

Department of Public Instruction AmeriCorps Farm to School Program

AmeriCorps Program of the Year

The Department of Public Instruction AmeriCorps Farm to School Program is dedicated to serving communities throughout the state by increasing access to fresh, healthy foods in schools and providing nutrition education to students. Their AmeriCorps members have impacted tens of thousands of students since the launch of the program in 2008 by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade & Consumer Protection. They have served nearly 75,000 hours since 2017 when the program transitioned to the Department of Public Instruction.

As part of their mission, the AmeriCorps members with Farm to School reach students in numerous ways, including leading lessons on nutrition, conducting tastings of locally raised/produced foods, working with students in school gardens, and connecting students with local farmers through classroom presentation or farm tours. When schools closed and moved to remote learning due to COVID-19, the Farm to School members found ways to continue reaching their students through virtual nutrition lessons, cooking demonstrations, and farm tours. Additionally, many continued maintaining the school gardens so that students would have items to harvest in the fall and provide home garden kits to their students to help connect them to their school gardens.

During the last school year, they continued to find ways to impact their students through a combination of in-person and virtual activities, collaborating with classroom teachers and finding innovative approaches to impact school meal programs by working with both school food service directors and local farmers. To help facilitate an increase in healthy local foods being served in school meal programs, Farm to School AmeriCorps members launched the Wisconsin Local Foods Database to connect more food service directors and farmers across the state. The groundwork for the database began in 2017 when AmeriCorps Farm to School member Megan Wise, while serving at Crawford County UW-Extension, created internal listings of farmers to ensure that future Farm to School members and school food service directors could maintain contact with local farmers. In the following years, the entire AmeriCorps Farm to School team managed the project as an internal tool, expanding its scope statewide. With both food service directors and farmers facing numerous challenges during the pandemic, the Farm to School members decided to create a public website for the database to help them connect with each other to get local foods into schools throughout the state. The creation of the Wisconsin Local Food Database is now helping alleviate the challenges for school food service directors by decreasing the time required to research and connect with local farmers. Additionally, it is assisting farmers whose local markets have been impacted by the pandemic to easily connect with school districts and make it possible for anyone in the general public to find healthy foods that these farmers can provide in their local area.

Through a combination of innovative service and dedicated efforts to impact student health and nutrition throughout Wisconsin, the Department of Public Instruction AmeriCorps Farm to School Program is supporting local communities and making a tangible difference for Wisconsin students, school staff, and farmers.

