The farm to school movement is growing, and empowered youth are playing key roles — bringing youthful originality and leadership to the table!

A growing movement across the U.S., “farm to school” describes the practice through which school districts purchase and serve regionally grown and raised food from local farms as part of school meals. Accompanying these purchase decisions and menu options are often experiential learning opportunities around environmental stewardship, recycling, food-waste reduction, farm experiences, garden-based learning, food insecurity/hunger, culinary innovations, and more.

GENYOUth is dedicated to helping further youth involvement in this important community-minded movement. Through GENYOUth’s flagship Fuel Up to Play 60 program — the nation’s largest in-school wellness program — and our student social-entrepreneurship program, AdVenture Capital, students are innovating and pioneering original farm to school solutions in their schools and communities. The goal? Even more wholesome and nutritious foods that kids need for growth and development.

An important and timely topic

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Farm to School Census, more than 42,000 schools nationwide have farm to school programs, which operate in conjunction with the National School Lunch Program and other school meal programs. Seventy-five percent of districts cite benefits that come from farm to school, including more students choosing school meals, lower costs from buying locally grown food, increasing support from parents and the community, and less wasted food and resources.

Farm to school is serious business, too. School districts across the country invested more than half a billion dollars (nearly $800 million) in local foods in the 2013-2014 school year, an increase of 105 percent over two years earlier. Among schools serving local foods, those foods account for about 13 percent of the school's food budget on average.

Empowering youth as farm to school “solution-generators”

GENYOUth is helping youth to create, champion, and implement farm to school initiatives that strengthen connections with fresh, nutritious food and local farmers. Student projects are demonstrating again and again how those ideas can shape everything from school food-purchasing policies and agriculture in the curriculum to deep connections and respect for where food comes from.

Schools and youth are using GENYOUth’s Funds for Fuel Up to Play 60 and AdVenture Capital
Students Connect Dairy Farms to Food Banks

When West Virginia fifth-grader REAGAN BLASHER learned that local food banks need milk donations, she raised more than $1,600 to help by creating a service project through Fuel Up to Play 60. On average, food banks are able to provide only the equivalent of less than one gallon of milk per person per year — far short of the 68 gallons per year needed to meet the Dietary Guidelines. Americans are generous in donating canned and dry goods to food banks, but many don’t think to donate milk because it’s perishable, despite the high-quality protein it provides.

That fact inspired Reagan to develop and launch her own version of The Great American Milk Drive by creating a fundraiser on her gofundme.com page to help purchase milk sourced from regional dairy farms for local West Virginia food banks. And she set her expectations high. “My goal was $1,250,” Reagan says. “I wanted a goal that would be a challenge to raise.” She involved classmates in fundraising efforts by coordinating a school-approved hat day, in order to wear a hat to class for one day, students could donate $1 to Reagan’s milk drive. By engaging friends and others at school, Reagan inspired them to continue to volunteer throughout the service drive.

Her passion paid off. Community members donated more than $1,600. The National Dairy Council thanked Reagan for her efforts by matching her donation to The Great American Milk Drive so even more families would receive the nutritious foods and beverages they need.

America’s dairy farmers support the fight against hunger. Learn more about how you can help those in your community at www.milklife.com/give.

In Springfield, Massachusetts, schools, “Ag Ed” (Agriculture Education) is becoming a cornerstone of the district’s wellness curriculum. One school, as part of its Fuel Up to Play 60 Farm to School Play, purchased yogurt- and cheese-making equipment for all classes to use as part of weekly labs. Food-supplier Sodexo helped make the equipment purchase possible. These students are getting hands-on knowledge not just of where their food comes from, but of how dairy products are actually created.

In Highland Park, Illinois, students are overhauling the ways in which school lunch programs are run by implementing direct district partnerships with farmers to bring fresh and wholesome produce to schools. Unused perishable food is distributed through food banks to families in the community who otherwise would not be able to secure these nutritious foods, including fresh fruits and vegetables.

In Sacramento, California, students dedicated a common area for gardening that, due to poor soil quality, struggled to grow healthy plants. Students built and installed a compost system and connected with local coffee shops and the cafeteria to recycle food-waste compost to make the soil crop-ready.

In Waverly, Iowa, students rolled up their sleeves to learn about the importance of agriculture in the state by organizing a farm to school week that involved a convening of local farmers, school nutrition directors, and students to showcase locally grown agricultural products.

grants for farm to school-related basics, such as starting, maintaining, and improving school gardens, and making field trips to local dairy farms. There, they’re learning about everything from the nutrients required in cows’ diets to how dairy farmers are responsibly stewarding our environment.

Students are also leading efforts to organize visits from, and hold cooking classes with, professional local chefs. They’re helping to revamp cafeteria designs with inspirational local-farm-themed murals and artwork. Students are constructing chicken coops and then developing original egg recipes and food-handling procedures suited to school and home use. They’re developing sustainability solutions, like rain-barrel irrigation in drought regions, and they’re putting in place natural composting routines for less-than-ideal garden soil.

Whether it’s recycling, local food sourcing, carbon-footprint monitoring, or addressing and reducing the amount of wasted food, farm to school-themed projects vividly illustrate how student leaders and student entrepreneurs are advancing the movement nationwide.

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Across the country, students on farm to school field trips learn where their milk, cheese, and yogurt comes from, or students learn about the farm origins of nutritious foods.

**Making farm to school happen: What schools and students need**

Through GENYOUth’s school-funding initiatives, we have learned a great deal about what schools and students most need in order to bring the farm to school. And happily, many of our like-minded partners are stepping up to the plate to provide funding and other resources to meet these needs, which include:

- Field trips to nearby farms
- Farmer visits in schools, including mobile dairy farms
- Supplies to start, maintain, or improve school gardens
- Cafeteria/kitchen equipment to prepare and serve locally produced food, especially for salad bars and yogurt smoothies
- Yogurt- and cheese-making equipment
- Supplies for taste test events including food carts, blenders, and promotional posters
- Visits from professional chefs to host cooking classes or taste tests
- Milk coolers or other food storage equipment
- Murals, paint, and other supplies for a cafeteria revamp
- After-school cooking classes with friends and family
- Rain barrels and watering cans
- Composting systems
- Virtual farm tours

**Vital sponsor support: Planting seeds for success with school grants**

GENYOUth’s corporate, non-profit, and business supporters are key players in advancing farm to school efforts. State and regional dairy councils are providing Funds for Fuel Up to Play 60 to help thousands of schools launch and expand their farm to school initiatives. Technology giant SAP underwrites GENYOUth’s AdVenture Capital program, many of whose student-originated project funding pitches are farm to school-centered.

Jamba Juice, a longtime GENYOUth partner, sponsors a GENYOUth-created school-garden grant program within California’s Sacramento City Unified School District, and awarded 14 area schools school-garden grants totaling $36,000. The program itself was science-based, with curriculum supported by the concept of gardens as outdoor, living science labs where students can learn about ecosystems, environmental stewardship, healthy food choices, and plant biology. These lessons are especially worthwhile in low-income neighborhoods in which students active in the program grow up, areas designated as “food deserts” because of their lack of grocery stores and farmers markets.
Everybody wins

Through farm to school programs, students enjoy fresh, local foods, reconnect with the entire food-production system, and gain leadership experiences in their school community. Local farmers benefit from new channels of sales and they can help to educate students about agriculture and sustainable farming practices. The support of small farms, local farmers, and regional economies are all elements of the farm to school equation, which is helping to improve the quality of child nutrition and learning opportunities about food/nutrition/agriculture in schools nationwide.

In addition to wins for students and farmers (not to mention ranchers, fishermen, and local food processors and manufacturers), farm to school advocates point out that communities as a whole profit from the movement, too. Farm to school efforts stimulate the local economy, help reduce carbon footprint thanks to local (rather than long-distance) transportation, and help directly improve local environments through school gardens and composting programs.

GENYOUth is committed to providing funding and programs that make possible everyday youth-led school and community efforts to improve access to healthful, local foods, which in turn strengthen regional food economies, enhance student and community consciousness of the value of “real foods,” and help students exercise their influence around this important responsibility. Most important, students gain in strength of voice, leadership skills, and the satisfaction that they are improving their health, their lives, their schools, and their communities.

RESOURCES

www.dairygood.org
The National Dairy Council’s website offers information about dairy farmers’ commitment to students around the Farm to School movement, as well as on how foods from the farm, including dairy, are a crucial part of school meals, school wellness, and the dairy industry’s commitment to the environment and sustainability.

www.FuelUptoPlay60.com
Fuel Up to Play 60 offers funding opportunities for schools. The program’s Farm to School Play has ideas and resources to help students and schools learn about farm-raised food in their area and bring locally produced food into their school.

www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool/farm-school
The U.S. Department of Agriculture provides valuable farm to school information.

www.nationaldairycouncil.org/Farm-To-Table
Farm to table resources from National Dairy Council include recipes, information on sustainability, and more.

www.farmtoschool.org
The National Farm to School Network is an information, advocacy, and networking hub for communities around the Farm to School movement. Farm to School has start kits for students and teacher to learn about farmers and farming.