

Issue #4
September 3, 2008

FOCUS on Evaluation!

In this week's newsletter we are very pleased to introduce to you to the School Food FOCUS evaluator, Gail Feenstra. Gail brings an impressive breadth and depth of experience that will serve us all well from the very beginning to final report on our shared work. As food systems analyst with the University of California's Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education Program and the UC Davis Agricultural Sustainability Institute, Gail has been involved in a wide range of research, education and evaluation efforts, insights from which have already been helpful to us in shaping our project milestones, projected outcomes and monitoring processes (*see Gail's bio below*). Of particular value to School Food FOCUS is Gail's experience in the delicate and complicated task of analyzing the economic details of school food purchases and distribution options.

Gail has been involved in early planning meetings with FOCUS core agencies and with our wonderful planners from the Institute for Conservation Leadership (we'll profile them in next week's newsletter!). She will also be fully engaged in our fall meeting, and spending time with each working group and in sessions with the full group so that we all have a good sense—from the very outset—of the evaluation plan and how it fits with ongoing program implementation and modification. Here's a sneak preview of the Evaluation Plan:

Overall evaluation goal and approach

The evaluation will assess the approach to school meal reform offered by School Food FOCUS to determine to what extent it enables school meal programs in large urban school districts to purchase healthier, more local and sustainably produced foods.

The evaluation will assess the progress and effectiveness of the three core areas of this project:

1. Creating cohesive structures that facilitate information sharing;
2. Developing a School Food Learning Lab to implement and share best practices for purchasing healthy, local, sustainable food; and
3. Developing an outreach, education and advocacy plan to expand the number of allies in this work and engage them in outreach strategies that improve school meals.

To create an organizational structure to implement these ambitious goals and continue them past the proposed grant period, the project envisions a planning process that will last throughout the life of the project.

Learning Community

The overall approach of this evaluation will be within the context of a learning community so that both process and progress indicators are shared with project

participants throughout the life of the project. In addition to observations and assessment data gathered by the evaluation team, we plan to work with project partners to include regular times for reflection among stakeholders so that everyone helps “make meaning” of how this project unfolds.

Guiding questions

It can be difficult to coordinate the many aspects of a comprehensive project such as this. In order to not lose sight of some of the bigger issues identified by project leaders, we will be guided by the following questions:

PRODUCTS/OUTCOMES

- How do the FOCUS structure and activities support sharing of practical experience and learning?
- Are the information and tools organized and disseminated by School Food FOCUS useful to stakeholders? To other diverse groups outside School Food FOCUS? In what ways are they making use of the information and tools?
- To what extent have school districts become aware of an available supply of locally grown, sustainable, healthful food in their regions?
- Do school districts procure more local, sustainable, healthful food than before this project was started? How? Why?
- Are regional suppliers (producers, distributors) able to increase the supply of local, sustainable food to large school districts? How? Why?
- What “change models” have developed to ensure more sustainable, healthful food in schools? Which have the most impact? Why?
- Is School Food FOCUS recognized for its education and outreach and policy/advocacy work at local, state and federal levels (including participation in affecting Farm Bill implementation and the 2009 Child Nutrition Reauthorization)?
- How was national legislation impacted as a result of the FOCUS campaign?
- Has School Food FOCUS established a pathway to a secure financial base for the future?

PROCESS OUTCOMES

- Are the stakeholders of School Food FOCUS committed and engaged in its work?
- Are stakeholders united with a clear, agreed upon mission, goals and tasks?
- Are stakeholders willing to communicate openly and share progress, successes and failures/challenges with one another in a community of trust? Do they call upon and use each others’ technical expertise? Are they willing to make course corrections if needed on the basis of group reflection?
- Do stakeholders feel recognized as pioneers in the journey toward more sustainable, healthful school food systems?
- Are stakeholders able to expand their vision about what is possible and practical in creating and sustaining sustainable, healthful food in school meals?
- Have new diverse stakeholders outside FOCUS supported its concept and joined in active support for healthy, local, sustainable food in school meals?

Benchmarks

In addition to these guiding questions, the evaluation team will work with FOCUS staff and consultants to create appropriate benchmarks for measuring successful completion of the proposed work plan.

Methods

For gathering data on the overall progress of the project, the evaluation team will rely primarily on interviews and short written reports from FOCUS staff and partners. This will allow participants to discuss both how and why the project is working and what sorts of challenges they face. We will also include space for suggesting ways to deal with difficulties or mistakes. We will solicit insights about how FOCUS is developing—either on the emerging large picture that is being “painted” or smaller, more specific activities. In addition, we will include questions that focus not only on the external products or processes being created and institutionalized, but on the professional relationships being forged, the communication patterns and the capacity to work constructively together.

Data on outcomes of more specific educational events, trainings or workshops will be gathered with short surveys. Data will be tabulated, summarized and shared with FOCUS partners for further reflection. Data on the use of educational products will be gathered through user interviews and short surveys.

You’ll be hearing more about evaluation at our fall meeting in St. Paul, and we’re sure you’ll enjoy meeting our dynamic and thoughtful evaluator, Gail Feenstra.

Bio

Gail Feenstra is the Food Systems Analyst at the University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SAREP), based in Davis, California. SAREP’s Food Systems Program encourages sustainable community development and local food systems that link farmers, consumers and communities. Feenstra’s research and education efforts include: direct marketing, farm-to-school and farm-to-institution evaluation, regional food system distribution models, food systems indicators, urban agriculture, food security, food policy, food system assessments and most recently, carbon footprint analysis in the food system. She is an associate editor of *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems* and past president of the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society. Feenstra has a doctorate in nutrition education from Teachers College, Columbia University with an emphasis in public health. Her career has been dedicated to integrating human, environmental and community health through sustainable food systems.