

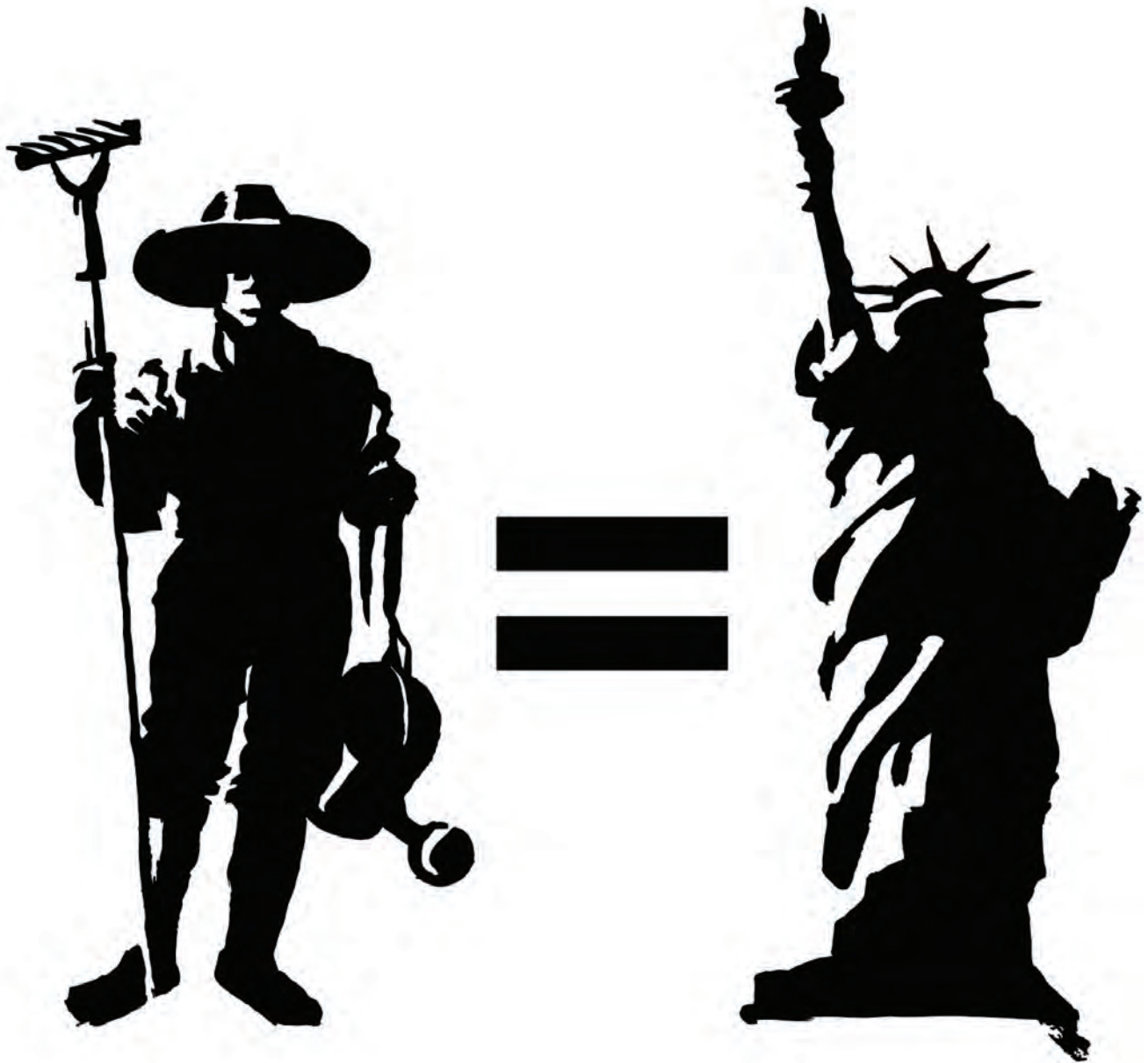
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The Food Politics Issue



Members of the Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative prepare an enormous batch of ratatouille for a local school - Photo courtesy of NEIFFI

NORTHEAST IOWA FOOD & FITNESS INITIATIVE: INSPIRING HEALTHY TRANSFORMATIONS

By Renee Brincks

During the 2011-2012 school year, Luther College Sustainable Foods Educator Maren Stumme-Diers worked with the Allamakee Community School District to develop wellness goals, increase student activity levels and incorporate wholesome, locally grown foods into school lunches. As part of the Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative (FFI), a six-county wellness campaign supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation Food & Community Program, some 20 area school districts are revamping menus, hosting cooking workshops, setting up greenhouses, building bike trails and more. Occasionally, says Stumme-Diers, those efforts produce surprising results.

“Parents will say, ‘What have you done with my children? They’re coming home and they want broccoli...’” she laughs.

Turning students on to vegetables is a start, but FFI leaders have loftier long-term goals for the region: increase access to healthy, local foods and create new opportunities for physical activity.

“It’s this idea of policy and system change, of environmental change, of creating within our communities the conditions that will support healthy lifestyles,” says FFI Project Director Ann Mansfield. “In health care, we’ve known for a long time what individuals

should eat and how they should exercise...But as long as people are put into environments that are full of failure, the individual model does not work.”

The Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative is one of nine community wellness projects currently funded by the Kellogg Foundation, and the only one serving a rural area. Team members in Allamakee, Chickasaw, Clayton, Fayette, Howard and Winneshiek counties spent 2½ years assessing the regional landscape with the help of a research grant awarded in 2007. Then, after outlining goals related to school wellness, active living and food systems, FFI leaders earned a three-year implementation grant. That funding ends this October. At press time, FFI had applied for an additional four-year grant that would help current projects transition to self-funded operations.

“From the beginning, Kellogg has challenged us to sustain and embed this work in our community,” says Mansfield. “They said, ‘We will invest in you for 8 to 10 years, but we need to see evidence that you are building commitment and long-term sustainability.’”

FFI stands out from other applicants, in part, because of grassroots, region-wide engagement. Luther College, Upper Explorerland Re-

gional Planning Commission and Iowa State University Extension and Outreach serve as the initiative's three core partners, and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Wellmark Foundation and Iowa Department of Transportation are among organizations that have also backed programs. In addition to nearly \$1.8 million from the Kellogg Foundation, Mansfield estimates that FFI has leveraged between \$3 million and \$4 million in additional funds and volunteer time, thanks to its supporters.

Success depends on more than winning grants, however.

"Very few groups have been invited to co-create the future," Mansfield says. "People think that this is about money. But actually, the answer is in the engagement and in the conversations."

For example, FFI brings together school food service professionals to discuss how they can more efficiently add local, seasonal produce to their meals. As a result, seven schools have started shared menu planning to bring unprocessed food to plates while also benefiting area producers. By creating one menu used by several schools, participants can place bigger orders with local farmers, and a longer lead time lets those farmers tailor their plantings to meet demand. Other events include hands-on workshops where chefs create recipes using seasonal produce, as well as discussions that allow food service staff members to share their own best practices.

FFI also supports school wellness teams and sends members of AmeriCorps and FoodCorps, a new national service organization addressing student nutrition, into districts to implement plans and educate families. Luther College supervises local FoodCorps members and FFI helps to fund their work, which ranges from building school gardens to collaborating with Safe Routes to School program managers to organizing farm-to-school activities.

Rather than administering workplace wellness outreach or other initiatives for adults, FFI's directive from the Kellogg Foundation is to focus on schoolchildren. The hope is that youngsters will share healthy messages with their families and communities.

"When school environments are supportive of making the healthy choice the easy choice, our youngest generation is going to grow up with that system of thinking," says Luther College Director of School Outreach Emily Neal, who oversees service members working with 18 schools throughout the six-county region. "You're educating young people who are still idealistic, who aren't set in their ways and who are, in some ways, change agents. They are open to things, and how kids think and feel affects their parents."

In the face of budget cuts, teacher-sharing agreements and other challenges, school districts often require outside resources, like the FFI service members, to build successful wellness campaigns. Schools are stretched and the landscape is constantly changing, explains Mansfield, but the initiative's flexible approach benefits participants.

"We cover a geographic area that's the size of Connecticut with these six counties," she says. "It's really important that every school and every community maintain its own identity."

FFI has helped several communities create active living opportunities that capitalize on unique local assets. Initiative leaders provided funding for a Frisbee golf course in Riceville and support "Walking Wednesdays" in several New Hampton schools. They were involved in early stages of planning for the trails in the Turkey River Recreation Corridor, which links Fayette and Clayton Counties. FFI also partnered with several local agencies in 2011 to launch Winneshiek County's Driftless Safari, a free, countywide treasure hunt for families. Based on the program's success, a Turkey River Safari was added in 2012. And, project leaders have organized bike rodeos,

walk-to-school days and walking school buses in several communities.

In Decorah, six student "bus groups" meet daily to walk to school with an adult.

"We know that if children get 15 to 20 minutes of exercise before arriving at school in the morning, it's better for their health, they perform better and their behavior is better," Mansfield says. "We're bussing our kids in and we're dropping them off right in front of the school. Why can't we rethink that?"

She and her colleagues are also encouraging community members to rethink local food systems, the third component of FFI's outreach.

"We decided that, from the food standpoint, just to produce food didn't really make things stick. You have to build demand, and you have to have a positive reason to build demand," says Eric Nordschow, a Decorah farmer and owner of Windridge Implements. "Healthy lifestyles, local foods and active living all support each other, so we get that demand curve."

Nordschow has been involved with FFI since its inception, and he helped shape related food and farm initiatives in the area. Though he's seen the market for local harvests grow significantly, he recognizes that challenges still exist. One hurdle is simply producing enough fruits, vegetables, meat and dairy products to satisfy the needs of schools, along with hospitals, nursing homes and other institutions. Nordschow says customers in La Crosse, Minneapolis and even Chicago have expressed interest in buying from area growers if the supply becomes available.

The other challenge is aggregating and processing local foods so that they can be delivered in a way that is useful for the end customer. GROWN Locally, a Northeast Iowa small-farm cooperative, is making progress in this area. Efforts continue elsewhere, as well.

Creating additional opportunities to grow and process foods right at home boosts both local health and local economies. In 2010 and 2011, 26 jobs were created in the six-county area thanks to an increased focus on local food production, and institutional spending on local foods was up by nearly \$300,000. A 2010 survey of 16 area producers measured sales of \$2.05 million, and preliminary numbers for 2011 estimate about \$3.5 million in sales by 23 producers.

The success is encouraging, but there is more work to be done.

"This has to scale in order for us to get traction," says Mansfield. "It's kind of a chicken and egg thing. If the farmers know that there is a commitment at the end of the growing season, the chances of them increasing next year's production are going to be there."

While stronger local food systems, more physical activity and lower obesity rates are concrete ways to measure FFI's progress among specific populations, a bigger-picture shift will ultimately signify success for project leaders.

"Encouraging people to live healthy lifestyles is important, but it all needs to be supported by system changes in the community," Mansfield says.

To learn more about the Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative, visit www.iowafoodandfitness.org.