



# Growth and new developments during a second term with Farm to School



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This quarter marked the beginning of my second year of serving in the AmeriCorps Farm to School program. With my second year has come an increased level of comfort, familiarity, and ambition with my Farm to School service work. By now I am quite comfortable with all of the manifold facets of what it is to work with students, school gardens, classrooms, and farms, and how to tie all of those elements together into a fruitful venture.

This year I am no longer getting my legs under me in the classroom—I feel comfortable not only with teaching, but also with the classrooms, students, and schools I serve. With this comfort has come a heightened interest in expanding the accessibility of my lessons, both mentally and physically, both in the classroom and in the garden. I have been able to spend more effort planning to meet students where they're at, and have a better understanding of how students of all types would like to engage with Farm to School programming. This will be a lifelong lesson as an educator, but it's one I feel more capable of taking on now. This means creating a variety of activities each lesson that provides a variety of learning experiences, especially while out in the garden. This also means making sure my lessons are more experiential, so that the students are engaged and incorporating what they're learning in a more thorough manner. I have organized a manner to readily have funds for taste tests, and students are loving trying more healthy and local foods! There's no doubt that trying and tasting helps connect what they're learning about healthy and local foods to their life in a more substantial and memorable way.

I've also been able to start a cooking club at one of my schools that has been very successful. The students love it, as do their parents, which is great—this has so far proven to be the most successful way to inform parents of Farm to School activity at this school yet. The demographic of the club has been younger students—Kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grade. A lot of these students did not know how to chop or measure before the club started, and they are now demonstrably more comfortable with these important elements of cooking! Their interest in trying their creations also evidently increased during our time together. There were quite a few students who did not want to try anything at the beginning of our club who were eagerly eating a whole plate of it by the end. Within the cooking club there were accompanying lessons on people from the represented culture of that day who were successful farmers, food producers, or activists in the Madison area. Students were able to see examples of people who looked like themselves or their classmates who had an interest in food and were able to make it their profession, all while the students were also learning how exciting and important it is to make food from various cultures.

This year there has also been important movements instigated in the school garden spaces. At one of my schools the students spent several weeks helping me clear a patch of lawn and ready it to be a pumpkin patch/three sisters garden in the spring. The students loved the opportunity to just dig and do garden work for a few weeks—it has proven to be a great way to get the students vested in the garden. Students are very excited to plant in this part of the garden they built in the spring!

At my other school we were awarded a large grant to entirely renovate the garden. This was needed because the beds were rotting, and the garden as a whole was not very ADA compliant. It has been an initiative of mine since the beginning of my service to ensure that the school garden spaces can be enjoyed by all, regardless of physical ability. There is still a long way to go, but I am glad I am here this second year to continue to be a force towards this change in the gardens.

Finally, the Rooted AmeriCorps crew has been able to build a relationship with the food service director of the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD). This relationship has come on the back of a year of trying many times to form a relationship with anyone at MMSD and coming up short every time. Fortunately for our Farm to School efforts, a new food service director started this year, and he has a potent interest in incorporating both student-grown and locally-grown produce into the school lunches in Madison. MMSD food service is a large and complicated system, so we are very excited to have such an eager ally helping us make strides in this component of our service. Rooted and MMSD have been steadily crafting a plan for a pilot program that we can instigate as early as this upcoming spring to get student-grown lettuce and herbs into the school lunches.

There is still a lot left for me to work and improve on in my role as a Farm to School specialist. I would like to make efforts to bring in real food producers and chefs into the cooking club to really enhance that element of the cultural cooking club and reify for students their potential in this field if they are interested in food. I would also like to make efforts in the spring to plant crops that are culturally relevant for the families who readily harvest from the school gardens in the summer. Having culturally diverse crops in the garden would also aid in continuing to be able to cook culturally diverse and fresh meals with the students in the summer programming.

There is still a lot of work to be done with the garden renovations and with getting the pilot program with MMSD off the ground and running. I am looking forward to all that I am to learn and work on, considering all that I have already learned, and all of the ways that I continue to blossom. Hopefully my growth will encourage the gardens and the students to bloom as well.