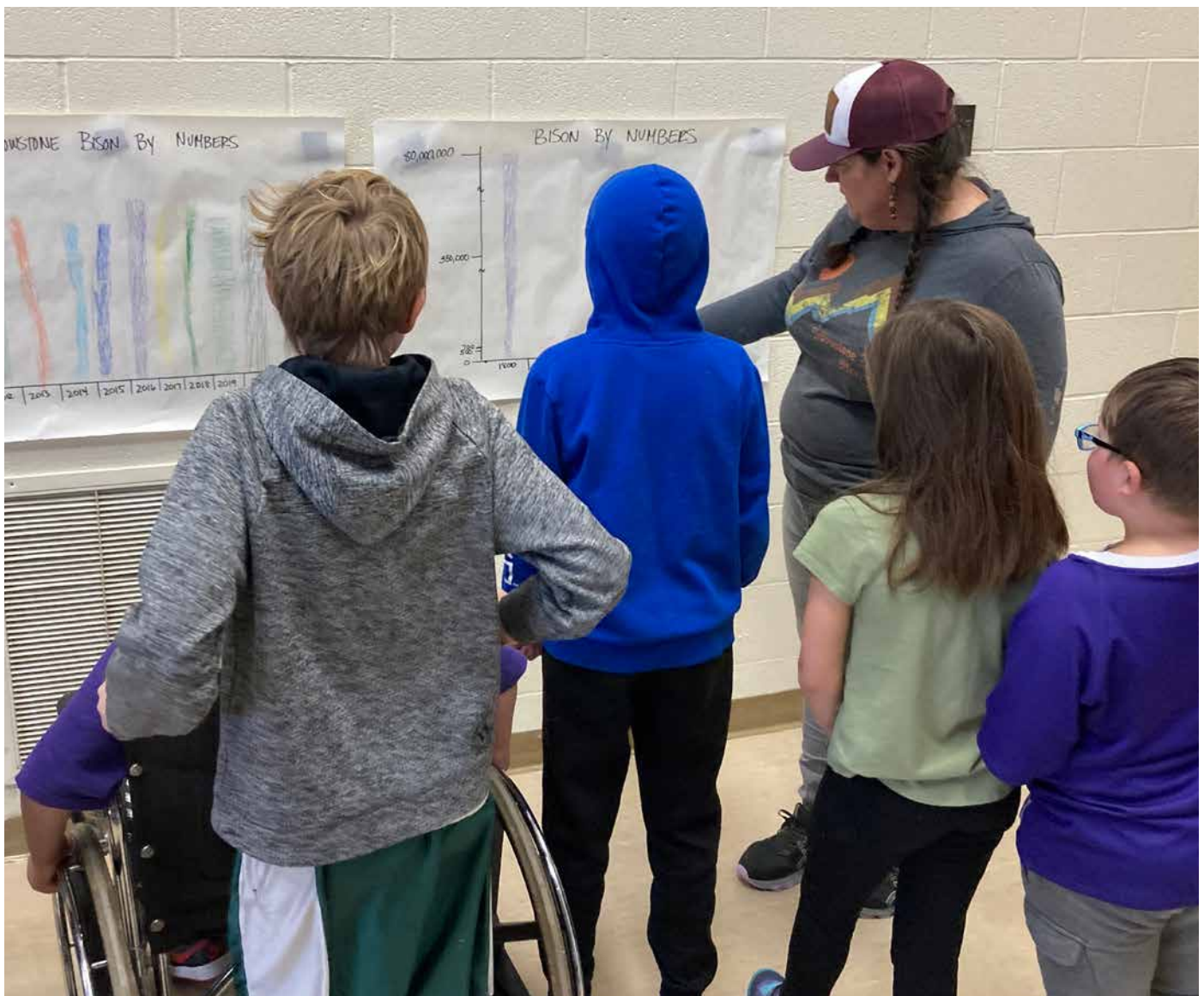




# FARM TO SCHOOL COOPERATION IN GARDINER, MONTANA: A RURAL SUCCESS STORY

By Blake Lineweaver, Mission West Community Development Partners



**A FARM-TO-SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT**

*Image: Holloway explains bison decline in Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem*

GARDINER, Mont. – In the Treasure State, rural is the norm for 470,000 Montanans living in communities with fewer than 2,500 people, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In rural America, access to many basic necessities can be an everyday struggle, from housing and electricity to water and food. Located a few miles north of Yellowstone National Park in Paradise Valley, the vacation town of Gardiner is no exception to these rural challenges.

Where some see struggle, Anna Holloway, Food Service Director for Gardiner Public Schools, finds opportunity. In her rural community, Holloway goes above and beyond in her role to bring Montana’s food and agriculture story into the school’s cafeteria and classrooms through local and regional foods.

With a degree in outdoor recreation and a teaching certification, Holloway started at Gardiner schools in the

classroom and later left teaching to establish Tumbleweed Bookstore and Cafe, a coffee shop across the Yellowstone River from the school. She found her way back to the school in 2016—this time in the cafeteria, where she has slowly shifted food operations from conventional “heat and serve” to mainly scratch cooking that showcases local and regional ingredients.

This transition was inspired, in part, by the “farm to school” approach Holloway first encountered at the Montana School Nutrition Association Conference in 2016. Holloway was quick to “jump on the bandwagon,” she says, after listening to Aubree Roth, Montana Farm to School Coordinator, present ways schools can integrate staple Montana foods—such as lentils, winter squash, and beef—into school food service programs, alongside agriculture and nutrition education and school gardens.

“I just fell in love with it,” Holloway recalls. “I thought it would be such a great thing to bring to our community, since it is so small, and lots of people have their own gardens.”

Drawing inspiration from peer networks at Montana Farm to School Summits and school nutrition conferences, Holloway has introduced local foods onto her menus, such as bison and beef, and built eight raised beds for the school’s food service program with help from Gardiner FFA. She sources fresh tomatoes, squash, cucumber, and kale from these beds for the salad bar as well as freezes and stores them for lunches during the winter months. Additionally, she teaches Harvest of the Month (HOM) lessons and conducts cooking demonstrations out of the school kitchen for grades K-5.

Building capacity for these programs is often a challenge, especially in rural communities. Often national and state service programs have assisted with farm to school programs, at least in their initial stages. Since the loss of Montana’s FoodCorps program in 2021, Holloway has worked directly with Farm to School of Park County to sponsor a national service member who serves part-time with Gardiner schools facilitating lessons, garden planning, and cooking demos. Sommer Giles, Gardiner’s



Image: Student harvesting tomatoes from the school's raised beds



“In a rural community, everybody wears ten hats, and so a lot of times you don’t have the numbers to support [farm to school],” says Holloway. “It’s been such a huge communal effort to make it work.”

AmeriCorps VISTA for school year 2022-2023, has found teaching farm to school lessons is as much a learning experience for her as it’s been for her students.

“I’ve never really had deep experiences with food, and that’s what drew me here,” says Giles. “I’ve never had a garden, I’ve never seen food grow. Everything I’ve been learning here is all brand new.”

### Where there’s a will, there’s a way

Likewise, Holloway’s farm-to-school vision for Gardiner schools was also brand new. With a kitchen staff of two and a passion for homemade meals and gardening, Holloway wanted to explore ways of bringing more scratch cooking and education into the school’s 680 weekly meals. When she approached her administration, they were initially hesitant to deviate from the norm.

“In the beginning, there was definitely pushback...mainly the menu changes. [They’d say] ‘kids are never going to eat this. They’re never going to do this,’” remembers Holloway. “They’re not going to do it the first month. But if you just stick with it, they’re going to come around.”

Making lunchtime fun for kids is at the heart of Holloway’s transformative food service model. One way she does this is by de-mystifying the central kitchen and having students prepare part of their meals.

“[Last fall], all the pumpkin that we had [harvested], the third and fourth, second and then fifth grade started the process of peeling the pumpkins [and] cooked them,” says Giles. “Another class mushed up the puree, and then another class made the pie. [Then the] kindergarten filled the pies. Everyone got to see and have their hands in what they were eating the next week.”

Through taste tests and cooking lessons, Holloway has found that by encouraging students to try new foods and diversify their palates at a young age leaves real, lasting impacts. For one, Holloway has noticed a significant decrease in food waste in the school’s cafeteria.

“When I first started, we had two trash cans out for elementary, [and] two trash cans for junior high and high school,” says Holloway. “Now we have one for the entire school, and it doesn’t even fill up.”



While there have been many successes, Holloway has faced setbacks—particularly with procurement, where sourcing and distributing locally ingredients can be challenging for rural communities.

“Sometimes, it’s tough with procurement. And if we do find something, because of the small amounts that we order, it tends to be pricier,” according to Holloway. “We’ve been able to balance that out with free vegetables from the [school] garden. So I’ll still pay that extra price, knowing that for a month, I don’t buy tomatoes.”

In overcoming these procurement challenges, Holloway has found that cooperating with other schools and larger businesses can make local foods accessible and affordable. In early 2023, Holloway was informed that Farm to School of Park County had started a cooperative agreement with Livingston Hospital and the Livingston Food Center to collectively source local carrots in bulk.

“I called and said, ‘I want to be a part of that,’” Holloway recalls. “And they said, ‘Okay.’ [Joining the agreement was] that easy.”

The group has made similar agreements to order local beef and bison for a more affordable price. Holloway pays the same four dollars a pound for local beef as she would for non-local beef. In the future, she hopes the group continues to leverage their institutional purchasing for other local foods and farm to school expenses, like purchasing soil or wood for raised beds.

Holloway also participates in the Montana Marinara project through the Office of Public Instruction (OPI). This veggie-

packed and kid-approved sauce combines USDA commodity tomatoes with Montana-grown butternut squash, carrots, onions, and safflower oil aggregated by the Western Montana Growers Cooperative in Missoula, MT. The sauce is made at the Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center in Ronan, MT where it’s then distributed statewide through OPI. Besides the benefit of sourcing locally for her rural and remote community, Holloway is able to use her USDA entitlement funds for the sauce, making it a win-win for her and Montana’s regional economy.

### Words from the wise

Next steps for Gardiner’s farm to school program are top of mind as Holloway’s transitions out of her role with Gardiner schools at the end of the 2022-2023 school year. For up and coming farm to school programs or those looking to start one, Holloway points to areas where she might have done things differently.

“Start small. I did not. Even if it entails procuring one item, once a month, and doing that for a whole year,” Holloway recommends. “[Also], find programs that failed and find out why. Then you won’t make those mistakes that they made...a lot of the programs that I’ve heard have failed because they didn’t have a group of people operating it.”

Especially for rural schools, Holloway recognizes that it takes many seats at the table to make a program sustainable. “In a rural community, everybody wears ten hats, and so a lot of times you don’t have the numbers to support [farm to school],” says Holloway. “It’s been such a huge communal effort to make it work.”

Whether you’re a food service director, administrator, or community member interested in starting farm to school in your district, reach out to our team of local food innovators ready to help you in the next steps to transform your school meal program:

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