Success Story:
Whole Kids Foundation and Slow Food USA Support District-wide Efforts to Bring Garden-grown Food to School Cafeterias

"Our garden is going strong. Now, how do we get that food into the lunch room?"

We are asked variations on this question every year. From garden-based educators to parents to food service directors to school administrators, getting vegetables from the garden to students' plates requires intensive collaboration and involves countless moving parts. Andrew Nowak, School Garden Specialist with Slow Food USA, saw this first hand. He spent more than 15 years developing gardens in the Denver, Colorado school district through Slow Food Denver and nearly a decade working with the district's food service director to make Denver the first school district in the country to develop a district-wide garden-to-cafeteria program.

Now, the garden-to-cafeteria work of Nowak and Slow Food USA extends far beyond the Denver school district thanks to a Whole Kids Foundation Healthy Kids Innovation Grant. Through this grant, Nowak has developed the Garden to Cafeteria Toolkit. The toolkit allows schools to use real garden-to-cafeteria models developed by US school districts as the basis for their own district-wide proposals. This means that districts interested in implementing garden-to-cafeteria programs do not need to start from scratch, but rather have the tools to tweak previously successful models to fit the specific needs of the district.

"The toolkit breaks down barriers and makes way for work in local procurement, healthy eating education, and garden recipes. It lays out a process of meetings and discussions, and includes protocols from other districts. So districts interested in developing their own protocol have a place to start from and a process to follow," explains Nowak.

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And the process is working. Through the Whole Kids Foundation grant, 3 school districts were selected from across the country to serve as pilot programs for the toolkit: Bellingham Public Schools in Washington; Pittsburg Unified School District in California; and Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District in Texas. Bellingham successfully launched their first school site for the garden-to-cafeteria program in April and will continue expanding to 15 or so schools. The other two districts will be launching their programs soon and Hawaii Public Schools and the US Virgin Islands are also starting to develop protocols based on the toolkit.

Thanks to the success of the pilot schools, the toolkit is now available for any school district to use. Whole Kids Foundation has extended the grant into its second phase in which the toolkit is published online and is available as a free download. Accompanying this publication, Nowak is presenting the entire toolkit in a 4-part webinar series in which districts can follow along, using the month between each webinar to work on developing their protocol. To further support districts interested in launching a garden-to-cafeteria program, Nowak is offering "office hours" after each month's webinar so that districts keeping pace with the webinar can get feedback on their developing protocols. (All webinars will be archived on the Whole Kids Foundation website here.)

If there are districts interested in using the toolkit but needing a bit more time before diving in, Nowak is still able to give feedback and support for districts that aren't able to meet the timeline of the current webinar series. "What I'm discovering," says Nowak, "is the pace of work and pace of completion varies widely across food service departments. We all know how short on time food service departments are and when we ask them to work on a project like this to develop protocols and procedures some districts move faster than others. We have to let the district determine the pace."

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Nowak can also offer deeper levels of support for interested districts. Up to three districts can be eligible for one-on-one support in which Nowak will call into meetings. He can also offer on-site support for up to two districts. Districts interested in this type of support should contact Nowak directly.

"There's a lot of support available, but the districts have to ask for it," Nowak explains.

As for educators, school garden support organizations, teachers, and others who support garden-based education, "the best role they can play in this process is to take this resource to their district's food service department and offer to be a partner in the use of the toolkit," says Nowak.

"It's easy to implement once all the pieces are in place," assures Nowak. "But we have to break down the silos and open up discussion between food service departments, school garden support organizations, and schools. This resource is the first of its kind to make this happen."

You can find more information about the Garden to Cafeteria Toolkit, including registration information for upcoming webinars and viewing options for past webinars, here. Whole Kids Foundation also supports school gardens and school food services through grants, including their Garden Grant program, their Salad Bar Grant, and Get Schools Cooking Grant.

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