

COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS + FARM TO SCHOOL AND EARLY CARE CONFERENCE

2023 SUCCESS STORY



FOOD SYSTEMS AND FARM TO SCHOOL CONFERENCE PROMOTES CONNECTION, COLLABORATION, AND A CULTURE OF CELEBRATION.

With a rising cost of living and the supply chain interruption due to COVID-19, Iowans are demonstrating a renewed and energized interest in local food systems. Research studies have found that when partnered with social integration, a shorter, more decentralized, and diverse supply chain can be more resilient and agile when faced with stressors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change (Nichols et. al, 2022). The Community Food Systems and Farm to School and Early Care Conference served as a gathering space for people to generate ideas, collaborate, and celebrate current efforts to promote local foods.

The Community Food Systems Program and the Iowa Farm to School and Early Care Coalition jointly hosted the inaugural Community Food Systems + Farm to School and Early Care (CFS + F2SEC) Conference on June 15-17, 2023, in Waukee, IA. In the past, the Community Food Systems Annual Event and the Iowa Farm to School and Early Care Conference were held separately during different times of the year. In 2023, the conference consisted of two full conference days complete with plenaries, breakout sessions, and exhibitors as well as one full day of field trips to local food and farm businesses that ended with a local foods reception. The conference theme was "Growing a Culture of Celebration."

RESPONSE

More than 170 individuals attended the conference including food systems practitioners, educators, food service, administrators, early care providers, food and farm businesses, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations. Plenaries included a panel on food systems development in Iowa, USDA investments and opportunities in local and regional foods, and farm to school efforts at Oelwein Community School District.

Breakout sessions offered presentations and learning experiences in food systems topics ranging from early care lessons to coalition development to learning collaboratives. Attendees had the opportunity to learn more about how to use data for decision-making and advocacy, familiarize themselves with the food and farm business database MarketMaker, hear about best practices for procuring local food in schools, and participate in hands-on activities that could be used in early care education.

Eighty-three participated in field trips to the Moore Elementary School Garden and Dogpatch Urban Gardens, where they learned about community involvement for garden management and urban vegetable production and marketing. A total of 96 attendees traveled to Grade A Gardens in Earlham, IA, to learn about diversified organic

vegetable farming and celebrate Iowa initiatives and community at a local foods reception, which consisted of a program highlighting the Iowa Food System Plan, which is a culmination of over two years of gathering input from various stakeholders throughout the Iowa food system.

OUTCOMES

An evaluation survey was developed in Qualtrics and distributed digitally to all conference attendees, including sponsor guests, vendors, and speakers. Sixty-four responses were collected on satisfaction and engagement with various aspects of the conference. Overall, 92% of evaluation respondents shared that they have a better understanding of potential projects that may be beneficial to their communities. Many attendees appreciated the connections and exposure to the different food system initiatives happening throughout the state. Evaluations indicated that the breakout sessions and networking laid a great foundation for future collaborations and strengthened existing partnerships. About 96% of respondents shared that the networking opportunities at the conference were beneficial and enjoyable. With a diverse range of site visits, 93% of respondents indicated that the field trips increased their understanding of different aspects of the food system in Iowa.

Sourcing local can be difficult to scale for large events and institutional procurement. However, many meals served during the conference included locally sourced ingredients and food products. One attendee remarked, "LOVED that the food for lunch was from local farms/businesses and you listed where it was from and how far away it was from Waukee." The conference demonstrated practices that other organizations and businesses can incorporate into their own events and activities.

“ *It was inspiring to see teachers and local food professionals come from all over the state to learn and engage.* ”

IMPACT

The 2023 Community Food Systems and Farm to School and Early Care Conference hosted 176 attendees and offered breakout sessions, plenaries, and field trips that highlighted local food work and encouraged increased engagement and collaboration among food systems practitioners throughout Iowa.

For more information on the Community Food Systems + Farm to School and Early Care Conference, contact Bre Miller at millerb@iastate.edu or visit bit.ly/cfs-f2sec-conference

References

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