

FarmLab Study
Phase 1 - Needs Assessment
Appendix J - Interview Summaries

October 6, 2016

Prepared for the Elkhart County Redevelopment Commission

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Wa-Nee Community Schools and Fairfield Community Schools

Amy Beer, Ag Instructor and FFA Advisor - Wa-Nee Community Schools

Kraig Bowers, Ag Instructor - Fairfield Community Schools

January 5, 2016

The first interview set up for this study illustrates the strength of existing ag education programs in Elkhart County and their mutually supportive relationships. Ag educators lead some of the busiest faculty schedules, managing direct-instruction classes and curricula, student-led projects, and extracurricular clubs and activities. Upon reaching out to Amy Beer and Kraig Bowers, they elected to meet jointly both to save time and to highlight their ongoing collaboration. As ag educators for the only two established ag education programs in Elkhart County (Elkhart Community Schools was still in implementation mode), their perspectives provided a valuable orientation for the direction of this study.

Mrs. Beer has been with Wa-Nee Community Schools (WCS) for 6 years. She is a licensed teacher with a background in animal husbandry and agribusiness, as well as an interest in natural resources. Mr. Bowers has been with Fairfield Community Schools (FCS) for 5 years, applying his experience with livestock to the development of an FFA program particularly strong in animal systems.

Both programs are anchored in a curriculum focused primarily on animals and plant-based life systems, with dual credit core science courses through Ivy Tech. Current offerings include Agribusiness Management and Natural Resource Management, with Veterinary Science to be offered next year. FCS is also targeting a Veterinary Training program the following year.

Extracurricular FFA activities include soils evaluation and livestock evaluations, as well as various Career Development Experiences (CDE's). At NorthWood High School (NHS) these include veterinary science and tractor restoration, as well as debate. Of the approximately 100 students enrolled in ag classes at NHS (there is not yet a Junior High program), 53 currently participate in extracurricular activities. FCS has approximately 130 affiliate members enrolled in classes (grades 8 to 12, plus one 3rd grade class), with 50 to 60 participating in extracurricular activities. Appreciating each other's strengths, and in order to stretch limited resources, extracurricular activities often include participants from both programs.

Mrs. Beer and Mr. Bowers both noted the tremendous community support and "abundant gifts" that their FFA programs have benefited from over the years. While the support is there, they are being careful not to grow too fast. One of the key needs is adequate facilities. Wa-Nee owns 120 acres of productive land and they'd like to build a shop. FHS has a fenced in 4-acre small ruminant pasture and a 4-acre test plot for cover crops. FHS is building a 2,400 sq. ft. veterinary facility, veterinary surgical lab, and science lab to support their growing animal systems programs. Both programs would also see a greenhouse as a valuable asset.

Both programs admittedly have room to grow in agronomy and crop production. They expressed concern about limited availability of traditional agriculture jobs for students to transition into. Nonetheless, they recognize that the value of promoting ag literacy goes beyond AFNR career pathways. Mrs. Beer emphasized that ag education can help students "see the whole ag picture" and

“challenge mis-perceptions about ‘evil’ agriculture.” Mr. Bowers observed how seeing working dairies and other farms can provide a “jumping off point for higher science learning.” Neither ag educator has extra time and resources to devote to ag in the classroom activities beyond their existing programs, but they see opportunities for more experiential learning opportunities to improve ag literacy among students and adults, as long as it is grounded in science.

Elkhart Area Career Center, Elkhart Community Schools

Bill Kovach, Executive Director - Office of Career and Alumni Success

Cyndy Keeling, Ag Educator

January 7, 2016

Elkhart Community Schools (ECS) is making tremendous progress implementing an ag education program that they envision being the largest in the state. They've initiated the process by hiring Cyndy Keeling as a district-wide ag educator; developing a 114-acre Agriculture Community Center and Environmental Learning Lab (ACCELL); and running programs through the Elkhart Area Career Center (EACC). The innovative program will serve most of the district's K-12 population as well as other area schools through the EACC.

ECS outlined 3 phases of program implementation: curriculum development, ACCELL, and broader community engagement. The key to the first phase is the training and licensure of 20 ag-certified science teachers under Keeling's guidance. This level of staff will enable ECS to offer an Intro to Ag course in 8th grade expected to reach 70% of the student class. Agriscience will be the main focus as they follow the Curriculum for Agricultural Science Education (CASE). Every High School ag education course is on track for dual credit through Ivy Tech.

ACCELL will provide experiential learning opportunities for more than food production. Its woodlands, wetlands, and pasture will provide opportunities for broader AFNR project-based assignments. The assistance of the Elkhart County Farm Bureau in developing this project illustrates the strong support they are receiving from the broader community. The goal for ACCELL is to be financially self-sustaining.

One goal of the ECS ag education program is to encourage greater community involvement by focusing on life science content relevant to ECS's urban population. Keeling emphasized the need for students to understand where their food comes from. Beyond the imagery of "farm to fork," they plan to bring practical lessons into the schools that teach students to be more self sufficient. ECS is collaborating with the Farm Bureau on ag in the classroom programs, including Dwight Moudy's Cowboy Ethics program.

Through the EACC, the ag education program can target a variety of career pathways. The EACC started the first FFA chapter in ECS in November and will develop courses in small engine repair, horticulture, and landscaping. The program will thus be able to serve 16 area schools currently sending students to EACC, including six districts in Elkhart County. While Fairfield has opted out, Keeling is aware of the "phenomenal work" Kraig Bowers is doing there with animal systems. Keeling views ongoing communication with Bowers and other ag educators as essential to exploring opportunities for collaboration and building a successful program for ECS.

Merry Lea Sustainable Farm, Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center

Luke Gascho, Executive Director

Jon Zirkle, Farm Manager

January 13, 2016

Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center is a 1,189-acre nature sanctuary and educational site in Noble County affiliated with Goshen College. Since its establishment in 1980, Merry Lea has been dedicated to conserving its diverse ecological habitats while providing educational experiences and recreational opportunities for the College and surrounding community.

For 25 years, the original farmstead has served to provide education about where food comes from by showcasing turn of the century techniques as “farmcraft.” The site typically hosts approximately 2,000 students per year from multiple grades (typically grades 1 to 4, and some kindergarten).

More recently, the Merry Lea Sustainable Farm was established to model sustainable agriculture practices for students and the visiting public. Merry Lea Sustainable Farm is the setting for Goshen College agricultural research projects (towards their degree requirements). The Agroecology Summer Intensive program also offers 12 college credits (or a non-credit certificate) for Goshen College students and students from other colleges (www.goshen.edu/asi). Classes include: Vegetable Crops, Properties & Management of Soils, Agroecology, and Small Farm Management & Produce Marketing. Goshen College students can opt to minor in Agroecology largely by taking this program or can declare an Environmental Science major with an Agroecology concentration.

Merry Lea Sustainable Farm also serves as a demonstration site supporting local farmers focused on sustainable agricultural practices. While educational in focus, it is a working production farm that sells produce through Community Supported Agriculture and through market stands on campus and at the Goshen Farmers Market. The Farm continues to work at implementing food safety/ GAP standards and modeling such practices and facilities for students, farmers, and the public. They see these food safety and GAP issues as key to achieving safely-prepared foods and at larger, more consistent volumes necessary for Farm to School/Farm to Institution purchases.

Merry Lea Sustainable Farm is interested in continuing to diversify their operations and production. The woody perennial polyculture project consists of 5 acres of plantings designed as a production orchard. They also have an interest in small-scale organic grain production and processing. While the Farm provides a platform for new community collaborations, they want to be careful to maintain organizational flexibility amidst a variety of limiters, including resources and staff time, capacity, and interest.

For more information, visit <https://www.goshen.edu/merrylea/sustainable-work/>

Note (10/6/16): A new program for PreK-12 called "Exploring Merry Lea Sustainable Farm" is underway as of Fall 2016. This program offers visiting elementary aged children chances to learn about farms as ecosystems, giving chances to learn about farm animals, experience garden produce, and explore wild creatures, soils, and plants on the edges of our farm. This program replaces the FarmCraft program of the past, keeping some original elements.

Middlebury Community Schools

Rachel Vallance, Assistant Principal - Northridge Middle School

January 25, 2016

Middlebury Community Schools (MCS) is currently implementing STEM-based experiential learning through Project Lead the Way. This presents many opportunities for integrating Ag-based curriculum and programs if funding and leadership can be made available. There is particular interest in increasing project-based learning and service learning opportunities at the Middle School level, because there is little currently in place.

However, curriculum standards set by the state make it difficult to explore new programs because teachers feel swamped the way it is. "If someone would take an already developed Ag curriculum and align it with state standards, in a way that involves teachers, ... they will do it. They are an enthusiastic bunch," Vallance said. She observed that teachers would want to know ahead of time what is being required of them, and what they could swap out to incorporate ag-based curriculum in the classroom. The current implementation of health and wellness committees could provide an entry point for food literacy.

Funding transportation and budgeting time for field trips was one concern that Vallance addressed in response to a centralized FarmLab concept. She supported the idea of a mobile ag demonstration or lab that could bring the experience to the school. She could imagine soil testing in the classroom, and also envisioned ways that ag-based projects and digital learning could come together and enable students to engage with the FarmLab remotely. Vallance expressed interest in continuing the conversation. "I'm excited about it. Teachers will want to be a part of it. I like the idea of a participatory process. It will take a lot of time and someone needs to lead it or else it will die out. It is relevant, there is no doubt about that," she said.

Farm to cafeteria presents different challenges. There are real and perceived barriers including limited cafeteria staff and GAP requirements. Vallance feels a push from the state to improve cafeterias and general nutrition. However, she notices that kids and parents seem to be at different norms related to nutrition. "Kids know one reality and parents are kind of stuck in a different place – we're at that phase with food right now," she said. She is inspired by the way the cafeteria provides a "full circle learning opportunity," and would envision, not only farm to school, but opportunities to educate about food waste as well.

Purdue Extension Elkhart County

Mary Ann Lienhart Cross, County Extension Director; Extension Educator - Health and Human Services

Jeff Burbrink, Extension Educator - Agriculture & Natural Resources

January 25, 2016

Purdue Extension Elkhart County is an education service providing a wide range of resources on food and agriculture in Elkhart County, aligned with other county-based offices throughout Indiana. Extension recognizes the depth of knowledge that exists within this historically agrarian community and provides a wide variety of resources and connections to preserve and integrate it into a changing community.

The Elkhart County 4-H Program is the largest in the state of Indiana, and the most well-known Extension program, Burbrink described. Although the Elkhart County 4-H Fair and Purdue Extension are separate entities, “the two are like puzzle pieces linked together,” said Burbrink. “(They) benefit greatly from one another.” The Elkhart County 4-H program offers kids and teens over 60 skill-based projects, many of them related to food and agriculture.

The 4-H program never lacks kids and teens who are eager to participate, however, “we need more people willing to be leaders,” said Mary Ann Lienhart Cross. Extension is continually looking for adults willing to lead these activities and provide positive mentoring for youth development.

Knowledge about gardening is supported through Michiana Master Gardeners. “We have vegetable growing experience...we’ve got that ability and that interest in growing the small backyard garden,” said Burbrink. “There’s the entrepreneurship aspect here that you don’t have in other communities, too.”

As an educator, Burbrink focuses his efforts on working with smaller farms growing fruits and vegetables. “With limited resources, they can’t commit a lot to trying something out and having a massive failure...having a place to do experiments would be helpful I think,” said Burbrink.

Mary Ann Lienhart Cross identified a number of the challenges that come with connecting farms to school kitchens. “School kitchens need more employees to help process food,” she said. “Until that funding is there...there’s just not enough help to make food from scratch. It’s labor intensive.”

“Most Schools are not designed to handle fresh produce,” Burbrink added. Because many school lunches come packaged and simply require reheating, many of the food prep facilities in schools hardly look like kitchens anymore, he said.

Tillers International

Pete Robertson, Farm Incubator Manager

Lori Evesque, Education Coordinator

January 28, 2016

Tillers International occupies a 430-acre historic farm southeast of Kalamazoo, Michigan. The mission of the organization is to “preserve, study, and exchange low-capital technologies that increase the sustainability and productivity of people in rural communities.” While much of their work is focused on animal traction and traditional agriculture practices abroad, they also provide education to the local region through workshops and demonstrations in a variety of skills and trades, including small grain raising, canning and preserving food, and beekeeping. Tillers helps gather mentors and educators with skills that are quickly disappearing by providing a platform for instruction. They also host regular higher education visits and family-oriented tours; school field trips are less frequent due to school budget reductions.

This interview focused primarily on Tillers’ Farm Incubator Program, which seeks to support new farmers through access to underutilized resources on the site such as land and infrastructure. Their goal is to insure that everyone coming through the program leaves with the fundamental skills and knowledge necessary to successfully manage small, diversified farms. Mentoring and succession are integral to their program development, considering that new farm startups can take 8 years to become financially secure. Long-term incubators will mentor beginners. This is the case with their first farmer, Pete Robertson, who is currently running the program.

The goal of the program is to create a community of farmers filling diverse niches, including orchards and intensive specialty crops. They are fortunate to have access to a variety of emerging markets and food hubs developing in Southwest Michigan, providing them with multiple options for production. Their approach to niche markets is to maintain a manageable scale that allows them to focus on quality and maintain customer relationships. The program aims to educate farmers, not feed the world. Community Supported Agriculture has been part of their model from the start.

Goshen Community Schools

Dr. Diane Woodworth, Superintendent

Tamra Ummel, Assistant Superintendent - Human Resources & Professional Development

Dr. Alan Metcalfe, Assistant Superintendent - Elementary Education

February 1, 2016

As Goshen Community Schools (GCS) rolls out a new strategic plan, they are looking at methodologies that lend themselves to problem solving and not just analyzing. They can envision how food literacy and ag programs would fit in nicely with that intention. “We’ve focused so much on academics,” said Superintendent Diane Woodworth. “It is competitive...we’re finally getting to the point where we can branch out a bit with real world applications.”

Woodworth and other administrative staff are eager to stay on top of conversations related to inquiry-based learning, STEM, early college, and vocational training opportunities. “Those conversations are all happening,” said Woodworth. “None of the more recent conversations have included ag or food production, but you can see it could likely be a topic of discussion.”

In addition to interest in FarmLab, GCS has access to land that could be dedicated to food production and use as an ag education site for schools in the district. They noted several challenges that accompany these unique opportunities. Although the timing seems ripe for conversation, “people are maxed out,” said Woodworth. “No one has the energy to own this. Several would be interested, but somebody needs to come with a more thought-out plan of how we could plug in. We don’t have time to make it happen.”

They also expressed concerns about the cost and financial obligations involved with sending students to an offsite location like FarmLab for part of the school day. “What is the cost to the school?” said Metcalfe. “How long until it becomes sustainable on its own?”

Costs would also influence implementing a Farm to School program in GCS cafeterias. As one of the largest districts in the county, finding the right scale for farm to school would be critical. GAP requirements and “red tape” in Indiana are also present barriers for food service directors with plenty to manage already. The director of the coordinated school health system for GCS, Susan Stiffney, is interested in continued conversation and hopes to find creative ways to gradually implement small changes in order to bring fresh, local foods into the cafeteria.

Finding grants and leadership to guide the process of implementing food and ag education into GCS is the ongoing opportunity and challenge.

Baugo Community Schools

James DuBois, Superintendent

Carol Deak, Director of Learning and Director of Food Services

February 2, 2016

Baugo Community Schools has expressed interest in pursuing the implementation of an ag program, especially as they approach a new strategic planning term. The district has been very focused on academics and curriculum development, and they are now eager to move to the next term with the intention of being more innovative, DuBois said. As a first step, BCS has partnered with Horizon Education Alliance's business roundtables to support project-based learning for high school level curricula. Currently, the majority of those involved in the roundtable discussions are from manufacturing and medical backgrounds. "If we want to expand into ag, it would be beneficial to have someone part of that team that would bring that [agricultural] influence to the table," Deak said.

In addition to the business roundtables, BCS has a program for juniors and seniors that allows upperclassman to explore career interests through projects, or by visiting the Elkhart Area Career Center (EACC). This is an attempt to allow students more time to think about potential careers, and to be more hands on. This provides an entry point for an ag program at the high school, allowing students to become more familiar with the variety of career paths within food and ag.

BCS has explored farm to school opportunities, with interest in broadening students' understanding of food. They are currently enrolled in a fresh fruits and vegetables program through the US Department of Defense. "It would be nice to use more local vendors, but [we] can't because of manpower at this point," said Deak.

As one of the smaller school districts in the county, BCS faces both opportunities and challenges as they consider incorporating an integrative and innovative ag program. "[We] have to look for the biggest bang for our buck," said Deak. "Looking across the board, how do we support as many kids as we can with limited funding and staffing?"

BCS may be a small district, but that comes with a number of assets; including some land near an idle elementary school building with a nature center and available kitchen space. This provides an exciting opportunity to start with and build on, according to Deak and DuBois. They can envision at least a small test plot, or summer intern opportunity to start.

Elkhart County Farm Bureau

Dwight Moudy

February 19, 2016

The Elkhart County Farm Bureau is a leading supporter of ag education programming in Elkhart County schools. Indiana Farm Bureau coordinates the USDA Ag in the Classroom program in Indiana. Dwight Moudy leads this program at the local level through the Elkhart County Farm Bureau. Under Moudy's guidance, Ag in the Classroom has gone from 1 classroom to over 30 in Elkhart Community Schools. Moudy leads the classes with materials and activities provided by the Ag in the Classroom program. Moudy has also developed curricula centered on Cowboy Ethics, which involves leading classroom discussions on work ethic and values.

Moudy recognizes a great need for ag education in our schools, from childhood through adulthood. He highlighted a number of opportunities, from his experience, that could use additional financial or leadership support, such as:

- Introducing an integrated ag curriculum that works its way up from kindergarten, and also meets pressures from state standards;
- Finding passionate teachers to lead the program;
- Treating teachers as professionals and allowing them to benefit from how ag is introduced in their classrooms; and
- Facilitating connections with the fairgrounds, and farms in the area.

Moudy believes it is essential that kids learn where their food comes from, and has enjoyed watching them experience a sense of accomplishment and excitement when they grow their own food, or have hands-on experience on a farm. A school garden is a great way to start that learning process, said Moudy. For him, it's not a question of whether there is need for more ag education facilities, it's a matter of when and how to get started.

Moving forward, he would be interested in exploring the implementation of an economic impact assessment, highlighting niche markets and providing data for the community. "In Indiana the number of farms has increased over the last census period, but the size of the farm has gone down," said Moudy. "If you look at the average age of farmers it's up to 60 ... Who's going to run these farms?"

Horizon Education Alliance

Brian Wiebe, Executive Director

Dr. Jason Harrison, Coordinator of HEA Business Education Roundtables

February 19, 2016

Horizon Education Alliance (HEA) strives to improve educational success in Elkhart County from birth to adulthood. Formed in 2012, HEA serves Elkhart County communities and schools as a convener in bringing the districts together. HEA's vision is that "Elkhart County will be a world-class place to learn, live, work and play."

Wiebe described the ways he could envision a concept like FarmLab fitting in well with the goals of HEA, especially related to developing 21st century skills such as creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. Going forward, Wiebe described that HEA's model will be to explore "what is it that we can do together that none of us can do alone?"

Differentiation between the districts can be a really good thing, Wiebe described, but finding ways to collaborate and build trust between the districts in order to cooperate is something HEA is willing and eager to help with.

HEA is in a position to support the work of convening, researching, evaluating, facilitating, and fundraising in the community. These are core functions that will be vital to the development of FarmLab's relationship with the schools in Elkhart County. Wiebe suggested that a key to success is finding the right leader. "You are going to want someone who wakes up everyday saying 'how are we going to do this'," said Wiebe. HEA could potentially help to mentor someone in this role, especially in helping the leader establish close relationships with area school districts and other key partners.

Middlebury, Goshen, and Baugo referenced the work of HEA and expressed interest in collaborating with them further to explore opportunities through an entity like FarmLab. HEA is currently working with most of the districts in conducting Business Education Roundtables, directed by Harrison. Some districts expressed wanting to see food and agricultural leaders around the table at these meetings in addition to other industries.

Middlebury Community Schools

Delores Merrick, Director of Special Projects

Sara Eash, Food Services Director

July 18, 2016

As Director of Special Projects, Delores Merrick submitted a planning grant application to the USDA in 2013 to help Middlebury Community Schools launch a variety of Farm to School activities. The proposed activities were backed by Purdue Extension's Local Foods program and sponsorship from area businesses. Activities would have included farm to cafeteria support and educational gardens. Although the grant was not ultimately awarded, it brought some of the key challenges to the forefront that schools must face in launching new farm to school initiatives, particularly with respect to local procurement.

The challenge of sourcing locally produced food for use in the cafeteria is now in the hands of Sara Eash, the recently hired Food Services Director for Middlebury Community Schools. While interested in addressing this challenge, her current focus is wisely on first building the capacity to prepare more dishes from scratch, and developing trust among the staff to make gradual changes in the kitchens. Cooking from scratch generally involves much more preparation, yet staff time is limited, as are processing skills in some cases. The kitchens are still adequately equipped for the most part, but having extra labor with good chopping skills is the limiting factor.

Menu design and planning can remain somewhat flexible to incorporate local ingredients as they become available. The current menu is on a 6 to 8 week cycle, so changes can be made relatively quickly without too much disruption. However, past efforts to procure local produce have encountered the familiar obstacles of inconsistent quality and delivery. They are eager to learn of local providers that they can source from without having to sacrifice their operational needs.

They are currently part of an HPS contract with other districts, committed to purchasing at least 90 percent of their food through Gordon Food Service. They have also purchased from Stanz Food Service and Commercial Food Systems in the past. Their contract for fluid milk is with Dean's Dairy.

The primary fresh and frozen produce ingredients typically found in their menus include corn, green beans, sweet potatoes, fresh carrots, red and yellow bell peppers, cucumbers, lettuce, and cherry tomatoes. Corn and green beans, while perhaps the most accessible, are also the most labor intensive to prepare. Students have been less fond of raw broccoli. Potatoes are typically sourced as a commodity and used for french fries. They also serve at least a half-cup of legumes per week, typically dried mixes of pinto beans or canned black beans. Salad bars are currently available to staff, and salads are available as sides for students.

Wa-Nee Community Schools

Betty Hahn, Food Services Director

July 19, 2016

Betty Hahn is the Food Services Director for Wa-Nee Community Schools, where she started in the kitchens 33 years ago. She can recall cartloads of surplus melons delivered by horse before regulations became more stringent. As options for local procurement became more limited, purchasing increasingly shifted to food service contractors. School districts now often collaborate to secure better bids from these providers, however there are significant commitments attached.

Wa-Nee is a member of Northern Indiana Educational Services Center, through which they arranged contracts for dairy and bakery goods, which are always contracted separately from other foods. By contracting with smaller dairies such as Prairie Farms and Schenkel's, they presume most of the fluid milk they purchase is produced relatively close by.

Their larger food contract is currently with HPS, through which they are obligated to purchase at least 90 percent of their food through Gordon Food Service. The remaining 10 percent is discretionary, which Wa-Nee mostly uses to purchase additional fresh produce. They have recently begun purchasing from Piazza Produce out of Indianapolis, which has existing routes in Elkhart County 3 days per week. This enables Wa-Nee to make more frequent purchases of fresh produce without needing as much storage.

Hahn has relayed the district's preferences for local to the providers (which they define as a 100 mile radius, preferably in Indiana), and has generally received supportive responses. The providers can identify where the produce originates and help schools access local producers. For a while, local procurement was much more difficult. Now, "everybody's on board with the whole (farm to school) movement, and it's easier to get information than it used to be."

Using fresh produce in the kitchens still presents some challenges, particularly preparation and processing. Staff time is already strained, and some items simply require too much slicing and dicing. Melons and squash are among the most accessible items, because they are relatively easy to prepare and serve.

Fresh produce, once obtained and processed, can easily be substituted into existing menus because it generally surpasses nutritional requirements. A bigger challenge is keeping parents and teachers informed ahead of time. Some teachers will highlight the foods and nutritional information in their classrooms, and many parents want to know in advance exactly what will be on the menu each week. Reliable quality and consistency of deliveries is therefore essential.

Wa-Nee is also able to occasionally source local products through commodity purchases using designated funds. They have purchased processed commodity tomatoes from Red Gold whenever possible, and have purchased commodity chicken products from Maple Leaf Farms.