

Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative

Cross Site Evaluation Summary, 2010-2011

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The Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative continues to build momentum during Year 2 of the implementation phase. Efforts continue to focus on building capacity within a six-county region of Northeast Iowa, including the counties of Fayette, Howard, Clayton, Chickasaw, Winneshiek, and Allamakee.

SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS

In an era of tight budgets, economic recession, and political wrangling for dwindling resources, gaining support for any kind of community development intervention almost always ends in a conversation about expected economic impacts. Job creation has become the yardstick by which such efforts are measured. However, other equally important change indicators are important to track such as the inclusion of vulnerable children, increase in local food sales, funds leveraged, policy changes, infrastructure changes, increased capacity of producers, institutional engagement, community engagement, local leadership capacity, and statewide leadership capacity.

Increasing Inclusion of Vulnerable Children

Balancing the focus on economic benefits of FFI interventions is the need to measure the impact of work on marginalized citizens—namely vulnerable children. A reasonably accurate estimate for **the number of vulnerable children impacted by the FFI work in Northeast Iowa is 4600** based on participation rates of children in free or reduced school lunch programs. In Northeast Iowa, these children are among the statistics reported on rural poverty which invariably exceed rates of urban poverty. According to the US Census Bureau, in 2002 14.2 percent of the nonmetro population was poor, compared with 11.6 percent of the metro population.

Job Creation

A total of 36 known jobs were created in the reporting year as a result of FFI work in Northeast Iowa. The following jobs were leveraged by the project and are supported by public and private sector.

- 10 jobs were created *within* the FFI in 2010-2011.
- 26 jobs were created *as a result of* a focus on local food production and processing in 2010-2011, including processing jobs, farm labor, and new production jobs.

Increase in Local Food Sales

The region experienced an overall increase in the number of dollars spent on local foods with immeasurable benefits on strengthening the region's economy. We know that:

1. Local food sales for 9 of the same producers tracked both last year and this year report **an increase in local food sales of \$1.12 million** (see Appendix 1 in Target 2 for more details).
2. **Local food purchases by institutions in the region increased nearly \$300,000** (see Appendix 2 in Target 2 for more details).
3. School purchases of locally grown food increased by \$1141 (note that many schools are also sourcing produce from school gardens, which will not be reflected in the data on school food purchases). While this increase is small, the number of school districts sourcing locally grown produce increased from 11 to 16.

Funds Leveraged

The total amount of funds leveraged in Year 2 (both indirect and aligned) is \$385,248. Last year, the total amount leveraged (excluding FFI funds) was \$872,819. In year 2, the Initiative exceeded the amount of direct resources leveraged in Year 1 by more than \$40,000. For aligned resources, Year 1 was more lucrative when \$635,226 were leveraged (nearly half of which came from USDA value-added producer grants) compared to \$107,047 in Year 2. In the past two years, the NEI FFI has leveraged a total of \$1.26 million for food and walkable/bikeable communities work in the region.

Policy Changes

School policies, customs, and practices have transformed dramatically as a result of FFI work.

- Policies on school gardens and using school garden produce in the school lunch program have been established.
- More schools are sourcing local food, an increase in 5 from last year.
- More schools are supporting the introduction of healthy foods into school food programs through the use of salad bars.
- More schools are supporting education, training, and networking to support the incorporation of safe, healthy, local food into school food programs.
- Food served at extracurricular school-sponsored events has changed to include healthier options.
- Two schools in the region hired new food service directors; working on Farm to School was part of both job descriptions.

Area business and non-profit customs, practices, and policies have changed as well.

- Food distributor Sysco of Iowa is investing in training more local growers to grow for them.
- New gardens have been established at Cresco Medical Center and Spectrum Industries for staff/clients.
- The Northeast Iowa Business Network has identified local food production as a priority economic development goal.
- Area food pantries are distributing coupons to low income families for the purchase of locally grown food at area farmers' markets. Funds for the coupons come from donations secured by the NE Iowa Funders Network.

Infrastructure Changes

At least seven infrastructure changes have occurred as a result of both the food and walkable/bikeable communities work.

- Results of feasibility studies commissioned by the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition led to the development of two processing plants (dairies) in the region.
- 3 miles of trail were built that connect two communities to the Valley of Elgin School.
- Decorah school construction reconfigured an intersection to accommodate the walking school bus and the school agreed to plow the route in winter.
- 7 streets in Decorah became "bicycle friendly" when 400 bicycle sharrows were painted on them to accommodate bike traffic on roads.
- In Decorah, the Trout Run Trail connects the community of Freeport to Decorah Community School District.
- Riceville continues to build their Wildcat trail that will connect the school to the Wapsi Trail. Just constructed, it is a 1/4 loop around the school playground.
- Postville youth planned, designed and constructed a Frisbee golf course at a city park.
- In partnership with planners and city engineers, Postville, South Winneshiek, and Howard-Winneshiek School Districts are actively planning to connect existing bike trails to their school with the community.

Increased Capacity of Producers

The Initiative is increasing the capacity of local producers to meet local demand.

- The number of new local food producers in the region increased by 11.
- The number of farmers who were food safety GAP certified increased by 13.
- The number of farmers supplying a local food cooperative/aggregator increased from 16 to 26.
- Two local farms hired 5 new full time employees.
- The number of new CSAs in the region increased by 5.
- Several producers are now approved vendors for Sodexo.
- Producers have access to a new source of credit through a microloan program that was started to finance new farming enterprises.

Institutional Engagement

The Northeast Iowa FFI chose to deliberately focus energy and investment on engaging institutions in this work. Primary target institutions are the schools with the greatest potential to impact children. One of the clear benefits of having an institutional focus is that institutions are in a position to integrate the work into structures that improve systemic access to healthy food and create walkable/bikeable communities with the greatest potential for sustainable, long-term change that makes “the healthy choice the easy choice. While direct markets are an important outlet for producers in the region, the scale at which they operate and the population they serve is still so small that a focus on developing and maintaining direct markets often precludes the necessary and wider transformation of food production, processing and distribution systems.

By the numbers, the effort to promote local, healthy food and walkable/bikeable communities in Northeast Iowa is gaining significant momentum in the schools. Cause for celebration is the fact that:

- **14 of the region’s 20 school districts (70%) have actively engaged school wellness teams,**
- **Sixteen school districts (80% of schools in the region) also have organized youth teams.**
- **16 (80%) of the schools are sourcing locally grown food, and**
- **16 (80%) have participated in a whole series of activities related to active transportation to and from school promoted and supported by the FFI.**
- **The Postville school district, which has the highest percent of children eligible for free or reduced school lunches in the region (70%), hosted the greatest number of farm to school activities in the region (13).**

Schools are not the only institutions engaged. Oneota Coop (a food cooperative) and Luther College, as well as two brokers, are among the **20 institutions that purchased local food last year** and cooperated to provide records on those purchases to the project. In the reporting year, local foods accounted for 22% of the food served at the College. Local foods accounted for 23% of food sales at Oneota Coop.

Community Engagement

In Year 2, there was a dramatic change in the number and composition of collaborative partners (Table 1). **More than 250 new partners joined the effort**, increasing from 294 to 550. The number of youth partners remained relatively steady. It is important to note that most of the targeted allies for Year 1 moved to ongoing partners.

Table 1. Change in Initiative Partners

Partners	2010-2011	% Youth 2010-2011	2009-2010	% Youth 2009-2010	% change from Year 1 to 2
<i>Total core, ongoing, and strategic partners</i>	550	13%	294	23%	+87%
<i>Youth</i>	70	13%	68	23%	+3%
<i>Core</i>	74	32%	45	49%	+64%
<i>Ongoing</i>	420	11%	224	20%	+88%
<i>Strategic</i>	56	0%	25	4%	+124%
<i>Potential allies</i>	19	0%	10	30%	+90%
<i>Potential challengers</i>	9	0%	4	0%	+125%

Local Leadership Capacity

The FFI is improving the status of youth within the region. Youth are increasingly respected as leaders and advocates for local food and walkable/bikeable communities both within their schools and communities. School boards are receptive to student presentations, parents and school personnel are supporting and helping with youth-planned activities, and many schools voluntarily include a multitude of youth-led activities on their School Wellness Action Plans to support youth (and consequently, Initiative) efforts. We suspect **youth who take on leadership roles in the project improve their overall health status** although we have only qualitative data to support this from interviews youth conducted with each other. Youth interviewed on the outcomes of their involvement in this work overwhelmingly related stories of change about what they eat. They also reported with confidence and pride their impact on community engagement in terms of connections they've developed with children and adults in their schools and communities as a result of their FFI involvement.

Statewide Leadership Capacity

In addition to having a core FFI partner hired in a statewide position, leaders of the FFI are strongly connected to related work throughout the state. FFI leaders serve on the steering committee for the statewide Regional Food Systems Working Group, which is supported by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University. The RFSWG is comprised of 16 regional food groups covering 83 of Iowa's 99 counties. Many of these groups look to the NEI FFI for guidance and direction on how to carry out their own regional food system efforts. In addition, a core FFI partner and leader of the NIFF Coalition has been appointed by Iowa's Governor to be the RFSWG representative to serve on the Local Food and Farm Council. The Council was created by new legislation passed in 2011 (in which the FFI played an influential role) which establishes a local food and farm program to carry out policy and funding recommendations designed to strengthen regional food systems in Iowa. Two of the NIFF Coalition team members have also been contracted by the statewide Iowa Local Food and Farm Initiative Coordinator as section leaders to lead planning and documentation of progress on policy items listed in two of the six sections of the Iowa Food and Farm Initiative. They are coordinating the assessment for their respective sections on food safety and processing and are generating recommendations for each.