



FOCUSING ON SCHOOL CULTURE TO STRENGTHEN FARM TO SCHOOL

PHOTO CREDIT: USDA

FARM TO SCHOOL (FTS) PROGRAMS ARE GROWING, uniting a variety of school-based initiatives and needs under one tent in order to integrate local, healthy foods into schools. While FTS has many benefits, from increasing student engagement to addressing childhood obesity and supporting economic development in local communities, it is important to understand what factors will ensure its long term success and staying power.

A school's culture is one of the most powerful predictors of success in implementing new educational strategies¹. School culture is both the explicit and implicit values, traditions, and messages expressed in the day to day affairs of a school, and has been linked to educational value measures including teacher behavior, which impacts curriculum, school climate, and student achievement².

SCHOOL CULTURE OFTEN GOES UNEXAMINED, leaving the faculty and staff unaware of the influence it has in guiding professional decision-making and programming³. In order to fully realize the many benefits of FTS, schools need to be fertile ground for these programs to take hold. Understanding the intersection of FTS and school culture will help ensure that innovations such as FTS have long term staying power.

A recent evaluation by PEER Associates of the Vermont FEED (Food Education Every Day) Northeast FTS Institute noted that 9 out of 10 schools participating in the program identified improvements in school culture.

FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS WITH TEN VERMONT SCHOOL PRINCIPALS were conducted in order to provide a greater understanding of the intersection between FTS and school culture. Interviews were conducted with principals from previous FTS Institute schools with at least 30% of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches, and every effort was made to ensure the schools' demographics were representative of Vermont. After reviewing the interviews for common threads, several major themes emerged, summarized as:

Farm to School becomes embedded into a school's culture when planning and experimentation are supported through relationships, and the value of Farm to School is experienced by and communicated to the school community.

The following contains details on the three major themes found and recommendations for school professionals.

¹ Anderman, 1991; Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996

² Meier, 2012, Stolp & Smith, 1995

³ Joseph, 1999

1 RELATIONSHIPS ARE FOUNDATIONAL

Successful FTS programming was often attributed to strong foundational community partnerships and internal relationships with school nutrition professionals, teachers, and other school staff that supported innovation. FTS often requires added planning and experimentation by school faculty and child nutrition professionals, and as such, relationships and trust were key in setting the stage for a healthy school culture that could embrace FTS. When asked how her school's culture has shifted since engaging in FTS, one principal said:

It's not as a result of engaging in FTS. FTS is a component... All this is because we're engaging in relationships and community building and we're putting that first.

Before FTS can be successful, relationships with key stakeholders within the school must already be cultivated. As an example, students who grew produce as part of their curriculum and brought the produce to the cafeteria developed a new relationship with school nutrition staff:

instead of just seeing them as the cook or the people in the kitchen, they're able to have more of a conversation of what they're bringing to them and why they're bringing them these items.

She also noted that students who engaged with school nutrition staff better understood the school's menu, adding:

that's where it starts, having that conversation. Each party understanding the why's.

External community partnerships, specifically with local farms, aided in curriculum integration and family well-being. Strong relationships with farmers helped teachers and students access relevant and meaningful content and gain hands-on skills. School nutrition professionals in relationship with farmers helped them source local food. Relationships with

community partners and other schools is vital to FTS success. One principal shared:

We're making an extension, we're making connections with others schools, other people. This work cannot be done in isolation.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- celebrate the successes of FTS program development with a variety of stakeholders
- acknowledge small successes in staff development along the way, with an eye towards continual, incremental growth
- school leaders, teachers and child nutrition directors should develop relationship-building strategies within the school and with the larger community as a foundation for effective partnerships
- language around FTS programming should be aligned to reflect the values of other educational and/or community-supported initiatives

2 VALUE MUST BE EXPERIENCED & COMMUNICATED

In order for FTS to take root, the value must be experienced by a diversity of players in a school and communicated to the extended school community. Many principals indicated that FTS programs aligned with their school and community culture that put “what’s best for students” at the heart of their educational practice. Not surprisingly, many principals first spoke to engaging in FTS because of the academic benefits to students:

If we had tried to do that [FTS] in a traditional classroom, there’s always a handful of kids who either aren’t going to get it or they’re going to get frustrated and then it becomes a behavior issue, but... when they’re seeing it, feeling it, and touching it, they are able to be successful.

In addition to the academic outcomes, students experience benefits through the school nutrition program. One principal talked about the value to the whole child such as having:

their basic needs met... getting exercise... putting nutrition in their bodies, [and supporting] the social and emotional needs of the kids.

The community plays a large role in demonstrating FTS's value. A student visit to a local farm was described as:

probably one of the best trips that they’ve ever had, and we’re a fairly poor community, so we don’t have access to a lot of things that other kids have for trips.

While it’s clear FTS has great value for students (in addition to the bulk of research showing how FTS can bolster local economies), this value must be clearly and regularly communicated to multiple stakeholders in the school community and beyond in order to create a groundswell of support. FTS efforts are communicated in various ways including: newsletters, daily announcements, policies, and hiring practices.

Several principals said FTS becomes part of the school culture when the values inherent in FTS mirror the values found in the community. One principal noted:

When you’re looking at FTS and when you’re looking at our school culture, our students realize that’s who we are and they should be really proud of that.

Previous research reinforces that if FTS is to become embedded into a school and benefit students and the community, it must be supported by the values, traditions, and messages of the school staff⁴.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- plan and implement regular communication about FTS programming through multiple means
- highlight the values of FTS to a variety of school stakeholders, including, but not limited to: families, school board members, all staff members and faculty, and school district administration
- use already in-place means of communication about the school menu - website, Facebook, newsletters - to share stories about local farm partnerships and new recipe taste tests
- gather and document stories to give regular reports and testimony from students on the value of FTS to administrators and school boards

⁴ Stolp & Smith, 1995

3 PRIORITIZATION LEADS TO EMBEDDEDNESS

As relationships are developed among multiple stakeholders in the school community and FTS value is experienced, FTS becomes more deeply embedded into school culture. Embeddedness - or the nature of being deeply ingrained in school and community practices - is recognized when FTS is explicitly connected to other initiatives, integrated into daily practice, and supported through policies and resource allocation.

Multiple principals indicated that while turnover in positions is undesirable, they used open positions to embed FTS in the job application criteria. Other means of prioritizing FTS included providing stipends for FTS committee members as a way to honor the time members spend above and beyond normal contract hours:

we have some dedicated [FTS] staff and they are paid a nominal fee to do it. They would do it anyway because it is a passion of theirs... I give them that small stipend just to say 'thank you.'

In addition to stipends, principals are supporting FTS efforts in their schools by allocating resources for professional learning of all staff, from food service trainings to whole-school professional development on connecting academic standards with FTS. Another strategy to make FTS easier to use and get teachers on board with school-wide taste tests is to provide support staff. A principal noted that their school has assembled a FTS committee to help plan activities because they acknowledge that Farm to School:

is one sliver of what a teacher has to do in the course of their year... we have the farm to school committee that does a lot of that work for the teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- FTS needs to be seen as part of a larger system of policies and activities supporting healthy food choices for children
- students, faculty, and child nutrition professionals should provide principals and other administrators with opportunities to learn about and experience the value of FTS programs by inviting them to dine with students and see students engaging in hands-on learning experiences through FTS
- invite outside personnel into the cafeteria to experience both the challenges and celebrate the successes of their staff's efforts in order to generate empathy and support for the child nutrition program
- set goals with staff and departments in a way tailored to meet individual needs and comfort levels with FTS programming
- advocate for increased planning and reflection time, stipends and committees to support integration of FTS programming
- dedicate time during contract hours or allocate funds to support staff and faculty in planning for FTS programming

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