



Detailed Arkansas Farm to School History

National Landscape

The birth of the phrase “farm to school” can be traced back to the 1990s when pilot projects began in California with the Edible Schoolyard Project and the Urban Environmental Policy Institute, and Florida with the New North Florida Cooperative Association, Inc. (NNFC).

In 1995 in California, the Edible Schoolyard Project started with the idea that it would be possible to transform children's relationship with food if they were given a taste of what's possible.¹ From this, the first Edible Schoolyard sprouted in partnership with the principal at a public middle school in Berkeley. Then in 1997, the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute conducted one of the first farm to school salad bar pilots with the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District.²

In 1995 in Florida under the direction of Glyen Holmes, NNFC started working with school districts to provide fresh produce for school meals.³ The group included 60-100 African-American farmers in Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas which served more than a million students in 72 school districts across the region.

From 1996 to 2004, the term farm to school gained momentum nationally. Early farm to school leadership took root by the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, Inc. (Southern SAWG). Southern SAWG was in operation from 1991-2020 with a mission of promoting sustainable agriculture in the South.⁴ The early 2000s saw interest in farm to school work take off with the number of states reporting programs more than doubling, according to data from the National Farm to School Network.

In 2004, the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act established a federal farm to school program, but the program was not funded at that time. The bill also required all school districts participating in the National School Lunch Program or other federally funded school meal programs to have a school wellness policy by the 2006-2007 school year.

Regional and national events were held, including the Farm to Cafeteria Conferences in 2001 (Washington), 2005 (Ohio), and 2007 (Maryland) that paved the way for national farm to school leadership to develop. This culminated with the creation of the National Farm to School Network (NFSN) in 2007. NFSN is a nonprofit that builds partnerships across sectors like public health, education, and

¹ <https://edibleschoolyard.org/about#mission>

² <https://www.uepifoodoxycreates.org/programs/los-angeles-farm-to-school-network/>

³ Benefits of Farm-to-school Projects: Healthy Eating and Physical Activity for School Children: Field Hearing Before the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress, First Session, May 15, 2009

⁴ <https://www.ssawg.org/>

agriculture, builds awareness about farm to school, and increases activities at the state and regional levels through training, capacity building, and policy advocacy.

In 2008 the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act (Farm Bill: Section 4302) established a geographic preference option to improve opportunities for local procurement in school meal programs. This bill directed the USDA Secretary of Agriculture to encourage schools to purchase locally grown and locally raised products “to the maximum extent practicable and appropriate.”

Arkansas Landscape

In Arkansas, farm to school efforts were taking place at schools around the state without a formal farm to school program. One very early example was at Ernestine Camp from the 1940s. The Camp was recognized as a national pioneer for school food service even prior to the 1946 National School Lunch Act because of their efforts to grow and maintain a school garden, raise chickens, and prepare scratch-made meals that included their butchered chickens and homemade bread.⁵

Towards the end of the 20th century, school and community gardens, such as Little Rock’s Dunbar Garden, were beginning to provide educational opportunities for students. Dunbar Garden started as a nonprofit in 1992 with the mission to provide educational resources and interactive opportunities for youth, families, and the community through sustainable urban agriculture.⁶

As for local procurement, Glyen Holmes with New North Florida Cooperative Association, Inc. (NNFC) visited Arkansas in the late 1990s to expand their farm to school model that provided school districts with fresh produce for school meals.

Building Statewide Momentum

In 2005, Fayetteville Public Schools became the first school district to develop a farm to school program with the intention of procuring local products to serve their students.⁷ The district hosted their first Local Harvest Lunch in 2007, which featured locally grown products in partnership with producers at the Fayetteville Farmers Market. Every subsequent year, the school district has continued to host a Local Harvest Lunch.

In 2007, Apple Seeds, Inc. was formed in Northwest Arkansas. Apple Seeds is a nonprofit with the mission to inspire healthy living through garden-based education.⁸ Its beginnings were rooted in establishing and supporting school gardens at Fayetteville Public Schools, and its programming has expanded to include cooking classes, farm and farmers market field trips, and garden clubs.

⁵ Documented by the Institute of Child Nutrition Archives and the School Nutrition Association’s book: A Pinch of Love.

⁶ <http://dunbargarden.org/>

⁷ <https://www.freeweekly.com/2007/02/01/farm-to-school/>

⁸ <https://appleseedsnwa.org/>

In 2008, Glyen Holmes with NNFC met with Stephen Walker of the Tri-County Community Coalition (TCC), a nonprofit incorporated in 2006, to talk about piloting a farm to school project in Arkansas that would provide more local food options for school districts.

In January 2009, two meetings were scheduled by the Arkansas Department of Education Child Nutrition Unit to look at the expansion of farm to school in the state. The first was a meeting to gather initial interest in farm to school and to talk about working with farmers in the southern region of the nation. The meeting was held in Little Rock at the Department's office with child nutrition directors from around the state and the then-Secretary of Agriculture Richard Bell.

The second meeting, at the end of the month, was in collaboration with Glyen Holmes, Executive Director of the aforementioned NNFC, Vonda Richardson, Extension Specialist with Florida A&M University, and Stephen Walker, Executive Director of the TCC at Phillips Community College - Stuttgart Campus. Child nutrition directors from around the state attended the meeting to hear about the successes of NNFC and to establish a farm to school pilot program in the state.

Following the meeting, TCC began using the farm to school model developed by NNFC with its group of farmers in south-central Arkansas and used NNFC's processing facility to process sweet potatoes, green beans, and collard greens into fresh, packaged, easy-to-serve products. 24 districts participated in the pilot program which connected them to local farms and aided in the purchasing of local food. Before the meeting and pilot program, two Arkansas school districts were a part of NNFCs portfolio in the southern part of the United States.

Towards the end of 2009, Heifer International hosted an Arkansas Farm to School Conference in Little Rock. This event brought together more than 200 stakeholders from around the state and nation. This event marks the first time the term "Arkansas Farm to School" was used. Arkansas Farm to School recognizes that statewide farm to school efforts require input and leadership from many organizations like nonprofits, distributors, state agencies, school districts, early care and education facilities, and alternative learning environments. Arkansas Farm to School is advanced by passionate people such as farmers, farmworkers, distributors, processors, teachers, families, and individuals. Together, we create Arkansas Farm to School.

An Arkansas Farm to School Steering Committee was convened following the 2009 conference based on interest in building farm to school momentum in the state. The group met regularly to discuss statewide goals and in 2010, the committee moved under the leadership of the Arkansas Food Policy Council.

In 2010, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (Child Nutrition Reauthorization: Section 243) provided \$5 million per year in mandatory funding for the USDA Farm to School Grant Program. Since the grant program was launched, \$617,430 in federal funding has been awarded to schools and organizations in Arkansas.

In 2012, after focus on farm to school waned from the Arkansas Food Policy Council, a Community Advisory Board for the Arkansas Grow Healthy Study led by Arkansas Children's Research Institute (ACRI) was formed to advise on pilot farm to school projects around the state.

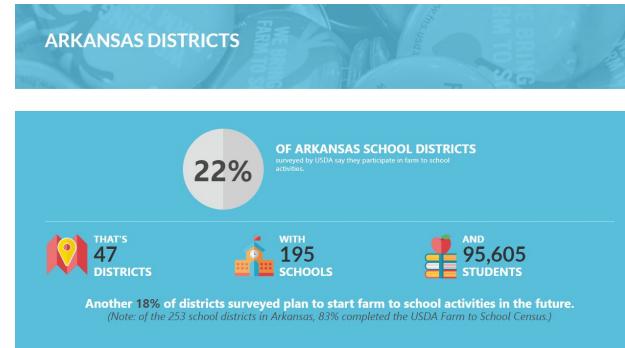
In 2013, ACRI was chosen as the state's Core Partner by the National Farm to School Network (NFSN) and took on a farm to school leadership role.



In 2014, then-Governor Mike Beebe first proclaimed October as Arkansas Farm to School Month. Governor Asa Hutchinson continued the tradition in 2015 and has proclaimed October as Arkansas Farm to School Month each year since.

In 2015, a [USDA Farm to School Census](#) was completed. The questionnaire asked public school districts, private schools, and charter schools that participated in the National School Lunch Program about their farm to school activities during the 2013-2014 school year. In Arkansas 253 school districts (83%) completed the survey. The data showed that 22% of Arkansas school districts participate in the following farm to school activities:

- 47 school districts
- 195 schools
- 95,605 students
- \$1,255,960 invested in local foods mainly at lunch (76%); while fruits (53%) and vegetables (45%) were the main local food purchases
- 36 school gardens



The support for farm to school grew in 2017 with the passage of Act 617, the Local Food, Farms, and Jobs Act (Local Food Act) to the state legislature. The Local Food Act created, strengthened, and expanded local farm and food economies throughout the state. The Local Food Act also intended to support and encourage the procurement of local farm or food products as a significant portion of all food products. Further, it required state agencies that received at least \$25,000 in state funding for the purchase of food products to set a goal to ensure that 10 percent of the amount budgeted for food purchases in fiscal year 2018 was spent on local farm and food products. The goal increased to 20 percent for subsequent fiscal years.

In 2017, NFSN recognized the following entities as farm to school Supporting Partners:

- Arkansas Department of Agriculture
- Arkansas Department of Education – Child Nutrition Unit
- Arkansas Department of Human Services
- University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service (UACES)



Also, in 2017, a group of state agencies and statewide nonprofits was formed, comprising many people from the Arkansas Farm to School Steering Committee and Community Advisory Board. The group became known as the Arkansas Farm to School Collaborative (Collaborative) and continues to meet regularly. The Collaborative members represent 12 state agencies and statewide nonprofits.

Significant changes were made to the Local Food Act during the 2019 legislative session of the Arkansas General Assembly by Act 796 of 2019. The amendment now requires state agencies that receive at least \$25,000 a year from the state and offer a food service program to report annually on their local food procurement. The amendment increased the local food procurement goal from 20 percent of the agency's purchases of food products to be spent on local farm and food products to at least 20 percent. Lastly, the amendment expanded the number of agencies required to report by changing the definition of "agency" to include institutes of higher education, child care facilities, after-school programs, state parks, state agencies, and designees under contract that receive at least \$25,000 a year from the state.

In 2019, the Arkansas General Assembly enacted another critical piece of farm to school legislation, Act 506 that established a Farm to School and Early Childhood Education Program within the Arkansas Department of Agriculture. The program aims to: 1) improve student health; 2) develop an educated agricultural workforce; 3) enrich the local farm or food products system and supporting the state's agricultural economy through the support and increase of procurement of local farm or food products for public schools; 4) accelerate garden and farm-based education for students; and 5) expand the relationships between schools and agricultural communities.

The bill also created a position for a full-time Farm to School and Early Childhood Education Program Coordinator who works to 1) address the issues of supply, demand, procurement, and consumption of local farm or food products in schools and early childhood programs; 2) take reasonable steps to incorporate more agriculture and nutrition education into schools and early childhood programs; 3) create a statewide program in collaboration with stakeholders; and 4) prepare an annual report.

Additionally in 2019, farm to school leaders from Arkansas travelled to Washington D.C. to speak with U.S. Senator John Boozman and U.S. Senator Tom Cotton. Ally Mrachek with Fayetteville School District and Maegan Brown with Conway Public Schools visited Senator Tom Cotton to share about their child nutrition farm to school efforts. Second, Destiny Schlinker with FoodCorps met with Senator John Boozman to talk about the Kids Eat Local Act.

Also in 2019, The USDA completed another Farm to School Census based on the 2018-2019 school year. It is anticipated that data for the 2019 census will be released in 2021.

In 2020, the Arkansas Department of Agriculture moved into the role of Core Partner for NFSN and ACRI shifted from Core Partner to Supporting Partner. The other Supporting Partners remained the same and UACES hired a Local Food Specialist who spends half their time focused on farm to school efforts in three regions of the state.