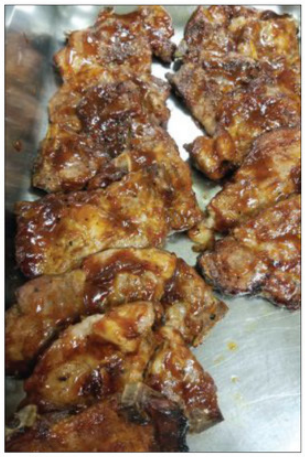
Ideas at Work | *Innovative initiatives raise the bar*

By Penny McLaren

Farm At School

» Discover one school nutrition program's exciting—and expanding—partnership with students engaged in agriculture sciences.



STUDENTS SOMETIMES HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL LUNCH IS READY TO BE SERVED. IN WISCONSIN, STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF HOLMEN WAIT UNTIL IT *GROWS.* All schools in the district have gardens, but these youngsters are raising *acres* of fresh produce: lettuce, asparagus, watermelon, corn, squash, apples. And what makes this district quite different from other farm-to-school initiatives profiled in *School Nutrition* is that students are also providing the school meal program with *meat* products from their own livestock. (Numerous chickens, seventeen pigs and two sheep, to be exact.)

It's quite possibly the perfect cafeteria-education partnership, because it's more than a farm-to-table dining experience: It's a student-run, school-farm-to-school-cafeteria-table initiative.

An Agri-ccomplishment For Michael Gasper, Holmen Nutrition Services supervisor, and 2018-19 Wisconsin SNA President, his team's role in getting kids *directly* involved in raising food that will be served on the cafeteria menu is at the heart of their mission. "Forming a relationship with the kids is more important than the food you are serving," he says. "We get involved in the educational aspect. It's at the whole core of what we do." Gasper has headed up Holmen's Nutrition Services operation for the last 12 years.

This rural district is composed of one high school, one middle school and four elementary schools—enrolling some 3,800 students. Participation in the school meals program is significant, regularly around 83%, and even higher on special meal days. The student-raised meat and crops often can feed *all* students who opt for a cafeteria lunch.

Holmen is one of 18 communities in La Crosse County, Wisc. Local television station WKBT sponsors an annual "Best of La Crosse County" competition. In the 2019 "Places to Eat" category—which included commercial restaurants from all across the county—the winner of the Best Farm to Table establishment was (trumpet fanfare): Holmen School District!

How have they made it all happen? How does a school nutrition services program get voted the best farm-to-table place to eat in town? How does a school district go about raising food items that the students love to eat?

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The School District of Holmen is quite possibliy the perfect cafeteria-education partnership because it's more than a farm-to-table dining experience: It's a student-run, school-farm-to-table initiative.

An Idea Takes Root "It was the 'perfect storm' of factors," answers Gasper, explaining the initial coincidental connections that began eight years ago. A then-recent hire in the Nutrition Services office shared her enthusiasm for her new job with her husband, an Agri Science teacher at Holmen High—and advisor of the school's FFA (Future Farmers of America) chapter. When one member sought to cultivate hydroponic lettuce as an FFA capstone project (required of graduating seniors), the question was, er…*planted*: Might Nutrition Services be able to use the lettuce harvest? Gasper knew he'd be able to serve all the fresh lettuce he could get from them. "That's where it started," he says.

The next year, a different student had another capstone project idea that would involve Gasper and his team: Would Nutrition Services make use of *chickens*? Gasper knew that accepting raw meat products would be quite a different undertaking from accepting fresh produce. Still, he was willing to partner with the students. "I once heard [SNA Past President] Dr. Katie Wilson, SNS, share the philosophy that sometimes you have to jump out of the plane before knowing whether your parachute will open," credits Gasper.

He worked out issues related to the processing, transport and storage of the chickens (more on that in a bit)—and did so again when a student inquired about raising pigs and using fresh pork in school meal offerings. The students bring ideas, the Nutrition Services team works them out and more fresh ideas just keep coming. "It has all morphed into something way bigger than we could have imagined," marvels Gasper, advising that others interested in following his cooperative lead start small. (The hydroponics project was a lot more manageable, he concedes.)

Pecking Away at Problems But if you do want to know how to incorporate fresh, student-farm-raised livestock in your school meal program, Gasper has cleared the field, so to speak. Here are just a few of the obstacles he encountered—and surmounted:

» The chickens grow up fast—from chick to full-grown in 37 to 41 days. The FFA students get an education in feeding and raising them. At full size, the students send them off, by truck, to a poultry processor.

» Nutrition Services had to use a poultry processor that was USDA-certified. He identified one that was a 45-minute drive from Holmen. Students accompany the truck and observe all steps in the processing of live animal to meat.

» "Getting the chickens there was one thing—but once the chickens were processed, how would we get it all *back* to our school?" Gasper approached his distributor. Theoretically, they could buy the chicken from the FFA chapter, through the school district, but only if the district carried the proper type of insurance, which it did *not*.

» Gasper sought another partner, eventually find-

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ing a local food co-op that had the proper insurance coverage and the willingness to help. The district could sell the chicken to the co-op, which, in turn, sold it to the distributor, who accepted the chicken frozen from the processor and stored it until the school district would buy it back.

» Nutrition Services team members get extra training in safe handling of raw meat and other less-processed items and entrées. ("We were moving in that direction anyway," Gasper says of the district's decreased reliance on pre-cooked menu items.)

A school-raised flock of 650 birds feeds all Holmen students—elementary through high school—at one special annual lunch. "Winner Winner Chicken Dinner" has become an eagerly anticipated January event for the past five years. The meal is served by the FFA students, with assistance from the Nutrition Services team. In 2019, the menu also featured school-raised pork chops with gravy (because not everyone likes chicken, confides Gasper). Other components of the reimbursable meal are FFA-raised corn, as well as locally sourced Wisconsin potatoes, a whole-grain roll and chocolate beet cake.

Other Meat Matters To use the pork from student-raised pigs, Gasper had to make some adjustments to his process. He tapped the resources of the Hunger Task Force of La Crosse, an area food bank, and used a different meat processor, one that is a little more than 30 minutes away. The food bank picks up the processed pork in a freezer truck and stores it until Nutrition Services is ready. "It is a different partnership entirely," explains Gasper. "Forging those relationships with people we know in the industry and community is important. We couldn't do it without them."

Besides butchering for pork chops, the processor can turn the FFA-produced pork into low-sodium Italian sausage—used by Nutrition Services in lasagna as a substitute for beef crumbles—plus "country-style" ribs and low-sodium bacon. Nutrition Services now offers an annual Barbeque Blues Day when they serve the pork in all the schools, another highly popular lunch day. And meat from FFA-raised sheep is a brand-new menu item. This has been used in gyros, which, Gasper reports, were a huge hit with students.

New Ideas Crop Up Before we completely lose any vegetarian or vegan readers, it's worth recounting the many ways Holmen's Nutrition Services team incorporates school-grown produce items in its menus. Gasper claims they have what is probably the largest school asparagus garden in the U.S.—some 2,500 asparagus plants are grown in a field on school property. The harvest coincides with the

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end of the school year. "Asparagus is easy to grow," Gasper asserts. "It requires zero maintenance. All you do after harvest is mow it down. Then it comes back the next spring, and there's even more of it."

What do they do with all that asparagus? Most of it is served as part of a special Surf and Turf end-of-the-school-year lunch at the high school. The roasted asparagus is served with grilled steak (featuring beef from a farm just down the road), along with garlic shrimp skewers, Wisconsin-grown baked potatoes and a wheat roll. This year, 835 high school students took part in the meal.

Partnerships abound to help the FFA students in their activities. Nutrition Services kicks in funds to pay for seed, fertilizer and other expenses. ("It is part of the cost of the meal; we would be buying food, anyway," explains Gasper.) One local farmer donated the use of three acres close to the high school, land where students are now growing corn. Gasper says that a few more area farmers have expressed an interest in letting Holmen students grow crops on their land. "As more people hear about it, they want to get involved," he says.

Not everything is a success—but it all makes for good learning experiences! Gasper recounts struggles to grow potatoes in poor soil, as well as one time when raccoons enjoyed a feast of cantaloupe before it could be harvested. "We have had more success than failure, though," Gasper points out. For example, an apple orchard will soon feature 75 trees planted by each elementary school class—and, so far, has fared well against hungry deer, thanks to a 10-foot fence built by the FFA students. The apple trees take just three to five years to develop and each class will tend its tree until graduation. "Someday," predicts Gasper, "*their* kids will be eating apples from those trees."

Fields of Dreams With the genie completely out of the bottle, Gasper is excited to help expand his department's partnership with Holmen's agriculture students. (These not only include the FFA members, but participants in Holmen's new Agriculture

WHAT IS FFA?

SNA, meet FFA. The National FFA organization (the acronym now replaces Future Farmers of America in official communications), encourages students to develop leadership skills and explore careers in agricultural production, as well as other fields. "With more than 250 careers in agriculture, there are many opportunities for our students to become involved," explains Kristy Meyers, National FFA communications manager. "Through agricultural education classes, they are able to explore a variety of these opportunities." She also points to FFA students being leaders in their schools and striving to give back to their communities, an important tenet of the organization. Participating students wear a blue corduroy jacket with the FFA logo—an enduring symbol through the organization's history.

The Smith-Hughes National Vocational Education Act of 1917 had promoted vocational education in "agriculture, trades and industry and homemaking," providing federal funds for this purpose. Still, by 1925, leaders in U.S. agriculture noted that boys were losing interest and leaving farm life. Four concerned Virginia Tech agricultural science education teachers banded together to create a state-based organization to encourage boys to develop leadership skills and follow agricultural careers. Using this model, the Future Farmers of America was subsequently formed in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1928. Female members were admitted beginning in 1969; this year commemorates 50 years of involvement of women in FFA.

An FFA chapter may be chartered in any public school with an agricultural education program. According to the National FFA organization, headquartered in Indianapolis, FFA currently has more than 669,000 U.S. members in grades 7 through 12 (a 32% increase since 2008) participating in one of 8,630 local chapters. Today, FFA students also pursue careers in biotechnology, veterinary sciences, medicine, teaching and business. (They might even find a place in nutrition services!)

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Science Academy, a formal, two-year program in which students can earn college credit and industry certificates.)

» Two cows are being raised (while Gasper thought they should name them "School" and "Lunch," the students went with "Earl" and "Oreo").

» "The next thing we are going to be doing that is really, really, cool," says Gasper, "is that the kids in our Agriculture Science Academy this coming year will be working on making their own cheese. They'll be making mozzarella cheese in a local cheese factory and will be doing the whole process from start to finish. Nutrition Services will use the mozzarella cheese, made from skim milk, in our program for our pizzas and other items."

» Gasper and Ag Science teacher Roger King spent three years fundraising for a state-of-the-art greenhouse with automatic temperature and lighting controls. Local businesses underwrote the entire cost and construction has just been completed. It should be fully operational by the start of next school year. "To be able to serve fresh tomatoes in January in Wisconsin will be great," Gasper says. Everything grown in the greenhouse will be hydroponic, like the lettuce of the original project, which is still grown every year.

Gasper attributes much of the success of all these cooperative initiatives to a variety of community relationships. Any other district can do the same, he counsels. "You just have to get very creative in how you solve the issue at hand," he explains, citing examples of approaching credit unions, hospitals and local farmers for greenhouse donations.

It also helps that the school administration is behind all these efforts. "They see the importance of it," credits Gasper. Another factor in the success of these projects is the enthusiasm of his Nutrition Services team. "My staff are always willing to try and produce new things," he boasts. "They see the value in what we do and embrace it. We couldn't do what we do without them."

Like other advocates of farm-to-school initiatives, Gasper knows that when the students are involved in getting the food to the table, they are also committed to eating it. "They are more invested in it. And the biggest thing is that they are not afraid to try new foods," he observes. Students learn best by doing—and they are excited to share results with their peers. Do you know where *your* food comes from? Kids in the School District of Holmen sure do. **SN**

Penny McLaren is a writer based in Vancouver, Wash., and a former editor of this publication.

WHAT IS 4-H?

Another national organization for students with its roots in agriculture is 4-H. Claiming to be the nation's largest youth-development organization, it works to foster leadership in young people, helping them to gain new skills to be "proactive forces in their communities," according to the National 4-H Council, headquartered in Chevy Chase, Md. 4-H serves rural, urban and suburban students in every state. In the U.S. it's administered through the Cooperative Extension Service of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, which is part of USDA.

The 4-H Club movement can be traced back to 1902, to the building of community club to help solve agricultural-related challenges. It was officially established as part of the Cooperative Extension Service in 1914. The familiar clover symbol emphasizes head, heart, hands and health. In 4-H, kids complete hands-on projects through in-school and after-school programs, school and community clubs and 4-H camps. While the foundation of the programs were in agriculture, today's 4-H members get involved in such issues as global food security, climate change and sustainable energy, childhood obesity and food safety, as well as take part in technology and STEM programs. As with FFA, local 4-H Clubs have the potential to be great partners with school nutrition teams.