



# Rural Action

## Farm to Institution to School

Rural Action  
Hocking College  
Southeast Ohio Food Bank  
ACEnet



### Overview

Since 2010, Rural Action and local partners have been building a model to provide fresh, local produce to schools in southeast Ohio through its Farm to Institution to School program. Each week, fresh local produce is purchased from the Chesterhill Produce Auction and delivered to Hocking College or the Southeast Ohio Food Bank, where it is processed by culinary students and other volunteers under instructor supervision. Rural Action then distributes the processed produce to local partner schools to serve in their lunch menus.

With funding that enabled the addition of a refrigerated truck and blast chill freezer in 2015, the program was able to purchase produce in season, process it at Hocking College, and freeze it for use throughout the school year. A partnership with the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet) allows for the storage of fresh and fresh-frozen product at ACEnet's Nelsonville Food Hub.



### Opportunity Seized

School districts in southeast Ohio lack the food service staff, time and kitchen space to process fresh produce. With over half of public school students qualifying for free or reduced school lunches in these districts, the heat-and-serve meals that are regularly offered leave nutritional gaps in the diets of many kids.

Meanwhile, the culinary students at Hocking College, and at Tri County Career Center use large amounts of fresh produce to develop their skills, including knife skills, blanching, freezing and vacuum sealing. Unfortunately, partnering institutions often didn't have an end use for the processed produce.



### Key Ingredients

#### PHASED FUNDING FOR STEADY GROWTH

Funding support for this program came in phases from foundation, federal and local food system investment sources. Initial Central Appalachian Network mini-grant funding to Hocking College allowed the model to be prototyped, different products to be tested and the partnership with Hocking College to be established. Subsequent funding from USDA, in partnership with local school districts and Hocking College, enabled the procurement of key pieces of infrastructure, including a blast chiller freezer, housed at Hocking College, walk-in freezer capacity at the Nelsonville Food Hub (with additional support from Osteopathic Heritage Foundation of Nelsonville), and later, a new refrigerated truck. Each new funding source increased the capacity and capability of the program, in addition to funding VISTA and AmeriCorps volunteers to manage the work.

#### STAKEHOLDER SUPPORT TO CARRY OUT PROJECT

Program stakeholders made investments – both monetary and in-kind – to contribute to the successful outcomes of the program. Local school district leadership, a community-based food access and nutrition group, food service staff at the schools, and volunteers all worked together to line up support for the program.

#### PEER LEARNING

Committed regional partners and representatives from similar programs convened in 2016 to learn from each other and exchange promising practices across models.



## Lessons & Best Practices

### DESIGN THE MODEL AROUND COMMUNITY ASSETS

Rural and low-income communities are rich in assets that can be used to develop creative local solutions and contribute tangible benefits. Some of the community assets contributing to the success of this program in southeast Ohio include older adults in the community who know how to cook less familiar vegetables, the students at Ohio University, Hocking College, and Tri-County Career Center who can be engaged as volunteer support, and small school districts that serve as manageable test sites with high proportions of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch.

### TAKE A SYSTEMIC APPROACH

Bring together stakeholders with a common vision to catalyze change. Allow local community groups to maintain ownership of the vision being implemented in their schools, while partnering with larger institutions for scale. To maximize impact, local programs and capacity building should be combined with advocacy campaigns to influence food access policies.

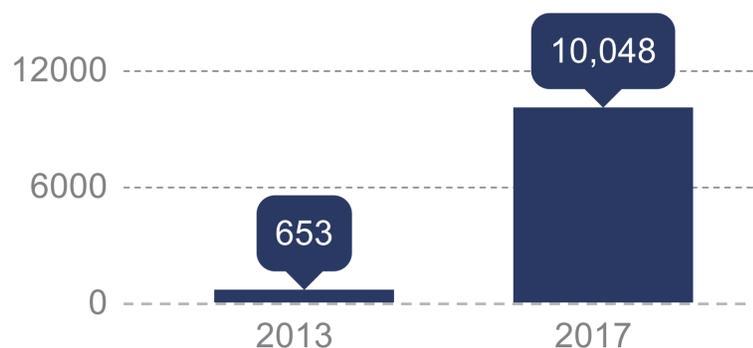


## Impact on Health

### PROGRAM EXPANSION MEANS MORE KIDS EAT FRESH FOODS

The number of schools served by the program has gone from two initially to now over 29. The volume of food distributed to school cafeterias has also grown exponentially from 653 lbs. in 2013 to 10,048 lbs. in 2017 – which is now a combination of fresh produce for immediate consumption and frozen produce that can be used year-round (thanks to the addition of freezing equipment).

## Pounds of Food Distributed to Schools



## Impact on the Economy

### ECONOMIC BENEFIT TO LOCAL FARMERS

In July-September 2017, more than 2,800 pounds of produce was purchased from a network of over 125 farmers at the Chesterhill Produce Auction to support the program. This is an especially viable way to support the price of produce during peak season thanks to the ability to purchase large volumes fresh, and freeze for later use.



### ECONOMIC BENEFIT TO HOCKING COLLEGE & OTHER REGIONAL PARTNERS

The culinary arts program no longer has to purchase produce for their students to learn food processing skills. Instead, their students practice their culinary training on program produce, which is seen as win-win in that the food processed in their kitchens creates a health impact in the schools afterwards. The Southeast Ohio Food Bank has gained a paying client for their kitchen space. High school students at Tri-County Career Center have gained valuable career experience beyond the norm of a culinary program.



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