



Previous page: Students from Vance Elementary in Asheville, NC participate in the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project's Chef Fest. Photo by Molly Nicholie.

Above: Farmer Dewain Mackey of Madison Farms delivers local tomatoes and strawberries to Hot Springs Elementary in North Carolina. Photo by Libby Hinsley.

I. Introduction to Farm to School Evaluation

Planning for Program Evaluation

A common mistake made by farm to school planners is waiting until the end of a reporting period for a grant, or after the project is up and running, to think about evaluation. Ideally, evaluation planning should take place at the same time as program planning. In order to measure the impacts of a project or to answer specific research questions relating to farm to school, specific data may need to be gathered from the start of the program.

Involving a multitude of stakeholders, program areas and variables, the complexity of farm to school programs presents a challenge in designing a comprehensive evaluation. In addition, most farm to school programs are not adequately funded, or are dependent on external support for start up and operational expenses such as costs for equipment and labor. Farm to school organizers may therefore be wary of focusing on evaluation activities with the fear that evaluation will divert limited resources from program activities, or will over-burden program staff. Also, evaluation terminology and models may appear foreign and academic to grassroots organizers of farm to school programs. For these reasons, it is no surprise that farm to school program evaluations have been limited, and those that have been conducted vary widely in focus.

For relatively new program models such as farm to school, it is essential to utilize sound evaluation methods that add to the body of knowledge on working models. Funding agencies are increasingly focused on evaluation results that provide clear evidence of project impacts. Well-designed evaluations can help program planners gauge how well they are meeting their goals and provide a feedback loop so that programs can adapt and achieve maximum benefits. Evaluations can also guide policy makers in the development of specific legislation that can further farm to school goals.

Farm to school practitioners around the country need to build their capacity to conduct more comprehensive evaluations and invest in the necessary resources. The funds required to evaluate a farm to school program depend on a variety of factors including: what aspects of the program are to be evaluated, the size of the program, kinds of outcomes evaluated, who is conducting the evaluation, the availability of existing data sources, and in-house evaluation expertise. An allocation of 5-10% of the overall program budget for evaluation is recommended, though this may not be feasible for all programs.

The first step in planning for program evaluation is working out the evaluation goals, objectives, strategies, and target populations. The next step is to develop an evaluation framework by identifying feasible evaluation methods, indicators, and targets for the program. For additional resources and information on planning and structuring an evaluation, please see the Community Food Projects Evaluation Handbook¹ developed by the Community Food Security Coalition.

It is important to evaluate both the processes and impacts of farm to school programs. Process evaluation indicators may be monitored to meet the project deliverables and describe implementation of a project. These typically include, but are not limited to, the number of operational programs, schools participating, children participating, farmers supplying food, school gardens developed, trainings and educational sessions conducted, recipes developed, curriculum or lessons implemented, etc. Impact evaluation indicators are aimed at examining outcomes related to program implementation, and usually require more expertise and financial resources to gather and analyze. Farm to school impact evaluation can be conducted through a variety of qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups, surveys with open ended questions), and quantitative methods (changes in weight, body mass index, academic scores, and in local product purchased).

Another consideration for evaluation planning is ethics, which includes the use of human subjects in evaluation. Federal regulations govern the protection of research participants, especially children. An entity known as the Institutional Review Board (IRB), based at universities and other research organizations, is charged with reviewing and approving any research that involves the participation of people. It is important to be aware of and follow these regulations, especially if a farm to school program is funded with public monies. See www.hhs.gov/ohrp/ for more information.

Deciding on the scope and focus area for a farm to school program evaluation depends on resources available – financial, staff expertise, and skills. Hiring or developing a contractual relationship with an experienced professional evaluator is an option, though it may pose a challenge for programs with limited financial resources. Researchers from local universities and colleges may be interested in developing connections with farm to school programs and could serve as valuable partners for evaluation.

For farm to school programs, information generated through research and evaluation may be broadly classified into the following categories, with some examples provided below:

Baseline / Existing Program Information / Feasibility Studies

Baseline information on pre-program indicators, existing information on number of farm to school programs already in operation, key components and features. This may also include a feasibility analysis using findings from the baseline data collection.

Student Impacts

Changes in knowledge, attitudes, behaviors regarding food choices and nutrition, health, local foods, agriculture, environment; changes in Body Mass Index (BMI), academic performance, discipline, attendance, and activity patterns.

Teacher Impacts

Changes in knowledge and attitudes of teachers and school administrators, changes in dietary behaviors.

Policy Impacts

Changes to school district nutrition and health policies, practices and policies regarding waste management and recycling.

Food Service Impacts

Changes in menu plans and recipes to offer more fruits and vegetables and local, healthy food options, changes in meal participation rates, financial viability of food service operations, changes to food procurement patterns, changes in the knowledge, attitudes and behaviors of food service staff.

Farmer Impacts

Sales to schools, changes in planting patterns, adoption of sustainable farming practices, breakthroughs in handling distribution and transportation issues, prevention of farmland loss, increase in the number of farms or farmers in the region.

Parent Impacts

Knowledge, attitude and behavior changes regarding diet and health, support for local farms and agriculture, changes in lifestyle, and food purchasing patterns at home.

Community Impacts

Awareness and interest in local foods and farming, access to local healthier foods, impacts on local economy.