



# Good Things Cooking in North Carolina

## Farmers and Chefs Help Young Minds Grow

Students' enthusiasm for school garden produce inspires parents and an agricultural nonprofit to improve district cafeteria offerings through food education. Kids and foodservice staff connect with and learn from farmers and local chefs.

Ashville City Schools

Buncombe County Schools, NC

“I didn’t start out to create a farm to school project,” says educator Emily Jackson from Asheville, North Carolina. It began with a school garden. “I saw how much our garden entranced my third graders. And when they grew the food, they always wanted to eat it.” What’s more, they paid full attention to related lessons in Emily’s classroom. Knowing she was on to something, Emily got other teachers involved. But, she says, something was missing. “We were growing good food, but we weren’t connecting it to the cafeteria.”

Emily’s goal was modest: To grow a new generation of people who cared where their food came from! To that end, she worked with the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project and secured a grant for a project dubbed Growing Minds. Soon the gardens became part of a broader nutrition and farm to school program that now includes farm visits, classroom cooking, chef demos, and cafeteria connections.

“Too often, nutrition education is uninteresting, lots of facts are delivered, and the focus is on what kids shouldn’t be doing,” says Emily. Her philosophy? Find out what engages students. What do they know about foods and what would they like to know? Help teachers think about their current instructional goals and plans, and ask, “How do garden, food, farm, and cooking connections fit in?”

## Cooking Classes Flourish

A concerned parent group called Eat Better, Learn Better discussed how to engage students with good foods rather than lecture them about bad ones. In-school cooking sessions seemed like a good springboard. In participating schools, a volunteer cook came in once a week or so. He or she (usually a parent, chef, or nutritionist) brought in a seasonal recipe, ingredients, and related local products. Teachers could sign up to send 10 students to a class. Recipes always went home in Spanish and English.

“One chef heard that the kids liked tasting kohlrabi, so she proposed a carrot/kohlrabi stew,” says Emily. The meal was a hit even with young skeptics — as was the guacamole and the winter squash/apple dish. Another chef



APPALACHIAN SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE PROJECT

pushed the envelope by suggesting chicken mafe, an African chicken, peanut butter, cabbage, and carrot dish. It, too, got a thumbs-up from the kids. As students' skills grew, so did their culinary wisdom. One boy observed, "Things taste better when you add the right stuff to them." Word has it that many students have also influenced their parents' food choices.

## Training Chefs to Mentor Students

Emily was concerned about "burning out" the few volunteer chefs. When she and colleagues solicited others who might like to work with children, they got an overwhelming response. A local foundation grant enabled her group to train the food experts to work with students and support the school curriculum. During the first hour of the "Chef Fest" session, the facilitators discussed which curriculum concepts for each grade could easily tie in with cooking. They also shared some basic advice with the chefs: Use simple ingredients; be aware of local cultural influences on children's food experiences; bring in related kids' fiction; and so on. A chef who had already worked with students came to discuss his experiences and how the restaurant benefited from the exposure. After that, the real fun began.

"We set up four stations with portable propane burners and we posted the curriculum connections on the wall," says Emily. The chefs had brought in ingredients. (She suggests having students bring in some items or purchasing them with grant funds.) Third and fourth graders worked with the chefs to create and consume an apple and winter squash soup. If it hadn't rained, says Emily, the cooking sessions would have occurred in the school garden so students could educate chefs about what grows there. "After the kids left, we spent a couple of hours discussing the experience." Then the kid-savvy chefs repeated the cooking session with students in grades K-2; they again debriefed as a group. Participants left with a notebook of lesson plans written by a teacher Emily had hired.

Today, when a teacher or school wants to set up a chef connection, someone contacts Emily's program. Growing Minds maintains a database of chefs interested in working with schools and the age groups and numbers of students they're willing to take on. At least one chef also does a monthly cooking demonstration for school kitchen workers, discussing cooking strategies and ingredients, and fielding questions.

Fifth-grade teacher Janet Miller says that her students have been delighted by the generosity of the chefs, one of whom donated a set of aprons for students to don as they cook. "They've also become much more willing to try different things and do the work involved in growing ingredients." She believes that such firsthand experiences with people who are passionate



### TIP: FARMERS' MARKET SCAVENGER HUNT

"I designed a scavenger hunt sheet for a farmers' market visit," says Emily. Her goal was to pique students' interest and focus them on some science concepts. But something more personal happened, too. With scavenger hunt sheets in hand, the young sleuths were more apt to talk with the men and women who grew their food. Student questions often broke the ice: "Some students, challenged to find something that grows underground, ran up to a farmer to ask if his lettuce would fit the bill!" says Emily.

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— Emily Jackson,  
Growing Minds



PHOTOS: APPALACHIAN SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE PROJECT

about cooking and sharing good meals help pave the way for healthy lifelong relationships with food.

## From Farm to Restaurant

When a K–2 class visited a local farm, parents weren’t the only escorts. A local chef joined the group to help students focus on the foods they were seeing. The plan: Invite the class back to the restaurant the following day. “The chef had noticed how excited the kids were when they saw and tasted beautiful okra at the farm,” says Emily. “So she talked about things they might do with it back at the restaurant.” The next day, she prepared some okra in different ways (such as pickled, and fried with cornmeal) for the class to taste and describe. A stunned and grateful parent sent this note to the chef: “When we went to the grocery store,

my child begged me to buy okra and insisted that we try cooking it three different ways. Thank you!”

During the farm visit and restaurant session, one of the adults captured youngsters’ comments and “incredible conversations” on tape. After a volunteer edited and narrated the tape, it ran on a local radio station, garnering great public relations for the project. It should also prove valuable for soliciting donations from potential funders.

Fresh from a year of new flavors and farm connections, a group of K–2 students worked with Emily and another teacher to create a book about their experiences. Language arts lessons bloomed as students determined what type of book it would be (“nonfiction, because this is real”) and what audience they would target (“other kids like us”). The storyline: Who grows our food and the experiences we had cooking it. The group incorporated photos, students’ drawings, and quotes they’d pulled from field trip audiotapes. Money from the project’s grant covered printing costs.

## Growing Ties with the Cafeteria

Early on in the project, in an effort to better understand how the foodservice operated, Emily spent a day shadowing the child nutrition director, the person in charge of all food for the school system. “I hadn’t realized that the school food budget was totally separate from the rest of the school,” says Emily. “Or that the foodservice has to raise all its own money.”

So she spread the word, first to the Eat Better, Learn Better group. The upshot: The group asked the foodservice for a cafeteria “wish list.” Then they sent the list home with students; families who could do so bought list items from a restaurant supplier. The parent group also bought a share in a community supported agriculture (CSA) farm so they could have fresh produce for cooking classes and cafeteria demos without taxing the foodservice budget. As the farm to school program grew, Emily used a grant from a

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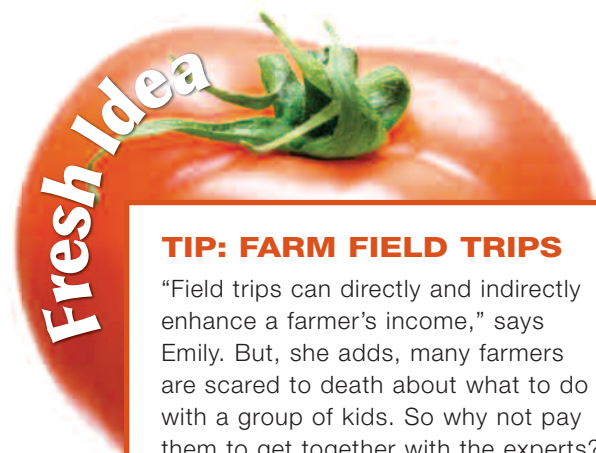
— Urban Food Worker

local health and wellness trust fund to buy “personal” CSA shares to get foodservice managers excited about fresh foods.

Meanwhile, Emily worked on a broader scale by starting a district-wide farm to school committee made up of child nutrition directors, farmers, Cooperative Extension staff, the health department, and a local food-processing facility. Committee members suspected that some food workers might be hesitant to support the project, so they took them on field trips to meet the growers and see what they had to offer. “These urban cooks tasted fresh corn and ate their way across the farm,” says Emily. Said one, “If kids had this experience, we would have no problem getting them to eat veggies.” During the locally grown picnic lunch, the school cooks got to discuss their experiences and concerns with growers.

“We make sure the foodservice staff knows they are an important part of these efforts,” says Emily. And, it appears, they’re rising to the challenge. Now, posters featuring photos of a supplier’s farm are prominently displayed in the lunchroom. As students enter, they can read the companion stories of the family and farm behind the fresh wholesome fare. At one school, a meet-the-farmer event included a stir-fry cooking demo along with samples. “The foodservice manager hadn’t had much success peddling cooked cabbage,” says Emily. But when she replicated what the farmer had done, it was wildly successful!

Find a Farm Field Trip Tool Kit, recipes, and more information about Growing Minds on the program’s Web site: [www.growing-minds.org/](http://www.growing-minds.org/).



#### **TIP: FARM FIELD TRIPS**

“Field trips can directly and indirectly enhance a farmer’s income,” says Emily. But, she adds, many farmers are scared to death about what to do with a group of kids. So why not pay them to get together with the experts? Growing Minds set up a workshop for farmers and teachers. Each group got to talk about what it needed from the other (“Bathrooms,” said one teacher), and presenters from both audiences described how they’d made the visits enriching for kids.

