



# THE THREE C'S OF HARDIN FARM TO SCHOOL: CAFETERIA, CLASSROOM, AND COMMUNITY

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## A FARM-TO-SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Image: Evan and Terri Van Order from Living Root Farm at Farmer in the Cafeteria at Crow Agency Public School

HARDIN, Mont. – A growing number of schools in Montana are adopting innovative approaches to bring local food onto their school menus and into their classrooms. This trend follows a nationwide push in school food service from the “heat and serve” model to scratch cooking using mainly fresh and whole ingredients. Simultaneously, more and more students are gaining knowledge about their local and regional food systems and how they can make a real impact in their communities through food.

Hardin School District 17H & I, located in Big Horn County, Montana, and on the Crow Reservation, has gone above and beyond in demonstrating how schools can bring cafeteria, classroom, and community together through delicious and nutritious local and regional foods.

Elle Ross, Hardin’s Farm to School Director, and Marlo Spreng, Director of Nutrition, are spearheading their

district’s efforts to integrate food service and farm to school education. For Ross, her passion for local food and agriculture stems from working over eight years at her local farmer’s market in St. Louis, Missouri. She later served for two years with FoodCorps at Hardin Public Schools, where she later assumed her current role in 2017.

Marlo Spreng, who brings decades of experience in fine-dining restaurants from around the United States, was no stranger to the “farm to table” concept when she joined Hardin Schools in 2019 from her previous role as head chef at Walkers Grill in Billings, MT. With her dedication to bringing healthy and kid-loving meals into the cafeteria, Spreng has worked with Ross to ensure every aspect of farm to school, from garden lessons to local food procurement, has staying power.

From Ross’s perspective, “Farm to school supports everything that’s happening in the cafeteria, and school nutrition is supporting everything that farm to school does in terms of learning opportunities, taste tests, and that shared space of food as community.” Together, Ross and Spreng connect the classroom, cafeteria, and community through healthy, local foods.

### **Farm to classroom**

Ross and Hardin FoodCorps members have created a comprehensive and engaging food education program for Hardin’s pre-K through 5th grade students. The program introduces students to local producers through farm field trips, classroom visits, and at mock farmers markets in the school cafeteria. Ross also designs recipes and conducts taste tests featuring Montana-grown foods featured in Harvest of the Month (HOM), like lentils, chokecherries, and beets. Over the years, Ross has observed a significant increase in teacher buy-in for farm-to-school education.

“I started [in FoodCorps] with three classes sporadically, K through 12, like once a month. By the second year, I was teaching 18 classes a week for K through 5,” says Ross of her FoodCorps experience. “I think it just shows how excited people are to try new foods and to have that education component of how our food grows and where it comes from.”



*Image: First graders from Crow Agency Public School harvesting*



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Spreng was introduced to the “farm to school” concept by Ross and was convinced of its impacts from the start. “When I first started, [I’d] see a kid in [the] middle school run up to [Ross] and tell her, ‘Oh, I tried the beets today!’” Spreng recalls. “You can literally see it work.” According to Ross and Spreng’s philosophy, a classroom-to-cafeteria connection engages students to try more foods in the cafeteria, leading to healthier food choices and less food waste.

Ross’s next goal is to build the infrastructure and tools for more students, teachers, and community members to engage with farm to school. In 2020, Ross applied for and received a \$75,000 USDA Farm to School grant to build a high tunnel and ten raised beds at the school’s eight-acre farm. A majority of produce from the high tunnel will supplement the school’s lunch program.

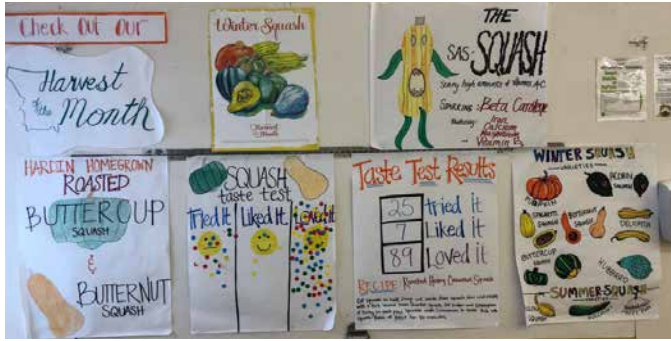
Ross works closely with teachers across the district to integrate the school farm and farm to school education into every classroom, K-12. For example, in fall 2023, Ross plans to have a buffalo hunt with the high school P.E. teacher, which is also a way of implementing Indian Education for All within the context of Crow culture and food sovereignty goals. In five years, Ross will incorporate

student-led projects and entrepreneurship around food and agriculture topics. With these plans in motion, Ross and Spreng are taking an incremental approach to ensure each step is thoughtful and well-executed.

“That’s one of the things that we’ve been working on really hard this last year, is to make sure that when we do something, we might do it a little bit slower,” says Ross. “But we’re doing it right. We’re taking our time, so it’s not just this one thing that we did one time.”

### **A fresh perspective in schools meals**

At Hardin schools, the same philosophy applies to the kitchen as it does to the classroom. In 2022, Hardin Public Schools became one of seven schools—and the first from Montana—to be selected for the Chef Ann Foundation’s “Get Schools Cooking” strategic planning program. Chef Ann, a former food service director for Boulder Valley School District in Colorado, created the initiative to help schools transition from “heat and serve” to a scratch cook operational model incrementally over three years. Consultants meet one-on-one with school food service directors and administration to assess the school and community from top to bottom.



“[The Chef Ann Foundation] will dive into our finances, our background, everything that we have been doing and assess that on a broader level to see what’s possible and how school nutrition can utilize farm to school more,” says Ross.

Prior to joining “Get Schools Cooking,” Hardin Schools demonstrated their desire to incorporate healthy foods by putting salad bars into every school. Ross and Spreng also coordinated with local producers, such as Living Root Farms and High Five Meats, to purchase local foods for the salad bars and Montana’s Harvest of the Month program. They also started conversations with regional food hubs, like the Western Montana Growers Cooperative and Yellowstone Food Hub.

With help from Chef Ann, Hardin is planning for a sustainable future, regardless of who’s running the show. “We’re super excited, but the best part is that the plan is to be sustainable,” says Spreng. “If I’m not here, if Elle’s not here, it can move forward.”

One way they plan to do this is through the school’s food service policy. Currently, Hardin School District spends between \$10,000 to \$20,000 annually on local foods. In collaboration with the district’s superintendent, Spreng looks to solidify a local food purchasing goal into Hardin’s food service policy manual for future years.

“Then my budget will be guaranteed if somebody on the [school] board five years from now says, ‘Oh, you’re buying ground beef for that? You can buy it for half the price,’” says Spreng. “And I can say, ‘We’ve made a commitment to spend \$10,000 locally, and I’m using it to purchase beef.’ You want it to be sustainable.”

## “It’s creating opportunity”

As a community-based program, Ross and Spreng aim to promote economic and cultural vitality through farm to school, because they recognize there’s a significant local need. “Plenty Doors, which is a nonprofit here, recently did an economic study. They said [we have] 85% economic leakage, which means [for] every dollar that you have in Bighorn County, 85% of it is going out. That’s a huge disadvantage to our community,” says Ross. “To have those opportunities, being able to have resources for students, for the community to continue to grow, thrive, and sustain, is the most important part, and really what we’re reaching for.”

Ross creates opportunities for students to explore local food and agricultural enterprises and nonprofits as a means of demonstrating what’s possible and to ensure students have access to food outside of school. In spring 2023, Ross organized two half-day field trips. On one day, students started broccoli, spinach, and lettuce in the school’s greenhouse. Later in the semester, students planted the vegetable starts at Helping Hands, Hardin’s community food bank where Ross also serves as Executive Director.

For those interested in starting a farm to school program, Ross encourages them to stick it out for the long haul. “Time and relationship building is so important...it’s not going to happen overnight. It takes time to both build relationships but then to also just be in it and celebrate those little steps along the way that I always forget...it’s a lot more than what’s happening in the day-to-day. It’s creating that system. It’s creating opportunity.”

Interested in creating local food opportunities in your school district? Reach out to our team of local food innovators ready to help find local food solutions for your school meal program:

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