

Farm to School Innovation Mini Grant

Final Report

SCHOOL YEAR
2021 - 2022



Executive Summary

The Farm to School (F2S) Innovation Mini-Grant is a collaboration between Georgia Organics and the Georgia Department of Public Health. The program is designed to support Georgia school nutrition programs' development of innovative and equity-centered F2S projects based on their own needs and vision and to collect data.

The project priority areas were developed with the goal of inspiring school districts to renew COVID-19 delayed F2S activities while addressing the health and racial inequities brought to light by the pandemic. The Farm to School Innovation Mini-Grant priorities are:

- Increase access to local, fresh, organically grown food,
- Include culturally responsive food and education,
- Increase local food procurement,
- and/or benefit Georgia certified organic farmers in other ways.

Fifteen F2S Innovation Mini-Grant awardees were selected from Georgia school districts for their projects' alignment with priority areas, replicability, and advancement of health and racial equity. Project outcomes have the potential to collectively reach 203 schools and 113,609 students in all of the awarded districts.

Health Equity

F2S practitioners and champions have the collective potential to advance health and racial equity by supporting access to healthy, fresh, and affordable foods and culturally responsive nutrition education. Thus, the primary driver of the Farm to School Innovation Mini-Grant is to encourage the development of projects that contribute to health and racial equity in their community.

Awardees were required to watch a health and racial equity training that would inform these concepts and their application in F2S. The outcomes of this training indicated that it is necessary to put health and racial equity education at the forefront of F2S support and resources in order to impact school leaders' understanding and implementation of equity-informed F2S strategies.

Farm to School Data

Awardees provided data specifically related to their F2S programming and activities for both School Years 2021 and 2022. A comparative analysis of that data illustrates the growth of F2S initiatives from 2021 through 2022:



Executive Summary (contd.)

Best Practices:

As demonstrated by successful and impactful farm to school programs across Georgia and identified as Farm to School Innovation Mini-Grant priorities, best practices are defined as strategies that:

- Increase access to local, fresh, organically grown food,
- Include culturally responsive food and education,
- Prioritize Health and/or Racial Equity,
- Increase local food procurement, and/or benefit Georgia certified organic farmers in other ways,
- Utilize sustainable growing practices.

Best practices are:

- Equitable,
- Realistic,
- Replicable,
- Applicable in various situations and locations,
- Cost-effective,
- Engaging to students, educators, administrators, staff, and community members.

The following best practices were compiled from the final reports:

Local Procurement

There are a variety of benefits of sourcing fresh food from small farms located within or near school districts, including community connections, investment in local economies, increased resiliency, and reduced carbon footprints.

Experiential Education

Hands-on F2S activities inspire students and encourage them to explore new concepts through different learning mechanisms. F2S experiential learning opportunities support child development and mental and physical well-being.



Photos courtesy of Savannah Chatham County School District

Environmental Education

Teaching students life skills like composting is both educational and beneficial to the environment in its focus on the cycle of life, soil health, reducing waste, and climate change mitigation.

Culturally Responsive, Cross-Curricular F2S Programming

Project Based Learning across grades and subject areas with topics such as “Salsa,” increase student understanding of the cultural significance of food. Project Based Learning helps students make cultural connections to Art, PE, STEM, and Language. Such projects can prompt the addition of culturally responsive foods to the school menu.

Farmer Connections

School events that connect students to farmers are often the only place a student might meet a farmer. These events introduce the idea of farmers as small business owners in the community and encourage students to consider agriculture as a career. Meeting farmers can also inspire enthusiasm to consume the products from farms in the school community.

Garden Connections

When students grow their own food, they become invested and highly motivated to eat it.

Georgia Farm to School (F2S) Programming

Farm to School (F2S) has grown tremendously over the past decade in Georgia. From 2014-2019, the Golden Radish Awards tracked and celebrated the expansion of Georgia F2S statewide. A collaboration of Georgia Organics, UGA Extension, and the Georgia Departments of Agriculture, Early Care and Learning, Education, and Public Health, the Golden Radish Awards recognized the extraordinary efforts of Georgia school nutrition-led F2S programs. Golden Radish criteria provided a definition of “farm to school” and served as a framework for school districts to model their own programs on. The best practices compiled and shared among awardees offered an opportunity for peer learning, friendly competition, best practice replication, and support. The data allowed state and other support agencies to understand the resources needed to advance farm to school initiatives and conceptualize the future of F2S in Georgia.

In 2019, over 90 school districts, nearly half the districts in the state, were recognized with a Golden Radish Award. Of those school districts, 70% adopted F2S language in a district-wide policy, demonstrating their commitment to F2S initiatives. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, F2S thrived and was quickly becoming institutionalized in the state of Georgia.



Photos courtesy of Jones County School District

F2S Innovation Mini Grant Conception

While the Golden Radish Awards encouraged school districts to expand their F2S initiatives, the COVID-19 pandemic made certain aspects of F2S unfeasible. School Nutrition Directors were forced to pause F2S programming while navigating last-minute changes to school schedules, reinventing their systems of meal distribution, ensuring social distancing, and managing a myriad of supply chain disruptions. After a two-year hiatus, Georgia Organics suspended the Golden Radish Awards due to the immense, pandemic-related challenges that made the program an unrealistic pursuit.

Although the Golden Radish Awards were discontinued, the Georgia Department of Public Health and Georgia Organics desire to continue incentivizing school districts to build their F2S programs.



Photos courtesy of Jackson County School District and Baldwin County School District



Photos courtesy of Jackson County School District

F2S Innovation Mini Grant Conception

The F2S Innovation Mini-Grant has a two-fold purpose -- to support Georgia school nutrition programs' development of innovative and equity-centered F2S projects based on their own needs and vision, and to collect data. The grant application and required social media sharing allow the agencies to compile and share best practices, track the growth areas of F2S programs, and understand the support needed for success.

The project priority areas were developed with the goal of inspiring school districts to renew their F2S activities while addressing the health and racial inequities brought to light by COVID-19. The Farm to School Innovation Mini-Grant priorities are:

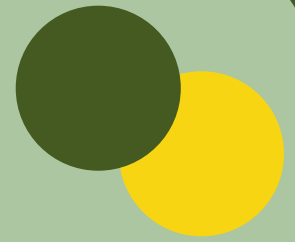
- Increase access to local, fresh, organically grown food,
- Include culturally responsive food and education,
- Increase local food procurement,
- and/or benefit Georgia-certified farmers in other ways.

Funds originally budgeted to support the Golden Radish 2021 Awards were reallocated to the Mini-Grant program.

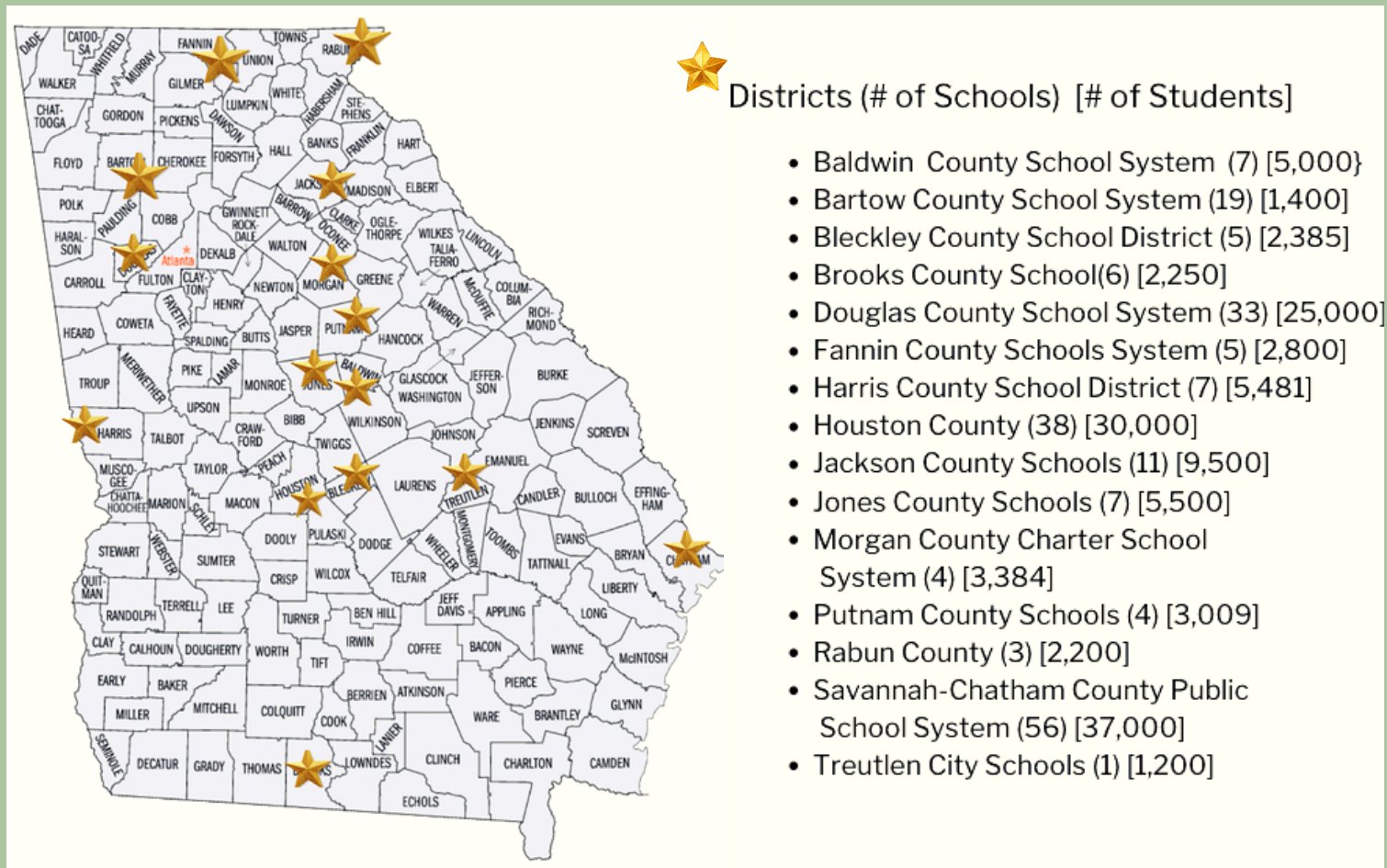
Farm to School Innovation Mini-Grant Funded Projects

Although the Golden Radish Awards were discontinued, the Georgia Department of Public Health and Georgia Organics desire to continue incentivizing school districts to build their F2S programs.

F2S Innovation Mini Grant Awardees



There are 15 F2S Innovation Mini-Grant Awardees from school districts across the state. Applications were submitted by District School Nutrition staff. Awards were given based on the project's alignment with priority areas, replicability, and advancement of health and racial equity. While projects typically took place in only a few schools within the district, the potential for later project replication throughout districts could potentially impact up to 203 schools and 113,609 students in all of the awarded districts.



School districts executed their projects during the 2021-2022 school year. Each school district was granted \$500 to support its project and had outstanding results. The table below provides more details regarding each district's results:

School District	F2S Mini-Grant Project Results
Baldwin County School District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed four Home Gardening Education stations to provide students with resources to begin their own gardens. • Distributed 200 introductory gardening brochures and 900 seed packets. • Conducted two taste tests for over 400 students using recipes from different cultural backgrounds. • Empowered 18 students with a Junior Master Gardener Certificate program. • Grew 30 different fruits and vegetables in four school gardens.
Bartow County School District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to pandemic-related project delays, project extended to July 15.
Bleckley County School District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offered three classes (75 students) taste tests of locally grown lettuce. • Students designed their own salads. • Students grew a variety of native Georgia vegetables.
Brooks County School District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposed over 250 students to garden-grown radishes in the school garden and school lunch. • Hosted an interactive Farm Day with activities and speakers for 650 students.
Douglas County School District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed a Farm to School Expo, with 11 farmers and community partners for nine different schools. • Offered taste tests of culturally diverse foods such as Biseep, Kilewil, and Jollof Rice.
Fannin County School District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created a vermi-composting system with 300 students who used the compost to grow cilantro in their school garden.
Harris County School District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to pandemic-related project delays, project extended to September 15.
Houston County School District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organized lettuce and broccoli activities and taste tests of school garden-grown and locally sourced produce for 500 kindergarten students.

<p>Jackson County School District</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted 56 taste tests of locally grown carrots and beets, offering recipes such as kale pesto and smoothies. • Transplanted 60 seedlings and planted 500 seeds sourced from local farmers.
<p>Jones County School District</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visited a local satsuma orange farm to learn about agricultural production and taste test freshly harvested oranges. • Conducted a taste test of locally grown kale for 25 elementary school students.
<p>Morgan County School District</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hosted over 118 healthy nutrition education lessons across a variety of different subjects such as Art, Science, P.E., and Spanish. • Offered a taste test to 30 elementary school classes. • Organized garden work days for 30 classes.
<p>Putnam County School District</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planted 10 garlic plants, five blueberry bushes, and three pear trees. • Started a monthly school garden club for over 100 students, who tended the garden and participated in nutrition education. • Planned eight meetings with students and parents to determine 2022 garden priorities. • Conducted four taste tests using items from the school garden.
<p>Rabun County School District</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rebuilt school garden beds in need of repair. • Purchased new kitchen equipment to facilitate F2S classroom activities. • Used the new equipment to make school garden-grown spinach quesadillas.
<p>Savannah-Chatham County Public School System</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Started a composting and vermicomposting program in every school in the district (56 in total). • Prepared elementary school students for experiential education by purchasing and reading two books: <u>Compost Stew: An A to Z Recipe for the Earth</u> and <u>Wiggling Worms at Work</u>.
<p>Treutlen County School District</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created a “Fall Planting and Spring Harvesting” day for 400 students.

F2S Program Growth



While each funded project was uniquely designed by and for the awarded school district, Mini-Grants were awarded based on project alignment with priority areas. To determine the impact of the F2S Innovation Mini-Grant, awardees provided data specifically related to their F2S programming and activities during both SY 2021 and 2022. All participants answered the following questions before and after the Mini-Grant project:

1. How many meals included locally grown produce?
2. What local farms did you purchase from?
3. How many F2S promotions did your district/SFA conduct?
4. How many schools had gardens?
5. Is F2S adopted into an LEA-wide policy?



Photos courtesy of Treutlen County School District

A comparative analysis of that data illustrates the growth of F2S initiatives from school years 2021 through 2022 in the following areas:

Locally Grown Produce

Across the school districts, there was a 96% increase in meals that incorporated locally grown food from 2021 to 2022. In 2022, Mini-Grantees served nearly 3.9 million meals featuring locally grown produce!

Local Procurement

There was a 13% increase in the number of local farms from which school districts purchased fruits and vegetables. Overall, awardees purchased from 72 different local Georgia farms.

F2S Promotions

F2S promotions are instances in which local produce is marketed and celebrated in school cafeterias or classrooms. The number of F2S promotions within Mini-Grant awardee districts saw a 12% increase from 2021 to 2022, with 596 F2S promotions in total.

School Gardens

In 2022, Mini-Grantees reported 100 school gardens within their school districts. Compared to the data from 2021, this shows a 36% increase in the number of school gardens.

F2S Policy

14 out of 15 of the awardees reported that F2S is present in a district-wide policy, indicating the institutionalization of F2S in those districts.

The results of this comparative analysis demonstrate the impact of the F2S Innovation Mini-Grants on F2S programming throughout Georgia. The financial support and technical assistance provided by the Mini-Grants supported school districts in enhancing F2S activities and advancing priority areas in school School Year 2022. Millions of Georgia students could be impacted by this grant, as it supported school district leaders to create small, innovative F2S initiatives that may be expanded in other schools and more broadly in the community. Considering pandemic-related setbacks and distractions, the accomplishments of Mini-Grantees and their project successes are impressive. As a result of the F2S Innovation Mini-Grants, awardees made great strides towards advancing local food procurement, increasing access to local, organically grown food, enhancing culturally responsive food and education, and supporting Georgia farmers.

Additionally, since these data points align with Golden Radish Award criteria, continued collection of data allows for observing the impact of COVID-19 on previous Golden Radish Award-winning F2S Innovation Mini-Grantees. (12 of 15 Mini-Grantees are previous Golden Radish Award Winners.) For example, SY 2021 Innovation Mini-Grant data can be compared to data from 2019 Golden Radish applications to understand the reduction of activities due to COVID-19. Additionally, an analysis of SY 2022 data compared to SY 2021 data demonstrates how F2S programs began to recover after COVID-19.

FARM TO SCHOOL INNOVATION MINI-GRANTEE PROGRAM GROWTH SCHOOL YEARS 2021 - 2022

Mini-Grantees served 96%
more locally grown meals
in 2022!

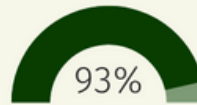


**3.8 MM
meals!**



11 NEW FARMS

Number of local farms
school districts
sourced from increased
from 65 to 76!



93%

93% of Mini-Grant
Awardees have
Farm to School
language in an LEA-
wide policy.



22 NEW GARDENS!



The Mini-Grant
program supported
an increased number
of school gardens.

79

more F2S
promotions
marketed local
food on school
menus and on
social media in
2022!



**15 Farm to School
Innovation Mini-Grantees**





Health and Racial Equity



Many of the school districts participating in the Mini-Grant are in low-wealth and minority-majority regions of Georgia. For instance, across awardee districts, at least 42% of the student population are eligible for free and reduced lunch, indicating the extent of health inequity. F2S practitioners and champions have the collective potential to advance health and racial equity by supporting access to healthy, fresh, and affordable foods and culturally responsive nutrition education. Thus, the primary driver of the Farm to School Innovation Mini-Grant is to encourage the development of projects that contribute to health and racial equity in their community.

What is Health Equity?

As defined by the Georgia F2S Alliance, health equity is the attainment of the highest level of health for all people. Health equity means that every person has an opportunity to achieve optimal health regardless of:

- The color of their skin
- Level of education
- Gender identity
- The job they have
- The neighborhood they live in
- Whether or not they have a disability

What is Racial Equity?

Racial equity, as defined by Race Forward, is the process of erasing racial disparities and improving social, political, and economic outcomes for all.

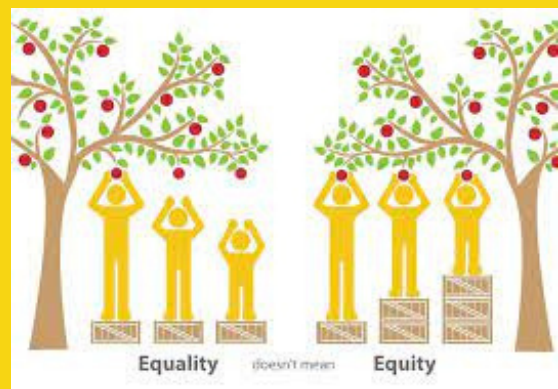


Image courtesy of socialventurepartners.org

Each Farm to School Innovation Mini-Grant applicant was asked to note the health and racial equity aspects of their project. The responses indicated that there was a lack of clear understanding among applicants as to the definition of and strategies that address health and racial equity. As a result, awardees were required to attend a health and racial equity training that would inform these concepts and their application in F2S.

Participants completed a survey before and after the training session to measure its impact on their understanding of health and racial equity. Some notable themes include:

Prioritizing Racial and Health Equity

Among the majority of awardees (63%), racial and health equity were understood as a value or priority within their organization. This result was similar in the pre and post training surveys, indicating the district's commitment to addressing inequities in their community.

Where Farm to School Intersects with Racial and Health Equity

In the post survey, the majority of districts believed that education on food and advocacy were the most prominent F2S strategies that could be applied to Racial Equity work.

Describing Racial and Health Equity

Prior to the training opportunity, 79% of respondents understood health equity to mean that everyone has the opportunity to attain their highest level of health, regardless of social determinants of health. This percentage increased after the training, with 85% of participants identifying the correct definition of health equity.

The outcomes of this training indicated that it is necessary to put health and racial equity education at the forefront of F2S support and resources in order to impact school leaders' understanding and implementation of equity-informed F2S strategies. Providing opportunities for school district leaders to learn about these concepts can empower the implementation of F2S policies, activities, and curriculum that increases health and racial equity. To learn more about the pre and post-training results, please visit this link for further analysis.



Conclusions



There are many accomplishments to be celebrated from the pilot F2S Innovation Mini-Grant Awards. Despite the myriad of COVID-19 challenges and the dramatic impact of inflation on the small size of the grant, awardees maintained a sense of curiosity, resourcefulness, and determination with project implementation. 13 of 15 districts successfully completed their project objectives by the due date, and two requested extensions. All reignited their passion for F2S and shared their progress and success on social media. As we hoped, each project created a body of inspiring F2S best practices with the potential to be replicated and applied in a variety of settings, even under-resourced areas.

I. Equitable Project Implementation

By design, the F2S Innovation Mini-Grant revealed a process for implementation of small-scale, community-led, food and nutrition education programs that meet schools and districts where they are at. The Mini-Grant allows school nutrition leaders to design and execute the F2S activities that they believe are the most needed and appropriate for their district. Awardees conceptualized projects considering:

- The school(s) and population most in need of the project and resulting resource
- Staff time and capacity available for project implementation
- Accessibility of resources/equipment/space required to execute the project
- Funding available for the project
- Existing support from school administration and community members

By taking these factors into consideration, school nutrition leaders identified project focus areas and achievable goals for their F2S Innovation Mini-Grants. From there, they made concrete plans for the project by creating an action plan and a timeline and identifying the person responsible for the project.



II. Best Practices

As demonstrated by successful and impactful farm to school programs across Georgia and identified as Farm to School Innovation Mini-Grant priorities, best practices are defined as strategies that:

- Increase access to local, fresh, organically grown food,
- Include culturally responsive food and education,
- Prioritize Health and/or Racial Equity,
- Increase local food procurement, and/or benefit Georgia certified organic farmers in other ways,
- Utilize sustainable growing practices.

Best practices are:

- Equitable,
- Realistic,
- Replicable,
- Applicable in various situations and locations,
- Cost-effective,
- Engaging to students, educators, administrators, staff, and community members.

13 of 15 Awardees reported project success, many with impressive results given the small size of the grants. Mini-Grantees submitted a final report with information and photos to enable widespread sharing of best practices. The following best practices were compiled from the final reports:

Experiential Learning

Hands-on F2S activities inspire students and encourage them to explore new concepts through different learning mechanisms. Additionally, F2S experiential learning opportunities support child development and mental and physical well-being. Many of the Mini-Grantees conducted hands-on activities such as garden work days, composting workshops, and cooking demonstrations, and found that students were engaged, motivated, and able to retain their learnings.



Photo courtesy of Houston County School District

“The biggest success story is that... this grant enabled teachers to bring their students outside for lessons. Bringing the classroom outdoors has long been known to increase mental health/social-emotional learning and this was a school year when that was desperately needed. It was obvious just looking at the students how much of a toll the pandemic took on them. I have so many pictures capturing the calmness I have seen students gain from being outdoors... Watching the worms has truly become a mini meditation for students (and staff!).” -Savannah Chatham County School District

Local Procurement

There are a variety of benefits of sourcing fresh food from small farms located within or near school districts.

- Local sourcing allows for purchasers and consumers to get to know the person or persons who produce their food. Meeting local farmers and food producers encourages community connections, which nurtures community resilience, and exposes students to a variety of career options in agriculture and food production.
- Local purchasing invests school food dollars into small, local businesses, which supports the local economy.
- Building long-term relationships with local farmers and producers can protect purchasers from regional and national supply chain disruptions and ensure a consistent supply of fresh food.
- Small farmers often use sustainable and organic growing practices, which are environmentally friendly, non-threatening to human and animal health, and can be effective strategies for combating climate change. Learning about these growing practices is a great way to infuse STEM in food education.

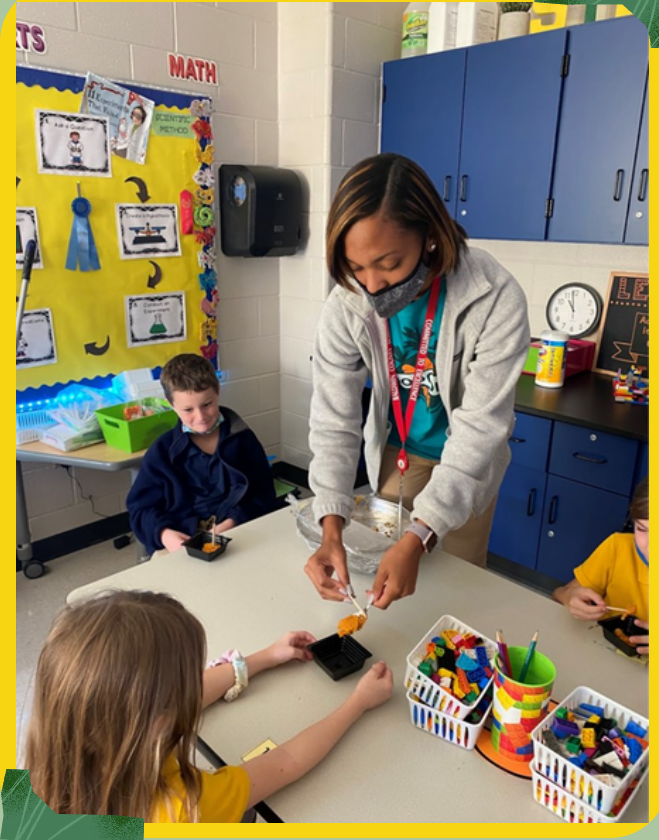


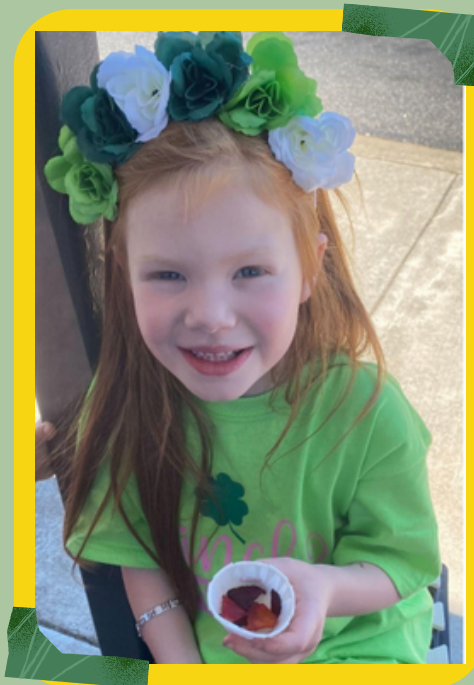
Photo courtesy of Baldwin County School District

“The Farm to School grant gave our district the opportunity to expose our students to a product that is grown right here in Georgia only 3 hours away. That experience made them more likely to try organic fruits and vegetables.” - Jones County School District

Taste Tests

Research has shown that a child 7-12 years needs to be exposed to a new food up to 20 times before accepting it (Loewen & Pliner, 1999). Taste tests are an inexpensive strategy to repeatedly expose children to new foods. Taste tests can encourage familiarity and offer an opportunity for students to provide feedback to nutrition staff before incorporation into the school menu. Additionally, when students are acquainted with a new food, they will be more inclined to eat it, which will reduce waste.

Photo courtesy of Jackson County School District



“The Farm to School grant gave our district the opportunity to expose our students to a product that is grown right here in Georgia only 3 hours away. That experience made them more likely to try organic fruits and vegetables.” - Bleckley County School District

“Students used their own authentic data to create bar graphs of the taste tests. Students became more aware of food choices and discussed what they ate with each other. Students were able to connect these activities to other learning activities about healthy eating habits. It encouraged students to try new foods.”
-Morgan County School District

Culturally Responsive, Cross-Curricular F2S Programming

Awardees worked to incorporate food and gardening education in Project Based Learning across grades and subject areas. For example, one school district grew the ingredients for, prepared, and taught students about salsa in Art, PE, STEM, and Spanish; increasing student understanding of the cultural significance of food and its connection to all subject areas. The project was so successful, that the nutrition staff will add homemade salsa to the school menu.

Environmental Education

Mini-Grantees found that F2S is an excellent segway to environmental education. Some of the awardees used their grant to teach students specifically about the cycle of life, soil health, reducing waste and climate change mitigation. These are life skills that benefit students as well as their communities.

“This project made an immediate impact with our green house and ability to nourish young/tender plants. With the cost of fertilizer skyrocketing, vermicomposting has been an amazing cost-savings for our agriculture program.”
-Fannin County School District



Photo courtesy of Rabun County School District

Farmer Connections

Many of the awardees utilized grant funds to support events that connected students with farmers for the first time. It was compelling for students to understand agriculture through the lens of a farmer, and specifically learn more about the people who grow food for them. Meeting farmers enhanced their enthusiasm and excitement to eat fresh produce. Additionally, students were exposed to a career path they may not have otherwise encountered.

Garden Connections

When students grow their own food, they become invested, and are highly motivated to eat it. Using garden-grown herbs, fruits, and vegetables in taste tests, snacks and meals may result in student eagerness to try those foods. Awardees report that students get especially enthusiastic to eat the foods they have grown, and express a sense of value, curiosity, and excitement to try their creations. Furthermore, they will have the opportunity to learn more about where food comes from and develop gardening skills that will serve them for a lifetime.



“Our garden activities impact health equity in our schools by teaching each child how to grow, harvest, and prepare healthy foods. This is knowledge they can take and use throughout their life, regardless of any other factor.” - Rabun County School District

Photo courtesy of Houston County School District

Quality Improvement of F2S Innovation Mini-Grant Program



To better inform the next F2S Innovation Mini-Grant cycle, we identified areas for improvement based on participant and administrator feedback and observations:

Health and Racial Equity Training

While health and racial equity were familiar concepts for many participants, their application in programming priorities was new. Innovation Mini-Grant applicants would have benefited from support and guidance in designing equity-focused projects.

In 2022, health and racial equity training will be available prior to the close of the grant application period to support the planning of health and racial equity-focused projects.

Addressing Basic Needs

Many of the participants had creative, original project ideas, but were forced to reallocate their award and resources to meet basic infrastructure needs such as rebuilding old garden beds and fixing broken Tower Gardens.

This reality prompted us to consider how the Mini-Grants can best support innovative project ideas, while also addressing basic needs that make innovative F2S programming possible.

Increase Grant Amounts

With the \$500 from this program, Mini-Grantees developed remarkable F2S initiatives that will continue to improve Georgia F2S programming. Funding was limited in order to accommodate the 15 school districts accepted into the program.

In future grant cycles, a smaller number of available grants with larger financial awards could be more effective, especially for implementing innovative, long-term F2S projects.

Plan for Social Distancing

Due to the uncertain nature of COVID-19 and necessary social distancing practices, project execution was limited in many cases. Changes were typically made in projects that intended to unite large groups of people or to invite community members from outside of the school to participate (i.e. community partners, farmers, etc.). While COVID-19 is still unpredictable, future project proposals should account for evolving social distance guidelines and school limitations on outside visitors.

Farmer Collaboration with Farm to School Education Programs

Experience has shown that farmer contribution to in-school agricultural education programs is an effective strategy to engage students in food education, generate student interest in agricultural careers, and increase community connections to local farmers. Farmers are often asked to volunteer, though, which can diminish the value of the farmers' time among students, community members, and even the farmers themselves. The Farm to School Innovation Mini-Grant allows us to encourage the value of farmers' time through the best practice of hiring farmers as agricultural consultants and education partners, although the small grant amounts don't allow for extensive time or projects. With additional funds for farmer stipends, more strategic partnerships between farmers and schools can be established.