involved in making farm to school an enormous accomplishment in Livingston. The students are eating delicious local foods in their cafeteria, and are provided with many educational opportunities. Livingston has proved that teamwork pays off. Huge goals are being met in their community by a series of smaller efforts brought together.

For more information, visit: <http://www.f2slivingstonmt.org/>.



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