



FRESH PERSPECTIVES WITH HAMILTON, MONTANA'S FARM TO SCHOOL TEAM

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A FARM-TO-SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Image: Salad bar with Local Bounti greens

HAMILTON, Mont. – Starting a farm to school program is no easy feat. From purchasing local foods to teaching nutrition and agricultural education lessons in school gardens, the time, money, and staffing for these activities are well-known hurdles. While some school districts have a farm to school “champion” spearheading school food reform, others have found a team-based approach more effective to building sustainable farm to school action.

This was the case for Hamilton School District, located in Montana’s Bitterroot Valley and one of the state’s newest farm to school programs established in fall 2022. The idea for Hamilton Farm to School took root with Drew Blankenbaker, a member of the school board and local farmer at Lifeline Produce in Victor, MT. An outspoken advocate for strengthening his community’s connection with its small- and mid-scale farmers, Blankenbaker made farm to school a key item of his re-election campaign in 2021.

In the spring of 2022, Blankenbaker applied for the first year of the Montana Farm to School Institute, organized by Montana Farm to School, Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI), and Montana Team Nutrition. This year-long program, modeled after a successful evidence-based strategy designed by Vermont FEED, paired community-based teams with experienced mentors from across the state to build sustainable farm to school programs in Montana.

Pieces fell into place when Hamilton School District became one of three schools accepted, including Power Public Schools and St. Ignatius School District. With the help of Aubree Roth, Montana Farm to School Coordinator, and mentorship from Jay Stagg, Food Service Director for Whitefish Public Schools and Hamilton’s designated farm to school coach, the team began to take shape.

Building the dream team

With the invitation to the Institute in hand, Blankenbaker contacted Amy Harvey, a third-grade teacher in the Hamilton School District. “Drew sent me an email like, ‘We’re doing this Farm to School Institute, can I put your name down?’ And I said, yes, of course, but I didn’t really know what that was at that point,” says Harvey. “I mean, I would have said yes anyway.”

Harvey is no stranger to bringing local foods into the classroom and cafeteria. An alum of FoodCorps—a national farm to school service program founded in Montana in 2006—Harvey served Missoula County Public Schools (MCPS) from 2015 to 2017 in sourcing local foods and teaching food lessons for the district.

“You got to work with kids, you got to do procurement, you got to be in the classroom and in the garden,” says Harvey. “It was really diverse in the things you got to do.”

During her FoodCorps service, Harvey assisted with the statewide pilot of Harvest of the Month (HOM), a program that provides food and nutrition lessons and materials for schools, early care education, and community organizations. The program has grown significantly since 2015 from a 10-month pilot of 30 schools to a year-long showcase of local foods across 92 registered schools serving 17,434 students, according to the Montana HOM 2020-2021 annual report.

The team had expertise, but Blankenbaker and Harvey knew they would need more hands. One requirement of the Institute instructed teams to have four to eight members in various roles to establish program credibility and sustainability, or “staying power,” as Harvey says.

“We started where we knew we had buy-in and [where] we could get our team on board and dedicate time to doing it,” says Harvey. “As a brand new program, we’re in a really good starting spot and have a lot of the people we need.”

Naturally, they tapped Nick Giacomino, the district’s freshman food service director, to transition more of the district’s food purchasing to the local scale. Second grade teacher Dulcie Belanger added educational capacity at Daly Elementary.

They’d also find community support and grant writing assistance from Grace Nichols, manager of the Speciality Crop Business Development program at Ravalli County Economic Development Authority. Completing the team was Hamilton’s community garden manager Warren Nienhaus, with 20 some years experience managing the city’s community garden adjacent to the school district’s quarter-acre garden plot.



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For Giacomino’s first year as food service director, building a team off the bat was a relief from his preconceptions of farm to school. “You hear stories of farm to school and I’m like, man, it seems like a really big undertaking for what seemed to be [just] the food service director,” says Giacomino. “Getting [the team] together had me realizing that farm to school for me isn’t going to be the stories I’ve heard.”

Progress in every step

With support from the Institute, the Hamilton team developed an action plan for the 2022-2023 school year that made incremental steps toward the comprehensive farm to school model: school gardens, education, and procurement of local foods.

At first, Giacomino was skeptical about purchasing from unfamiliar sources. “I guess you could say I was cynical,” he says. “I wasn’t super knowledgeable on the ability because I’ve always been from a food safety [standpoint]. You have to order from a reputable distributor. So I’m like, how do they do that?”

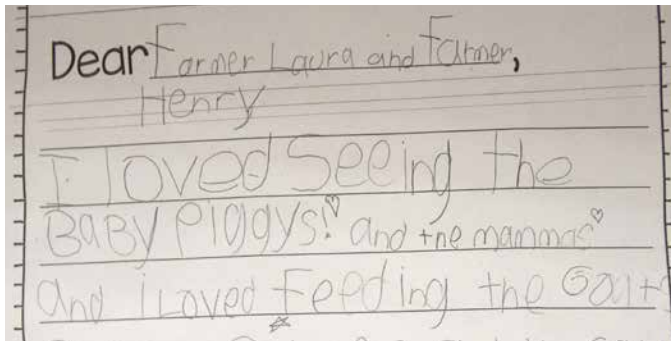
Jay Stagg helped Giacomino connect with resources, such as the Western Montana Growers Cooperative (WMGC), one of three producer-owned food cooperatives affiliated

with the Northwest Food Hub Network. Based an hour north in Missoula, WMGC distributes local foods to the Whitefish School District and now, thanks to the Institute, also to Hamilton. Local Bounti, a hydroponic business based in Hamilton and one of WMGC’s vendors, provides fresh greens for the two districts’ salad bars, year-round.

Looking ahead, Giacomino hopes to expand his local food purchasing. “On the procurement side...[the goal] is 20% of our food purchases [to be local],” he says. “That’s the ultimate goal in about three years. We’re sitting probably about 7% right out the gate.” Defining a local food is still on the table for Hamilton’s team, but for Giacomino, anything Montana-grown or raised is considered local.

Beyond the economic benefit to his community, buying local has a special meaning for Giacomino. “It’s great to be able to go to the local butcher and shake his hand, and he knows who I am,” he says of his local meat processor, Hamilton Packing Co. “You just get a better product, something you can be proud of. And local farmers visiting the kids, that’s one of the biggest benefits.”

On the education side, Harvey and Belanger agree that



community engagement is crucial. In the school year 2022-2023, they designed three farmer-in-the-classroom days, as a part of HOM, where second and third grade students met their local producers.

“We partnered with different local partners to come in and be kind of a guest farmer for the kids,” says Harvey. “We really wanted to take the onus off of the teachers.”

The first was an apple taste test in October with Samantha O’Byrne with O’Hara Commons. Collecting apples was a community effort, with Nichols bringing 40 pounds of apples from the Western Agricultural Research Center in Corvallis, in addition to donations from kids. Harvey even brought in apples from her mother’s backyard tree.

“It brought up so many good questions,” remembers Harvey. “They wanted to know, ‘Why do we have different apples? And how do you get apples from one tree? And how do you grow them?’” Other farmer-in-the-classroom events have included a brassica lesson with Laura Garber from Homestead Organics in November, and in February, Blankenbaker read the children’s book *Tops and Bottoms* for the month’s beet showcase.

Soon, Hamilton students will investigate their plant-related questions with hands-on, experiential learning in the school’s quarter-acre garden near Daly Elementary. Created years ago, it later went into disuse. Nichols applied for and was awarded two grants to revive the plot.

The dream for the garden includes: “six beds, some fruit trees, some raspberry canes, rhubarb, a pumpkin patch, and an outdoor education space,” shares Nichols. “In the

next six months, we want to put in beds and ADA accessible walking paths. We also want to plant a traditional Salish garden in one of the beds. We’re hoping that will be a really good way for people to learn about traditional Salish foods and medicinal plants.”

Cooperation is key

In their first year, Hamilton Farm to School has accomplished much of what it set out to do. For its role, Harvey credits the Institute for getting the program on its feet. “I think it’s hard for schools to find motivation to start, and that is one of the benefits [of the Institute],” she says. “It’s structured enough that it puts pieces in place for you to begin, but then also it’s not super binding. We have to do some reporting, but it’s not over the top, and we didn’t have to pay thousands of dollars to participate.”

Hamilton’s team also found there’s strength in numbers. “It’s probably scary to a lot of food service directors, especially a new one,” Giacomino says. “Find a team. If you were to do it by yourself, it would be very challenging. I don’t have time during the day to teach a class...And I don’t have the knowledge. They [the teachers] are more suited to teaching classes about food.”

Their final piece of advice? “Have fun,” says Harvey. “You can get lost in the weeds of worrying about things. And it’s like, no, it’s actually really fun stuff to be working on. And I have to remind myself of that sometimes, too.”

For more information about Hamilton Farm to School, follow their website for updates, volunteer events, and impressive farm to school merch. And 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 finding local food solutions for your school meal program:

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