

Agricultural Science Education: Becoming a Part of Community Food Systems

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Introduction

The Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources (ANR) Career Clusters are comprised of seven pathways that represent the knowledge and skills for agricultural education programs (Office of Vocational and Adult Education [OVAE], 2006). They are serving as the foundation for the development of national agricultural education standards (National Council for Agricultural Education, 2004). Following national trends, the State of Michigan is also using the ANR cluster as a foundation to develop a curriculum framework, as it represents the diversity of Michigan agricultural education. With assistance from the Department of Labor and Economic Growth and Michigan State University, benchmarks and curriculum based on the ANR clusters are being developed. Currently, Michigan has found success in integrating all of the pathway areas into their revised curriculum except the Food Products and Processing Systems. Factors contributing to this disconnect are: agricultural science program educators are not knowledgeable about food systems, food systems have previously been incorporated in work and family studies programs, and the measurable criteria included in the food stems pathway does not represent where Michigan is headed regarding food systems.

According to the C.S. Mott Chair of Sustainable Agriculture Food Systems at Michigan State University, the future of food systems in the state is a niche market with emphasis placed on community foods, value-added products, community sustainable agriculture (CSA), and urban agriculture, to name a few (M. Hamm, personal communication, January 15, 2007). To begin intertwining the future of food production into the classroom, the C.S. Mott group has developed the Youth Farm Stand Project (YFSP), a program focusing on nutrition education and entrepreneurship. This is one of several initiatives through the Mott Group that attempts to tackle the larger question—Who will feed Michigan? Joining forces with agricultural education programs, topics of sustainable agriculture, food nutrition, entrepreneur skills, and community foods are being addressed in the agriculture classroom.

The Michigan Youth Farm Stand Project

The Youth Farm Stand Project attempts to address issues of food access and availability in Michigan communities through two mechanisms: (1) nutrition and entrepreneurial education designed to impact purchase and consumption of fresh foods and vegetables, and (2) product proximity in targeted neighborhoods (C.S. Mott Group, 2006). The YFSP is a one-year USDA funded program targeted at low-income urban communities. The program is a collaborative effort between the C.S. Mott Group, USDA Family Nutrition Program, community partners, and Michigan youth. Youth farm stands are an excellent channel to facilitate community food systems and economic development. Youth create operational business plans, grow and/or procure produce, become ambassadors of healthy food, prepare cooking demonstrations, and directly market their produce locally. Youth acquire entrepreneurial skills and are exposed first hand to the dimensions of growing and marketing their own produce within their local

communities Youth strategically locate their farm stands in areas where the community does not have sufficient access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Through community engagement, youth network with members for donations in time or resources, and they have the opportunity to produce the crops or procure produce from local farmers.

There are no prescribed steps in the YFSP, each action plan is youth driven, community based and developed with sustainability in mind. Each project is unique with considerations of locality and potential community partnerships in the area.

Results to Date

The Youth Farm Stands Project was piloted in 2005/06 in two Michigan communities with a total of 22 4-H youth participants. Fourteen farms provided produce and other goods for market; 3,600 lbs. of produce were given away as market incentives; gross market sales at one of the sites was \$11,973 for a net income of \$2,460; and the youth re-invested a portion of their proceeds back into the project for the following year (C.S. Mott Group, 2006). They noted an increase in youth nutritional education and found the youth were making healthier dietary choices. There was an increase noted in the relationships between the farmers, customers, and youth participants throughout the counties (Harper, 2006). For the 2006/07 YFSP six communities are participating including one agricultural science education FFA chapter, two horticultural 4-H group, and one charter school focusing on historic agriculture techniques dating back to the 1800's. Final outcomes have not been evaluated to date; however, the success within the agricultural education programs thus far has sprung interest in other agricultural education programs to participate in the 2007/08 YFSP.

Costs & Resources Needed

The initial start up cost provided by the C.S. Mott group to each community was \$8,500. With the funds each YFSP must have a completed action plan and budget. In most of the 2006/07 sites majority of the monies was used to hire a program mentor/manager to help oversee the development of the project. The remainder of the recourse costs varies depending on the needs of the community. Some groups are using more of their funding to cover marketing costs, while others are using it upfront to procure products. If interested in remaining sustainable after one year, the individual YFSP will need to seek funding sources. When interviewing the agricultural science educators involved in the YFSP many of the start up funds were not needed as the resources provided within their school agriculture programs such as greenhouses, land labs, etc., were available to utilize.

References

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