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The Youth Farmstand: A Model Program for Workforce Preparedness, Lifeskills Education, and Economic Development

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Abstract: Youth farmstands effectively integrate three responsibilities of Cooperative Extension—serving the agricultural community, helping youth through 4-H, and providing nutrition education through family and community health sciences. In addition, youth farmstands support many community initiatives and, by nature, form diverse and productive partnerships and collaborations. This article shows how a youth farmstand project addresses many local needs, including food security and economic and community development. For youth, it offers workplace preparedness, lifeskills training, and community service opportunities, as well as improved nutrition and health. Farmers also benefit through new retail outlets for their products, with limited labor investments.

In 2003, Rutgers Cooperative Extension (RCE) of Gloucester County launched Seeds to Success, a youth farmstand project, part of a statewide initiative. Seeds to Success is the largest youth farmstand initiative in New Jersey, preparing special needs, at-risk youth for the workforce through classroom and on-the-job training. (Special needs students have Individual Educational Plans developed to support learning and education.) During the school year, Seeds to Success teaches banking and financial basics and food/nutrition education annually to more than 250 special-needs youth from three at-risk Gloucester County communities.

Seeds to Success Youth Farmstands bring new business and affordable, nutritious foods to residents of three limited-resource communities. The farmstands are a unique example of economic development in at-risk communities. And they support local farmers by offering three new outlets to sell their crops at competitive, profitable prices.

Seeds to Success is a multi-faceted project with four key goals:

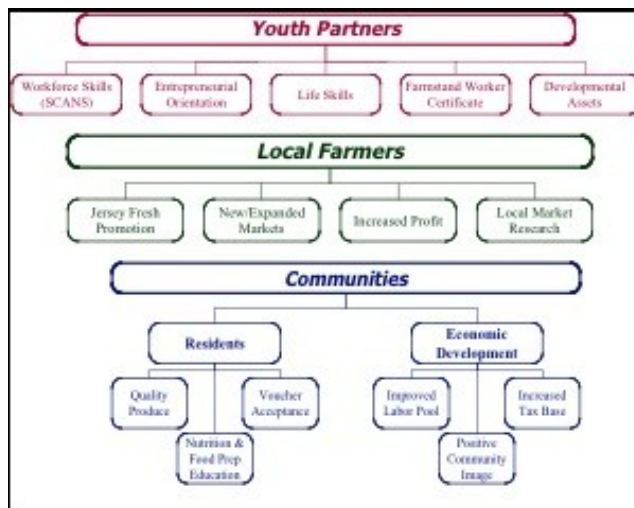
1. Support local farmers by creating new retail outlets for their products

2. Increase workplace readiness skills in special needs, at-risk youth
3. Improve life skills in at-risk, special needs youth
4. Build food security and healthier, stronger communities

Because the project is multi-faceted, with a range of goals, Seeds to Success offers a plethora of benefits to a number of audiences within its targeted communities (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Multi-Level Benefits of a Youth Farmstand Project (Blalock, L., RCE Youth Farmstand Program, 2004)



Diversity of Audiences and Outreach

The Seeds to Success youth farmstand project addresses numerous county needs: food security, economic and community development, workplace preparedness, lifeskills development, community service opportunities for special needs youth, and improved nutrition/health. The project reaches out to a diverse audience.

Community

At least 20% of the population in the target communities is considered "at-risk," that is, at or below poverty level. These communities have initiatives to address neighborhood revitalization and consider Seeds to Success a logical "fit" into these efforts. All community partners were anxious to bring fresh, locally grown produce to their residents, knowing that increased access to healthy foods directly correlates to increased consumption which may, in turn, reduce chronic disease risks (Bodor, Rose, Farley, Swalm, & Scott, 2008).

Farmstand customers purchase produce with cash, food stamps, and Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) vouchers (USDA Food and Nutrition Service Online, 2008). FMNP vouchers account for 10-15% of the sales annually.

Youth

Although educational programs in our county provide workforce preparation to special needs students, there is a significant disparity between the number of youth who require training and the number of workplace opportunities available. All youth, regardless of their physical and mental conditions, need and deserve the opportunity to be involved in activities unique to their own talents and interests in preparation for adulthood in a world with great diversity (Tormeohlen & Field, 1994). Many Seeds to Success students would have few employment opportunities without the farmstands. Seeds to Success also fosters citizenship, self-esteem and personal development for "at-risk" youth. Farmstand employees also fulfill volunteer commitments and work with local charities.

Seeds to Success involves both in-school and on-the-job training. During the school year, youth participate in nutrition, food safety, banking, and financial education. During the summer, youth apply this knowledge at one of the three farmstands, where youth truly experience many aspects of the day-to-day operations of a retail entrepreneurial enterprise.

Farmers

Despite living in close proximity to local farms, residents of targeted communities have limited access to locally grown produce. Neither supermarkets nor area farm markets are within an accessible walking distance or reachable via public transportation. While there is a need, economic restraints, poor marketing conditions, and lack of trained, affordable manpower limit the ability of local farmers to expand retail markets by opening and operating farmstands in new, low-income communities.

There have been attempts to increase access to locally grown produce in each targeted community. However, starting and keeping retail farm markets in operation demands a great deal of attention to consumer, vendor and community needs (Abel, Thomson, & Maretzki, 1999). Collaborations between farmers and local agencies established "portable" farmstands that traveled throughout the community to serve WIC clients, seniors, and food stamp recipients have failed. This happened largely because there was no established, long-term allegiance to the initiative; participating farmers made little profit and were unwilling to continue; and there was limited awareness and support from the community in general. Other attempts to operate farm markets have met with limited success, primarily because trained, affordable labor to staff farm markets is not available. To participate, farmers must staff farm market booths themselves, taking them away from managing their farms and reducing profit.

Seeds to Success offers a profitable alternative for farmers, enabling them to establish new retail outlets for their products—with limited labor investments. During the first 5 years of the program, eight farmers were able to expand their markets by selling over \$67,000 worth of produce to the farmstands.

Outcomes and Impacts

Farmstand outcomes/impacts are reported through several assessment methods including, pre- and post-farmstand skillathons, SCANS observational surveys and customer surveys. In addition, school-based pre- and post-tests assess behavior, attitude and knowledge changes made as a result of classroom education. To date, Seeds to Success demonstrates a variety of outcomes and impacts for youth, farmers and the community, which are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.

Seeds to Success Benefits Youth, Community and Local Farmers

Lifeskills Education (Youth)	Workforce Preparedness (Youth)	Economic Development & Community Development (Community & Farmers)
Improvements in nutrition knowledge, including ability to identify the types of fruits and vegetables that were better sources of key nutrients like fiber and vitamins A and C	Work productively with peers and supervisors to complete tasks and projects	Average of \$13,400 of produce purchased annually from NJ farmers
Improvements in food handling skills, including cleaning fruits and vegetables prior to eating and preparing snacks using locally grown fruits and vegetables	Provide good customer service Understand inventory, ordering and pricing systems	FMNP vouchers account, on average, for 10% of total farmstand sales
Able to distinguish between locally and non-locally grown produce	Accurately calculate a sale on a cash register using a list of different produce items Use a calculator Read a scale accurately and determine cost from weight of produce	Youth farmstands provide farmers with income opportunity that was previously not available to local farmers; enable farmers to reach new retail markets that, previously, were not profitable; are more profitable than farmer-managed farm markets.
Improvements in money management practices, including ability to write checks, deposit slips, and correctly operate a check register.	Match the prices with weight/ amount Handle money and government vouchers efficiently and make change correctly	FMNP voucher recipients indicate that Seeds to Success youth farmstands in their communities make redeeming FMNP vouchers easier
Learn, practice and/or improve personal qualities including, responsibility, self-esteem, dependability, sociability,	Complete a basic resume Journal and document	

self-management, integrity and honesty	workplace experiences	
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In Summary

Seeds to Success is a collaborative program that integrates three departments in Cooperative Extension: Agriculture and Resource Management, 4-H Youth Development, and Family and Community Health Sciences. Partnerships and community collaborations are an integral component of the project, as well. Youth farmstands present an ideal opportunity to provide integrated Extension programming that supports a broad range of Extension goals.

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