



Connecting family, community and health from a food system perspective

Abstract: This project focused on identifying reasons why families with school-age children do or do not regularly consume locally grown foods, as well as strategies to increase consumption of locally grown foods by families.

Principal Investigator:

Kim Greder
ISU Extension
Iowa State University

Co-investigators:

LaVon Eblen
Harrisdale Homestead
Atlantic

Emily Krentel
Cass County Memorial Hospital
Atlantic

Ardyth Gillespie
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York

Cornelia Butler Flora
Sociology
Iowa State University

Budget:
\$15,711 for year one
\$24,037 for year two

Q What are the perspectives of parents with school-age children in Cass County regarding locally grown foods as a regular food source for their children? Which current assets in Cass County can be further mobilized to increase the consumption of locally grown foods by families with school-age children?

A Focus group and individual interviews with parents, local growers, and community leaders, as well as surveys distributed to parents helped to provide answers to the project questions. Findings revealed that parents desire locally grown food, but it needs to be affordable and accessible. Many parents lack knowledge, skill and confidence on how to include locally grown foods within family snacks/meals. Involving children in growing and preparing food increases their interest in eating it. Relationships between growers and families can increase appreciation for and consumption of locally grown food. Relationships between growers and influential community leaders are key to increasing availability of locally grown food in the community



MARKETING

Background

Strengthening awareness of and access to locally-grown food (whether grown by a family or by a local producer) can help strengthen a local economy and potentially increase food security among families. It also may increase the consumption of specific foods such as fruits and vegetables by a local population, which can help reduce the prevalence of diet-related chronic diseases (i.e., obesity, heart disease and diabetes). Both families and the communities in which they live have assets that can be tapped to make environments more supportive of healthy eating practices and to improve the availability, access and appreciation of locally grown foods.

The project focused on these objectives:

1. Explore how to make locally grown food a regular viable healthy food source for Cass County families with school-age children.
2. Identify values, priorities, experiences, and knowledge of Cass County families with school-age children that shape how they make decisions about food and whether or not to include locally grown foods in their daily eating.
3. Identify assets in Cass County that can be invested to improve the appreciation, availability and accessibility of locally grown food to families with school-age children.

Approach and methods

Tasks for Year 1:

- Conduct literature review to better understand the topic.



Cass County parents focus group

- Connect with area organizations interested in promoting locally grown foods to share project goals/objectives and discuss how to align common goals.
- Identify project awareness building activities.
- Develop project marketing materials (e.g., brochure).
- Make connections with local groups to market project activities and develop plans for collaborative efforts.
- Plan and conduct field trips with families to visit local growers
- Conduct hands-on workshops with families to help them learn how to prepare the produce they grew in their garden boxes

Tasks for Year 2:

- Conduct two or three focus groups with parents of school-age children to gather insight into their experiences with and perceptions of locally grown food being a viable food choice in their family's daily eating.
- Conduct focus group with local growers and community leaders to understand the community and local policy context for support of locally grown foods.
- Develop interactive display focused on locally grown foods that includes a short survey for parents of school-age children. Use survey results to further inform project activities.
- Facilitate workshops to help families learn how to grow food in garden boxes.
- Plan, facilitate and evaluate parent/child cooking sessions to prepare local foods.
- Market project activities via local news media, and school newsletters/flyers.
- Conduct four to six follow-up interviews with parents who participated in project activities to learn how the activities influenced their thinking and consumption of locally grown food.

Results and discussion

Cass County parents who were part of this project wanted to serve locally grown foods to their children because they believed this food was produced with fewer chemicals and was healthier than food grown elsewhere and sold in grocery stores. They wanted to support the local economy by buying food from local growers. Some families who participated in the project raised animals for meat and already grew their own food, which they regularly used in family meals.

Barriers identified by parents that prevented them from serving local foods included:

1. The grocery store in their community did not carry locally grown food and they would have to travel some distance to purchase locally grown food.
2. The farmers' market was open for only a limited time on certain days, was not in a convenient location and did not carry a variety of produce.
3. Belief that it was more expensive to purchase locally grown food at the grocery store, farmers' market or directly from growers than it was to purchase other produce at grocery stores.



4. Lack of knowledge regarding how to store and prepare locally grown produce or how to include unfamiliar items (e.g., eggplant) in family recipes.
5. Lack of time to prepare produce.
6. Belief that a lot of space was needed to grow produce.
7. Belief that locally grown food (particularly produce) spoils quicker than other foods (canned, frozen).
8. Lack of knowledge about how to grow produce.
9. Belief that their children would not like fresh vegetables.

Key factors that influenced parents' food purchases were:

- Will family members eat the food item?
- Is the food item healthy/nutritious?
- How much does the food item cost?
- How quickly will the food item spoil?
- Is the food item simple and easy to prepare?

Conclusions

1. Parents and children are interested in food. Parents want their children to eat healthy and children like to grow and prepare food. Parents and children want to grow and prepare food together. Assumptions parents have about their children's food preferences can influence the kinds of foods children consume.
2. It is critical to involve the target audience (in this case, parents with school-age children) in planning the project. To successfully recruit the target audience, it is beneficial to partner with an influential person/organization that has similar goals and direct, regular contact with the audience.
3. The most important factors in family participation are whether project goals and activities align with family values and goals, and activities are scheduled when families are able to participate. Scheduling activities in coordination with other activities in which families are participating can help increase program participation. However, remains difficult for families to participate due to family schedule conflicts. The one-time cooking sessions and demonstrations were more successful in attracting families than a series of cooking sessions.
4. Getting families hooked. Once families engaged in project activities, they were excited and wanted to continue. The key was to get them to take part in a project activity.

Impact of results

Findings from this project reveal that parents with young children are concerned about "healthy food" and many parents prefer food that is locally grown. Children will eat more fresh produce if they are involved in planting and/or preparing the produce. If families become more aware of and experience locally grown food, they can become strong advocates for food produced in Iowa for human consumption.

However, price is an important consideration for families, especially those with lower household incomes, in determining what food they purchase.

The activities included in this program can guide other communities in moving toward the Iowa Food and Farm Plan goals of increased food dollars spent on locally grown and processed foods and building local coalitions of consumers/co-producers with producers, distributors and other food system stakeholders for collective planning. The networks that were formed among parents and food providers as part of the project activities can facilitate new innovations in healthy eating for Cass County families beyond this project.

The value of involving parents and children in learning about locally grown food and how to grow and prepare food for personal consumption was an important aspect of the project. Parents and children are interested in food and health and being together. Iowa needs to identify opportunities for parents and their children to discover and learn together vs. separately. Information and findings from this project have been shared with Cass County Cultivators, Healthy Cass County, Cass County Blue Zones Committee and the Cass County Food Policy Council to help inform local activities and policies regarding the local food system.

The methods and findings from the project can help inform community planning for enhancing the availability, accessibility and appreciation of locally grown food. Identifying family and community assets and strengths and bringing community food system stakeholders together with community organizations to collectively plan and develop sustainable food systems can enhance health and well-being of children, their families and communities. By increasing children's experiential awareness of locally grown food, children become more interested in food and will influence family food purchases.

Education and outreach

Findings from the focus group interviews with parents appear in the publication: Gredler, K. and Gillette, M. Local foods and families in Cass County. Iowa State University Extension Publication, SP383a.

The main focus of this project was educational outreach to families with school-age children. Nearly 400 parents and school-age children participated in project activities about growing food and preparing locally grown food. Project activities included: parent/child cooking sessions, cooking demonstrations, building and planting garden boxes, workshops focused on growing produce, and field trips to local growers.

Data was collected from 96 parents regarding their values, priorities, experiences and knowledge that shape how they make decisions about food and whether to include locally grown foods in their daily eating. Information was collected from 20 community leaders and growers to identify community assets that can be invested to improve the value, availability and accessibility of locally grown food to families with school-age children.



Cass County -- Griswold mural.

The PIs planned to conduct focus group interviews with parents of school-age children early in year one to inform project activities. Due to funds arriving later than planned (close to the growing season), and the unavailability of a key local project member, they moved directly to project activities (e.g., teaching families how to grow local produce). They partnered with local organizations that had similar goals (Healthy Cass County) to get families actively involved in learning about growing food for individual family consumption. Given the timing of the grant start date, they were not able to market the project activities in time, resulting in lower than anticipated program participation during year one. During year two, they conducted focus group interviews with parents of school-age children to further inform program activities.

Leveraged funds

Among the many agencies and additional funds involved in carrying out the project:

- ISU Extension to Families (\$300)
- ISU Extension to Families (\$120)
- Healthy Cass County (\$100)
- Cass County Memorial Hospital (\$60).
- Cass County Memorial Hospital (\$300) and Harrisdale Homestead (\$300)
- Anita Health and Wellness (\$25)
- Healthy Cass County (\$100) and Cass County Conservation (\$100)
- An Iowa State University student participated in a summer internship in Cass County and collaborated with project staff by helping families learn how to build garden boxes and grow vegetables, as well as assisted with project evaluation (\$500)
- Hy-Vee (\$75)

**For more information,
contact:**

*Kimberly Greder,
Human Development
and Family Studies, 56
LeBaron Hall, Iowa
State University, Ames,
Iowa 50011-4380;
(515) 294-5906, e-mail
kgreder@iastate.edu*