

Issue #9

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FOCUS on Co-creating Our Network

As we celebrated Thanksgiving last week, we here at Liquori and Associates were—and—are particularly thankful for the vision and dedication of the many people and organizations working on School Food FOCUS.

Our Oct. 30th-Nov. 1st meeting in St. Paul gave us a great sense of the energy all kinds of partners are bringing to this work—and how much we are going to be able to accomplish together. The convening hosted representatives from school districts and leaders in their foodservice operations, along with local and national organizations partnering with school districts and School Food FOCUS on relevant food, procurement, policy and other issues. The supporting core team of School Food FOCUS was also present, together with our excellent planners, evaluators and transformational leadership consultants, to help facilitate and support the work of stakeholders as we began to create the overall vision, mission and hands-on programmatic work of School Food FOCUS.

Our goals for the intensive convening were intentionally broad and specific, as we set out to:

- **Form** the program leadership with new people and stronger relationships;
- **Strengthen** our understanding and practice of leadership in this transformative project;
- **Engage** in significant teamwork on designing and developing each of the core program areas;
- **Understand** the program's evaluation plan and set program outcomes for first year;
- **Begin** integrating the work of the program areas;
- **Identify and design** ways to develop the larger FOCUS network;
- **Develop** this next year's overall program timeline and work plan with deliverables; and
- **Clarify and improve** communication and decision-making.

It was an ambitious agenda with as much focus on relationship building and process as there was on outcomes. We devoted large chunks of time for “worker bees” in the project—who’ve been working across long distances—to meet in person and lay out shared goals and plans. We also used each session—plenaries and breakouts—to be aware of our cultural differences and to practice the leadership skills we seek to build throughout the project for all involved. By the end of our time together, the investment in relationships and active listening had already paid off in the very evident ways participants took on ownership of program goals and specific tasks, and committed to staying engaged as FOCUS continues to develop. We left the meeting full of energy to launch various efforts and to convene a larger number of stakeholders, including many more school food service directors and staff, in our March 2009 School Food FOCUS conference.

While in St. Paul, we made great progress on a number of fronts (below), and we welcome the active participation of our full network as we continue to refine and operationalize this work.

School Food FOCUS Goals

In St. Paul, we brainstormed—as a group of nearly thirty people—ideas about the vision, mission and goals of the overall effort. While these ideas are being refined (more soon!) we did reach a clearer shared understanding of FOCUS goals:

As a national initiative to help school districts with 40,000+ children to purchase healthier, more sustainable, and more local foods, School Food FOCUS has four specific goals.

- To demonstrate the purchasing power of Big Cities school districts (40K+ students);
- To develop and share successful models and field-tested methods of what people have been able to do to transform school meals, backed up by respected research and analysis;
- To develop compelling messages and communicate a practical vision for change; and
- To coordinate a broad multi-sector network of advocates for local, healthy, sustainable school meals who are seeking and making change both in school districts and in public policy.

We also reaffirmed our short and long-term goal of continuing to increase the number and active involvement of school food service professionals in FOCUS.

School Food Learning Lab (SFLL)

The Learning Lab made great strides in creating a work plan based on the skills and contributions of diverse team members, which included leadership of the St. Paul school district, the expertise of their community partner—the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, the insightful research team from MSU and the newly hired SFLL Manager from Liquori and Associates, Dorothy Brayley. She brings over a decade of experience in the school systems of Rhode Island to assist Learning Lab school districts, beginning with St. Paul Public Schools, to reach the procurement goals they establish in redirecting their food purchasing practices. The researchers from MSU have established a solid base of information to begin developing the supply chain analysis as well as working on an interpersonal basis with the food system stakeholders and players in St. Paul. At this meeting, the SFLL team identified the four initial priority types of food to concentrate on integrating into their food service and mapped out next steps leading to the practical application and evaluation of specific procurement changes.

In the intervening weeks, the SFLL team has continued to refine plans, review initial purchasing data, discuss research questions and draft up a list of contacts for further research. The whole team is planning to meet again in St. Paul in mid-December to keep the work moving forward.

Policy Working Group

Participants in the School Food FOCUS Policy Working Group made good use of their time together in St. Paul to get to know each other better and to deepen discussion on a number of key documents and strategies being considered in preparation for debates around the 2009 Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR). Specifically, the group reviewed the working context of child nutrition advocacy, and the various sectors of allies and coalitions we will be coordinating with over time. They also dug much deeper into discussion of FOCUS-specific policy targets, and developed ideas to be vetted with the larger working group, along with an overall advocacy strategy and timeline.

Since the St. Paul meeting, the policy working group has continued to vet and refine these foundational agreements and documents. They also organized a meeting in Washington, DC and via conference call, convened by long-time child nutrition advocacy Ed Cooney, Executive Director of The Congressional Hunger Center. The meeting was designed to introduce School Food FOCUS, its Policy Working Group and members to a range of allied groups and coalitions working on Child Nutrition Reauthorization and related Farm Bill implementation, as well as to discuss policy priorities, approaches, and potential strategies among various players and to generate ideas for coordinating CNR advocacy for greatest possible impact.

Knowledge Café

The St. Paul meeting included two inspiring sessions with school food service directors who affirmed their interest and strong commitment in helping to create and use the Knowledge Café. In addition to being a repository for sharing best practices and lessons learned, the Knowledge Café is developing structures to enable peer-to-peer communications tools and one-on-one support to school food service professionals. In its initial phases, it will be a unique, targeted container “of, by and for” food service directors who are committed to shaping it, sharing information, and promoting it to colleagues. While we discussed goals for the Knowledge Café—to provide new ideas, learning tools, and a roadmap to help school districts plan and take steps for program improvement to support sustainable communities—we also agreed that its founding principles are to be clear, easy, user friendly and USEFUL and USED! In the coming weeks, Ruth Blackburn and Nicole de Beaufort are taking the lead in getting the online component of the Café up and running. We’ll then beta test it with the food service directors who participated in the St. Paul meetings, who will then reach out directly to their peers to broaden the circle of knowledge sharing. Meanwhile, you can access some initial resources at <http://www.liquoriandassociates.com/KnowledgeCafe.html>.

Education and Outreach

The Education and Outreach component of School Food FOCUS will be developed to demonstrate to multiple audiences that change is not only necessary, but it is also *possible* and it is *happening*. In St. Paul, we clarified that the FOCUS education and outreach efforts will be informed by the learning and outcomes of the three FOCUS working groups: Learning Lab, Policy and Knowledge Café. As these program areas develop, we will refine our thinking about priority audiences, timing and plans to create and circulate compelling messages and information about the work and experience of FOCUS.

Leadership Integration Team

In St. Paul we discussed the need to create a team that can ensure synergy between working groups in sharing of information, resources, and avoiding duplicative or competing efforts. Informed by those discussions and subsequent work with our colleagues at VISIONS, we are clarifying the roles, skills and tasks of this team, which will be facilitated by FOCUS staff. So stay tuned!

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