

# KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

## Food from the Farm – Promoting Healthy Eating in Kindergarten Classrooms

In Kansas City, Missouri, schools are undertaking a new approach to improving the health of children as well as their families. Dubbed “Food from the Farm,” this program is aimed at teaching kindergarteners about healthy foods and healthy eating, providing them with the necessary tools to make the healthy choice. An adaptation of the Food Trust program known as the Kindergarten Initiative, Food from the Farm has reshaped and modified this program to address the needs of their own population. Implemented in four urban schools and three rural schools, these schools serve low-income, minority families, where almost 90 percent of children receive free or reduced lunch, making it an important issue to improve the eating habits of children.

The aim of Food from the Farm is to connect kindergarteners and their families to local farmers as a means to encourage eating local fruits and vegetables and to help kids understand where food comes from. The program consists of four main components. The first is creating healthy eating and agriculture lessons that are taught in the kindergarten classrooms. The second is having local fruit and vegetable tastings in the classroom to give children multiple exposures and encourage children to develop a preference for fruits and vegetables. The third is bringing children to



Kindergarteners with their parents exploring the farms where their food comes from

local farms in the fall and spring so that they can understand how food is grown. The fourth component is increasing parent engagement.

The first step of the program is to train all involved kindergarten teachers and at least one school administrator about the goals of the program and the lesson plans. Teachers are trained on using positive language when discussing food to help students develop positive attitudes towards food. Each classroom is equipped with a poster that has different facial expressions and phrases that children are encouraged to use. Ranging from “I like it a lot” to “I don’t like it yet,” this poster encourages students to maintain a positive attitude towards food, and has them recognize that even if they do not like a food yet, if they continue to try the food they can eventually develop a preference for it later.

Realizing that there may be some hesitancy among teachers because of a perception that they must develop a new style of teaching, the Food from the Farm lesson plans are aligned with the Missouri grade-level expectations and state standards. The lessons are crafted in a way that they can be easily integrated into normal subject lessons such as science, math, or the visual arts, allowing for easy transition into raising awareness about healthy eating and making healthy choices.



Teachers showing students how to make healthy foods

One of the largest obstacles that Food from the Farm must overcome is getting parents involved. The program is aimed at changing the eating behaviors of children; however, without the active involvement of parents, children are unable to maintain these healthy eating behaviors at home. Thus, Food from the Farm aims to reach out to parents by inviting them to come to the farms with their children so that they too can develop an understanding of how food is grown and what healthy eating is. The program also sends home newsletters to parents to educate them on what their children are learning and what types of behaviors to encourage at home. Weekly email messages are also sent out that consist of short and sweet actionable messages about healthy eating or how to get kids to eat healthy—such as encouraging parents to let children help cook at home or let children pick foods in the grocery stores.

Food from the Farm's success is due to the participation and involvement of various key players. With the help of Kansas City Healthy Kids, the Food Trust and grant funding through the Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City, the program gained the structural and financial support to be established. Other important key players include the farmers, who have been very supportive and active in educating children and their families as well as providing the fruits and vegetables used at the schools. Food from the Farm has also partnered up with the food service management company, OPPA, whom have undertaken the role of preparing the fruits and vegetables and



Farmers teaching kindergarteners how food is grown on the farm



integrating this process into the school's regular food program.

Not only has Food from the Farm improved the eating behaviors of participating students and their families, but it has also positively impacted policies. Because of student's positive reactions to fruits and vegetables, two of the participating schools have improved snack offerings to the entire school. One school has changed from offering such snacks as Oreos to serving cheeses, fruits, and whole grains. Food from the Farm has now increased their focus on the policy side, working to incorporate the use of local foods in the food services at the schools.

As the program reaches the end of its grant fund, Food from the Farm is focusing their efforts on ensuring that the schools can be self-sustainable as well as finding policy areas that they can help schools facilitate. Food from the Farm also hopes to integrate another program called Early Sprouts, a pre-kindergarten/pre-school gardening program that will create two strong developmental years in healthy eating.

Food from the Farm tackles the issue of unhealthy eating behaviors at a young age. Realizing that teaching children healthy eating behaviors from a young age will improve the likelihood that these children will continue these practices as they age, Food from the Farm integrates healthy eating behaviors into their school curriculum. However, Food from the Farm expands their influence by engaging parents in learning more about healthy eating behaviors, fostering an environment in which the first choice that both parents and children opt for is the healthier choice.

**For more information:**

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