

Alachua County Schools Farm to School Program Named “One in a Melon” Voted Top Farm to School Program in Florida

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service has awarded Alachua County Schools a ‘One in a Melon’ award for administering an exemplary farm to school program. One school district per state was selected for the award by receiving the most public nominations.



From March 15 through April 15, parents, teachers, community stakeholders, and students were invited to visit USDA’s [Farm to School Census](#) website and nominate their favorite farm to school program to receive the award. According to the Census, 81 Florida districts have farm to school programs, and a total of 5,254 districts participate across the U.S.

Alachua County Public Schools has been participating in farm to school since 2014. A USDA Farm to School grant kick-started a collaboration between the district’s Food and Nutrition Services and the Exceptional Student Education departments to create a ‘Farm to School to Work Hub’ where students with disabilities learn about a healthy, local food system by participating in one. Components of the program include a school garden demonstration site, a state-of-the-art greenhouse, and a food hub. Students learn to grow food in-ground and hydroponically. Produce grown both at the hub and by local farms is collected, sorted, and packed for use in taste tests and in the school lunch program. Students throughout the district visit the Hub to learn more about the food system and their role in it. Nutrition education is provided by participating students through a collaboration with the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Family Nutrition Program.

Currently about 17,000 children participate in Alachua County School’s farm to school programming. In the future the district hopes to expand production at the Hub and school gardens and create more opportunities for local farms to sell to the school system. The goal is to increase access to the healthiest food the region has to offer.

District officials say farm to school programs help students form healthy habits, learn where their food comes from, and develop an understanding of the importance of nutrition and agriculture. Results of the 2015 USDA Farm to School Census show that schools with robust farm to school programs report reductions in food waste, higher school meal participation rates, and increased willingness of the students to try new foods, notably fruits and vegetables. Census results also show that U.S. schools invested nearly \$800 million in local food from farmers, ranchers, fishermen, and food processors and manufacturers in the 2013- 2014 school year, which is money going directly back into local communities.

“School food service staff in Alachua County have noticed a number of benefits by participating in farm to school initiative, including increased interest in the fruit and vegetables offered on the lunch line,” said Kelli Brew, Farm to School Coordinator. “Students who participate with school gardens show pride in bringing their produce to the lunchroom.”

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