

# Working Across Geography to Cultivate Meaningful Community Change

**I**n rural Northeast Iowa, communities are coming together to promote health by increasing access to healthy, locally grown foods. The efforts began when community members realized that despite the agricultural bounty of the region, only 1% of all food purchased in Northeast Iowa is sourced locally.

In 2006, the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture—recognizing that Northeast Iowa offered a great opportunity for improving access to locally grown food—selected the region as the pilot community for its Regional Food System Working Group: the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm (NIFF) Coalition. As a result, a diverse coalition of stakeholders emerged, representing youth, farmers, educators, and food producers. The coalition identified food production as a strong community asset for the region, acknowledging the important links between the availability of locally grown food and health. They began working to identify the opportunities and barriers to promoting access to healthy foods and achieving a local food system in the region.

Soon after, in April 2007, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation chose Northeast Iowa as a project site for their Food & Fitness Initiative (FFI), further supporting the region in developing strategic plans and policies that emphasize equity and promote healthy eating and physical activity within the region. With the introduction of the Kellogg Food & Fitness Initiative, the NIFF Coalition discovered the third leg to their stool—FFI helped them build their ideas while expanding the breadth of their work to emphasize equity and physical activity. Rather than seeing this new piece of work as a challenge, coalition leadership saw this as a real opportunity to merge efforts, “We had a big group of people who wanted to help and it didn’t mean changing our current direction; it actually helped us focus our work,” said FFI co-convenor, Brenda Ranum. FFI now serves as the overall umbrella for collaborative efforts and NIFF members are tasked specifically with advancing food system efforts. With community members involved in NIFF and FFI coming together—along with active living stakeholders—Northeast Iowa is proving that strong collaboration can help achieve a vision of a healthier, more sustainable community.



*Students from Central High School in Elkader, IA help the food service staff prepare fresh vegetables for lunch.*

## Barriers are quickly overcome

The Northeast Iowa Coalition is active in six rural counties, covering a geographic area slightly larger than the entire State of Connecticut. Within this area, distance presents the greatest barrier to bringing people together, yet these communities are making it work. Remarkably, the coalition has been successful in attracting diverse stakeholders with a variety of interests and skills. This was achieved by creating an open learning community and allowing a visioning process where different stakeholders could provide input. Stakeholders were eager to get involved and included those representing traditional and sustainable agriculture, medical providers, representatives from various departments within government, as well as community residents of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds. Coalition leaders see themselves serving as the “bridge-builders” and connectors, helping the group get to a place of common ground and understanding and allowing partners in the initiative to share their vision for a healthier food system and increased opportunities for physical activity. In order to ensure that efforts are far-reaching across the wide geographic region, the coalition assigns a county convener for each county who is responsible for reaching out to new stakeholders and bringing them together for monthly meetings. Webinars, teleconferencing and emails facilitate communication across counties. Each county coalition also sends representatives to monthly region-wide meetings and monthly topical workgroups to strategize on how to work cohesively across the region and disseminate ideas between counties. Coalition leaders were pleased to discover that community members will really go the distance to make Northeast Iowa a healthier place.

By involving diverse community members, the Northeast Iowa Coalition began investigating additional barriers to achieving healthy, local food and physical activity. For example, local school food services staff raised concerns around policies that prohibited them from procuring and preparing locally grown produce in schools. A coalition member approached a staff person at the State’s Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship and discovered that schools could serve locally grown produce to students as long as the source is clean and verified; the regulations being enforced did not reflect the actual policy language. As a result, the State Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship wrote a letter to schools clarifying the rules and the coalition quickly went to work disseminating this information and dispelling myths around serving local foods in schools. Soon enough, schools were connecting with local food producers and thinking systematically. It was discovered that produce with slight blemishes, also known as “second stream” produce that could not be sold to supermarkets and grocery stores, happened to be ideal for schools because the price is low and blemishes are removed when food services prepares the produce.



*Farmer Chris Blanchard demonstrates good post-harvest handling practices at his farm.*

**Schools as a hub.** Similar to many rural places across the US, schools are the hub of communities in Northeast Iowa. Schools serve not only as educational institutions, but also as a place for community meetings, tradition, and interaction. The coalition identified schools as the perfect starting point for their work for several reasons: the strength of schools as a community center to attract diverse community members, the ability to reach the most vulnerable children, the potential for improving health early in a child's life, and the opportunity for youth engagement.

The coalition began Farm to School pilot projects with six schools in economically disadvantaged communities within the region. These pilot projects aimed to connect local food producers, processors, schools, and youth to provide healthier, local food to students coupled with an educational component in the classroom. Schools assembled teams that included community, youth, and school members to provide leadership for the Farm to School project. Today, the team works together to promote changes within and well beyond the school environment, bringing together stakeholders to cultivate meaningful relationships that advance the goals of the coalition. The brainstorming that led to the idea of selling second stream produce to schools is one outcome of the Farm to School pilot. Others include producers and schools working together to plan the producers' growing season around foods the schools want to serve. In-school activities include Home Grown School Lunch Week, when local foods are promoted and presented to students, and the construction of school gardens with the assistance of local producers. The capacity of these communities continues to expand; teams are now planning physical activity promotion programs, such as Safe Routes to School and offering students a greater variety of physical activity options.



*Students at Riceville Elementary participate in a bike rodeo to learn about bike safety in their town.*

**Addressing Equity.** From the start, the FFI Coalition was committed to addressing health equity in their work. The Northeast Iowa region is 98% Caucasian so this required the coalition to examine equity from other angles besides race and ethnicity. The group identified low-income families with children as the most vulnerable population in their community and during the planning phase, FFI committed to distributing extra resources into the five communities with the highest poverty rates. As they embarked on the Farm to School pilots they identified six schools (one in each community) that were serving predominantly low-income families. What they discovered was that these were the schools that also showed the most readiness to adopt changes to improve the food environment. Coalition leaders suspected the readiness of underserved schools had to do with the groundwork that coalition members had already done to raise awareness in underserved schools because of the coalition's emphasis on impacting vulnerable children. Also, coalition leadership suspected that while most institutions are resistant to change, institutions may be more open to finding new solutions to

problems during times of struggle. Several of these schools were already exploring ways to improve the health of students and attending FFI trainings and meetings.

**From Competition to Coalition.** Remarkably, historically competitive communities in Northeast Iowa—largely due to the need to compete for funding sources—now value working together. Although only six schools were chosen to receive funds during the pilot study, all schools in the region were invited to get involved and learn from the successes of the pilot schools. With the goal of equity made clear from the start, all communities were informed of the school selection process: schools selected had a significantly higher percentage of students that qualified for free or reduced-price lunch through the National School Lunch Program than other schools in the region. By providing additional assistance to communities with limited resources, the project hopes to target the most vulnerable youth and increase equity.

Assuring transparency within the coalition has also been essential to reducing competition. From the start, all financial information and agenda items have been publically posted and accessible. By creating a trusting and inclusionary atmosphere, communities that were once in competition learn that they can greatly benefit by working together. In fact, many of the improvements the pilot schools have made do not entail funding at all. Rather, they require innovative ideas and people inspired to create a healthier community. Ann Mansfield, project co-convenor, describes how “with engagement and funding to bring people together and share ideas, people are seeing there are lots of things they can do in schools that aren’t fiscal. It’s been a major shift in the context in which people see themselves.” Fortunately, there is no shortage of human capital in Northeast Iowa. Active monthly coalition meetings serve as a venue for sharing these experiences and lessons learned across communities, shifting regional norms from competitive to cooperative. Throughout this process, the coalition has discovered a way to harness limited funds allocated to a small number of schools, and expand program benefits to many other communities.

**Capitalizing on Human Capital.** Perhaps the most valuable impact of the project has been building relationships and sharing knowledge within and between counties. The coalition and the school teams provide a springboard for community member involvement and interest. Region-wide team meetings—involving representatives from county, school, and youth teams—effectively disperse ideas and strategies throughout a large area. Rather than reinventing the wheel, communities can modify the successes of other communities to fit their unique needs.



*Regional team members work in small groups to discuss issues about the NE Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative.*

## Looking Ahead

Northeast Iowa proves that active community members not only accomplish major milestones, but also spread their energy and enthusiasm to others in the community. One community member models this enthusiasm to a T: after hearing about the excitement around local food production, Michael Gooder decided to transition 3.5 acres of his eight acre greenhouse, used to grow begonias, to grow produce to



Producers learn about greenhouse production from a local farmer.

create greater access to produce for schools and the greater community. Sourcing food for schools and for grocery stores was new to Gooder, so he connected with big food producers in the region and gained valuable advice from these newly acquired collaborators: he learned from some of the big food producers that his greenhouses were ideal for growing tomatoes during the off-season. Within one year, the 3.5 acres of his transformed greenhouse produced 100,000 pounds of tomatoes! As the next off-season approached, Gooder decided to dabble in other veg-

etables. Soon enough, he discovered that there are numerous vegetables that could be grown off-season. As Gooder's success with local food production became apparent, he realized that he could also be an asset to schools in other ways. Gooder secured donated seeds for his next project and is now starting plants for school gardens in his greenhouse, turning out more lush, resilient plants that otherwise would have struggled to grow through chilly and harsh winters.

This example is just one of the many stories to tell of this remarkable community. Stakeholders have overcome the barriers of trying to create long-term sustainable change in a rural, geographically spread out region, and in fact, have even identified the benefits of working collaboratively in a rural region. As Brenda Ranum puts it, "We could not have planned for all of our early successes. But what we tried to do is bring people together and they brought resources, skills, and ideas to the table and have allowed us to do much more together than we could ever do alone. It's amazing what people can accomplish when they have a common vision." When given the opportunity to flourish, these communities proved that they could partner, lend a helping hand, and connect ideas that led to incredible feats...and their stories are just beginning.

### For more information

Visit the Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative web site: [www.iowafoodandfitness.org/](http://www.iowafoodandfitness.org/)



This profile is part of Communities Taking Action, an online repository of profiles that showcase successful community initiatives aimed at improving health equity.

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### Prevention Institute

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