Profile: **Page County**

Increasing Economic Viability through a "Farm to School" Program

Page County is in Virginia's fertile Shenandoah Valley. Its nearly 500 farms are highly productive, and the county ranks fifth in the Commonwealth for the market value of agricultural products sold. But the number of farms and land in farms have declined in recent years because of economic challenges. Public school leaders decided to support a "Farm to School" program to bring fresh, locally grown products into their cafeterias while also supporting the area's agricultural economy. They also felt that this program could encourage students to learn more about agriculture. Starting small and growing as capacity allowed, Page County's Farm to School efforts have flourished.

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Situation

Page County is 50 miles northeast of Staunton in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley. The South Fork Shenandoah River winds from south to north throughout the county; Interstate 81 lies a few miles west of its western border; and a third of its landmass is in either Shenandoah National Park or national forest lands.

With a population of roughly 24,000 people, Page County is largely rural. Like other rural places, its population skews older, with 29 percent of its residents aged 60 and older. The county's median household income is $59,396, which is below the state's median income, and 9.5 percent of its population is below the poverty line.

Agriculture is the foundation of Page County's economy. It ranks fifth in the Commonwealth for the market value of agricultural products sold and is home to nearly 500 farms. Despite recent declines in farms and farmland, agriculture remains a key element of the county's environment and culture.

Leaders in Page County understand agriculture's importance, yet they have also seen many farms struggle. As such, some leaders have taken creative steps to support its economic viability. In the mid-2010s, the county's public school system began participating in a multi-county USDA grant program to offer locally grown food in their schools. Initially, their involvement was limited to sourcing just a few products, like apples and sweet potatoes. During this period, they saw both

the economic potential of giving local farmers a stable market and how much students enjoyed the fresh local foods. When they hired a new Supervisor of Nutritional Services in 2017, the county expanded their Farm to School program, believing it could especially help young and smaller scale farmers looking for consistent markets.

Approach

That then-new nutritional services leader—Virginia "Jenny" Jeffries, who still leads this work in 2025—was committed to seeing the Farm to School program succeed. "I was born and raised here, and I have a love for this community," she says. "I have seen the number of farms decrease, and I have seen industries leave our county. So, for me, once I got into this position and realized most of the money for school nutrition programs is coming from the federal government, I thought: 'what a great way to spend that money, to spend it locally and help local farmers.'"

Thankfully, Jeffries had a foundation from which to start. The existing local procurement efforts, limited as they were, helped others within the schools and community see that the approach was possible. Working with a limited number of products at the beginning also gave Jeffries and her colleagues a chance to work through and learn the logistics of the procurement process, which can be complex. Learning to navigate purchasing guidelines, delivery and storage capacity, food preparation, food safety, and farmer engagement takes time. She continued sourcing limited products and then slowly began adding more.

Occasionally, the products are grown by students in school gardens and donated to the cafeterias, or they are raised by Future Farmers of America (FFA) and 4-H members. But most of the time, they are bought from nearby farms. Jeffries and her team try their best to source farm products from within Page County, and they have successfully undertaken outreach efforts to connect with these farmers. But they also source some things from within 100 miles of the county's center, which still supports regional agriculture. When that is not possible, they try to source from within Virginia.

One of the biggest goals of Page County's Farm to School program—and one particularly relevant to Planning for Agriculture—is related to economic development in the agricultural community. "Being able to financially support our farmers and hopefully be able to help them

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> VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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sustain their farms is important to us," says Jeffries. She especially tries to do that for new and beginning farmers in the county, wanting them to understand that the school system can be a profitable, reliable, and consistent market. While no economic impact data exists for Page County specifically, national findings affirm that farmers benefit from these initiatives.

Through this Farm to School program—which is active in all eight of the system's schools—students get a taste of local agriculture. Sometimes, they tour the farms that provide them with meat or produce. They get to meet their farmers and know where their food comes from. Even when that cannot happen, they at least know that some of what they are consuming comes from a farm nearby.

Other times, they get to eat things that their peers raised in a school garden. "One of our school gardens grew radishes," Jeffries mentions, "and toward the end of the school year, they brought us radishes. There are 500 kids in that school, and we made tossed salads and cut those radishes so small that everyone had at least a tiny piece of radish. The pride that those kids had, knowing that they were part of producing that little bit of radish, was huge." Jeffries also notes that the students have come to taste the difference in produce sourced locally and produce that is brought in from several states away.

All these experiences get students—and, by extension, their families—more engaged with agriculture in their community.

Outcomes

Over eight years, Jeffries and her team have incorporated a variety of locally grown foods into school meals, from sweet potatoes, salad greens, and tomatoes to cantaloupe, butternut squash, peppers, and onions. They are working to add proteins, like chicken and pork. Last year, they spent nearly 10 percent of their food budget on local products, an impressive-yet-achievable threshold.

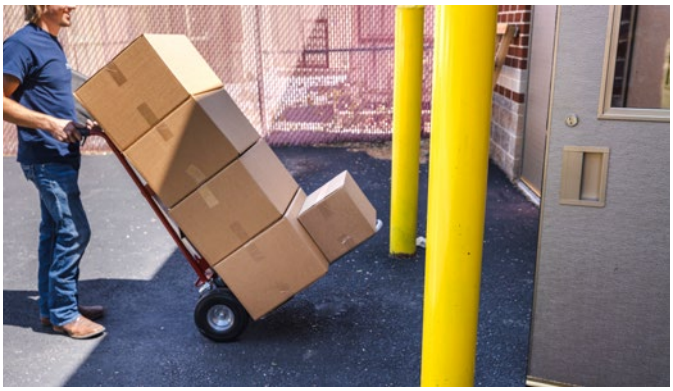
"It is really a win-win for communities when they invest in these programs," says Bee Thorp, the Lead Farm to School Specialist for the Virginia Department of Education. "It supports the local agricultural economy while providing opportunities for students to eat fresh fruits, vegetables, and proteins and learn about their food."

Seth Benton, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Program Manager for Food Distribution, agrees. "We have a marketing division here that works with farmers. We have staff members located throughout the state that try to hook up farms with schools—and not just with schools, but with other business opportunities. We try to make connections between the farmers that are looking for a market and the folks who are going to purchase. Farm to School gives producers who don't always have a market an additional place to sell their food, and that's certainly a benefit to individual farmers, but to the community as a whole as well."

Lessons Learned

Thorp and Benton share that the most important aspect of a successful Farm to School program is having a nutrition director who wants to make it happen. The Farm to School program in Page County did not appear out of thin air. Getting to where they are now required hard work, patience, and flexibility.

Jeffries' biggest piece of advice to others is to "start small and be patient." Begin with sourcing one



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ingredient, such as lettuce for a salad bar. Work through the ins and outs—the outreach, sourcing, storage, and preparation—for that one product. And when that starts to feel manageable, think about how to expand.

Utilizing small amounts of locally grown products can be simple. However, securing local products on a large scale can be challenging for both farmers and schools. They have to go through a bid or "request for proposals" process, which is complicated and can be difficult for local farmers to submit the lowest bid and make any profit. But school nutrition programs can write their requests for proposals to make local farmers more competitive. They can factor in the time of harvest and source identification or ask for additional services like coming to speak to students about agriculture or inviting school field trips to the farm. School systems can ask for these services explicitly in their proposal requests, signaling things that make it possible for local farmers to stand out.

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Jeffries' background in food regulation has helped her navigate this sometimes-complex process, but she shares that other people—whether school nutrition directors like her or someone in a position like Thorp's—can help with answering questions. Someone who wants to lead this charge in Virginia does not have to go it alone. They can also benefit from excellent resources that support the work, including an in-depth Farm to School Toolkit from the Virginia Department of Education.

Getting the word out to farmers about the Farm to School program can also be a challenge—or an opportunity. For example, Jeffries attends local and regional marketing meetings hosted by VDACS so she can meet farmers and inform them of the program. She also talks with extension agents in her area, who might call to ask what products she is most interested in purchasing so they can advise farmers. And she shares her contact info and encourages farmers to get in touch directly: "If you have something to sell from your farm, call me. I will figure out a way to work with you." To her peers in other school systems, she explains that it is essential to "be present as much as possible" in the agricultural community.

On the farmer side, Benton says distribution to schools can be tough, especially for smaller-scale producers who often lack the time and/or resources to deliver products themselves. Packing, processing, and storage can present challenges, depending on the farm product. Extension agents, VDACS staff, and others can help farmers navigate these logistical challenges.

"For whatever reason, this has been one of my personal goals for our community and for our students," Jeffries says. "It's all about the holistic impact. It is a win for our students because they're getting that local food, and it's a win for the farming community because we're able to infuse that money back into our area."

To learn more about Page County's program, see this short video.