

# Producer Tipsheet: Conducting Agricultural Education in Montana Schools

Are you a farmer, rancher, or food business looking to break into school markets, create brand recognition with local students and families, or educate the next generation of agricultural workers? Do you have sustainable farming, ranching, or processing practices that demonstrate environmental stewardship? If so, getting involved with school agricultural education activities is a great opportunity for you to share your knowledge while making connections in your community. Students benefit by engaging directly with producers through agricultural education activities, such as farm field trips and farmer visits, projects involving producers, and school gardens. However, many schools and producers don't have the time, funding, or staff to dedicate to forming producer-school partnerships. The EPA Environmental Education project Growing for Environmental Stewardship, conducted by the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT), helped eight school communities and many producers overcome these constraints through subgrants and technical assistance. This brief tipsheet, based on evaluations received from the eight subgrantees, includes key tips for partnering with Montana schools to conduct agricultural education activities.



*Philipsburg students working in garden.  
Photo: Lauren Dunn, FoodCorps*

## Choose What Works Best for You

**Presentations:** One way to get involved is to go to a classroom to talk about what you do and why it's important. Talk about what you produce or process and the methods you use to keep your operation sustainable. Discuss the challenges and rewards with students and tell them how they can support your business. Use photos, videos, and objects. Bring samples for students, teachers, and parents.

**Tutorials:** What are you an expert in? Schools that brought producers in to give a workshop on their trade reported that students were very engaged. Some examples of possible tutorials are canning, grafting, pickling, seed saving, apple and grape pressing, milling, and herb drying.

**Host Tours:** While time-consuming and contingent upon schools having funding for transportation, subgrantees reported that taking students to a farm or ranch was particularly impactful, and many students began to understand the time, money, and work it takes to get their food to the grocery store.

**Student Projects:** Since the pandemic, many schools have undertaken video projects of their local food systems. Let schools know if you're available to students to be interviewed for videos, papers, and presentations, and whether they can take footage of your farm, ranch, or food business.

**Donate:** Do you have garden cloth, seeds, tools, hoses, or other materials you aren't using anymore? Contact schools in your area to see if they could use them!

**Garden:** Many schools need someone with growing experience to maintain the school garden when school is not in session. Odds are you don't have time to be that person. However, you can train parents, teachers, and other volunteers on how to manage the school garden and be available to them if questions arise.

**Internship Programs:** Internships and apprenticeships are a valuable option if you are interested in receiving inexpensive, part-time labor and passing your knowledge onto high school students. School staff, often the family consumer science teacher, will be able to connect you with students or student agricultural organizations to help get the word out that you are hiring.

## Getting in Touch

Identifying who to contact at schools to get involved in agricultural education isn't always straightforward. Some schools have an agricultural education teacher or farm to school director. They would be the first point of contact. You can usually find their contact information on the school website or by calling. Another option is to go to the Montana Harvest of the Month Map to see if any schools in your area are participating in farm to school activities. The contact listed will be the Montana Harvest of the Month team lead for that school. They are a good point of contact because they are involved in farm to school activities.

Other school stakeholders who are often involved in agricultural education, or can connect you with the right person, include family consumer science teachers, food service directors, principals, superintendents, administrators, nurses, and science teachers. Local organizations might also know how to get in touch with the right person, such as organizations that manage local community gardens, your county's Montana State University Extension office, Future Farmers of America chapter, and the AERO Local Food Coordinator.



*Students putting eggs into the incubator in Ronan.  
Photo: Brenda Richey, MSU Extension*

## Stay Up to Date

- Join the [Montana Harvest of the Month](#) (HOM) program, which showcases Montana grown and raised food in Montana schools, institutions, organizations, and businesses. Each month, participating sites focus on promoting one locally grown item by displaying HOM posters and materials, serving it in snacks or meals, offering it for purchase, or conducting educational lessons and activities. The two primary goals of this program are to promote local, healthy foods to Montanans and to support Montana farmers, ranchers, and food businesses. Participating sites receive a free packet of materials that includes posters, handouts, and other promotional materials, as well as guides, additional resources, and training. When you register as a producer on [mtharvestofthemonth.org](#), you indicate if and how you are interested in getting involved with schools, and this information is published in the producer directory, which identifies the products you offer, whether you wish to be contacted for agricultural education activities, and whether you are interested in school and other institutional sales. Schools, preschools, hospitals, and other institutions have access to the producer directory. You also receive a monthly newsletter and a login to the website. Both are updated with farm to school events and opportunities.
- Join the Montana [Farm to School Leadership Team](#) working groups to make connections with organizations and schools that are increasing access to nutrition, agricultural education, local foods, and school gardens. You can also stay up to date on initiatives and provide your feedback.

- Sign up for newsletters to stay informed. Entities with relevant newsletters include schools, the Montana Department of Agriculture, Montana Farmers Union, local colleges and university agriculture and nutrition programs, community and economic development centers, food banks, sustainability and compost organizations, and local farming nonprofits.

## **Project Highlights**

### **Linderman Elementary Students Take Us on a Virtual Field Trip**

Linderman Elementary School, located in Polson, Montana, has an enrollment of about 300 students. Polson is part of the Flathead Indian Reservation, home to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. JB Capdeville, district baker and agricultural education teacher, used the EPA funds to partner with Spring Mountain Ranch and Montana Marbled Meats to create a video highlighting their production of Montana beef. Under the direction of Capdeville, students created a virtual tour of a local ranch and its processing facility, interviewed the ranchers, and narrated the video with facts about the operation. Students were shown the video before they went to the cafeteria to be served shepherd's pie made with beef from Mountain Spring Ranch.

### **Philipsburg Students Grow Microgreens for Cafeteria**

Philipsburg Elementary School, located in Philipsburg, Montana, has an enrollment of about 90 students. Philipsburg teacher Megan Flannery used a portion of the EPA funds to bring in a local farmer to kick off a microgreens project. Dustin Muhly of Frost Pocket Farms gave a tutorial on growing microgreens to second, fifth, and sixth graders. The classes cared for the microgreens until they were ready for harvest, and the students then took some home to their families. The next week, the cafeteria began offering microgreens as a daily option in its salad bar.

This tipsheet was completed by Molly Kirkham, Montana Local Foods Specialist at the National Center for Appropriate Technology as part of an EPA Environmental Education Grant. The eight subgrantees were Land to Hand Montana, Gallatin Valley Farm to School, Farm to School of Park County, Montana State University – Flathead Reservation Extension Office – 4-H Mentoring, Polson School District #23, Philipsburg Elementary, Hardin School District 17H&1, and Lincoln Elementary School in Anaconda. For more information contact Molly at [mollyk@ncat.org](mailto:mollyk@ncat.org).

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