

# SUCCESS STORIES

By: Marilyn Hill, RN, MS  
Smitha Ahamed, MPH, MANPO  
Amber Flanigan  
Lorraine Edwards

## FIGHTING CANCER EARLY WITH HEALTHY EATING: Farm to School Partnership Program

### SUMMARY

The state of Georgia made progress in reducing childhood obesity among low-income children through a variety of factors one of which was Special Supplemental Nutrition Program and Women, Infants & Children food package emphasis on healthy foods such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables and low-fat milk. A program aimed at youth from low income families which combined nutritional education, meal planning, budgeting, gardening and exposure to locally grown fruit and vegetables harvested at their peak of freshness and taste became a goal of the Athens Land Trust and the East Georgia Cancer Coalition. This resulted in the Farm to School Partnership. The program encourages youth to try foods they may never had liked or eaten. The program has received positive feedback from participants, increased their food knowledge and will be continued during each school year.



### CHALLENGE

The state of Georgia has a childhood obesity rate of 14%. Georgia's obesity rate for third graders is more than five times the national average with 43% being overweight or obese. Georgia's obesity rates for middle school children are 15%, and 12% for high school students. Poverty increases risk for childhood obesity by 26% due to limited access to fresh and healthy food. The poverty rate in Athens-Clarke County is nearly double the state average (33.3% vs.18%).

Childhood obesity increases risk for cancer, diabetes and heart disease, and various chronic diseases. The National Cancer Institute in 2012 associated obesity with increased risks of cancers of the esophagus, breast (postmenopausal), endometrium (the lining of the uterus), colon and rectum, kidney, pancreas, thyroid, gallbladder, and possibly other cancer types.

In Athens-Clarke County limited preference for and access to fresh fruits and vegetables has the potential to exacerbate childhood obesity, cancer and chronic disease rates.

### YOUR INVOLVEMENT IS KEY

The Farm to School Program has been effective in changing Athens-Clarke County students' knowledge and behavior regarding eating fresh fruits and vegetables. If this trend continues, the Farm to School Program may reduce obesity rates in the state of Georgia.

Supporting the East Georgia Cancer Coalition and the Athens Land Trust will allow this program to continue to positively influence knowledge and behavior regarding fruits and vegetables.

Cultivating healthier children protects our future. Children are our future. If they do not lead healthy lifestyles, they will not grow up to be healthy, contributing members of society.

Donating is easy! Donations can be made in the form of healthy fruits and vegetables, supplies, and many more items. Financial donations are also appreciated. For more information on how you can get involved please visit [www.eastgeorgiacancer.org](http://www.eastgeorgiacancer.org) and [www.athenslandtrust.org](http://www.athenslandtrust.org).

"Our partnership has allowed us to provide education taste tests for students in the Athens-Clarke County school system and provide cooking courses to teens while engaging them in sustainable farming, business education and entrepreneurship opportunities and educational food experiences. It was an experience they will never forget."

- Amber Flanigan  
Farm to School Coordinator  
Athens Land Trust

## SOLUTION

The East Georgia Cancer Coalition partnered with the Athens Land Trust and Food Corps in 2014 by sponsoring Cooking Matters™ for teens and creating the Farm to School Program. The teen participants were part of the Young Urban Farm Program, which teaches high school students leadership, life skills and entrepreneurial and business skill development as they learn about sustainable agricultural practices and participate in a youth-run business, while earning class credit.

The Farm to School Partnership uses an innovative approach to combatting obesity through food choice by:

- Introducing students to eating fruits and vegetables grown locally and picked at their peak of freshness
- Providing education on the foods (why they are healthy and how they can be prepared on a budget)
- Providing an incentive of earning a stipend by working on the farm

The Athens Clarke County Farm to School Program is based on the premise that students will choose to eat more fruits and vegetables if produce is fresh, locally grown and picked at the peak of their flavor and if those choices are reinforced with educational activities. The Farm to School Program provides students with educational activities including garden-based learning and taste tests.

The curriculum (Cooking Matters) empowers low-income families with the skills to stretch their food budgets so they can prepare healthy meals at home. Participants learn to shop smarter, use nutrition information to make healthier food choices, and cook delicious, affordable meals.

Educating the students about the value of planning and budgeting for food is emphasized because research has shown that low-income families that plan meals, write grocery lists and budget for food make healthy meals more often than those who do not. Each student receives bags of food and ingredients to recreate meals prepared in class. After completing the course, students receive Cooking Matters™ books, cutting boards and a \$25 gift card.

## RESULTS

The Farm to School Partnership provided students with fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables at no cost to encourage healthy eating and reinforced this message by providing educational activities such as garden based learning and taste tests to empower students to make healthier food choices. This program reached over 591 participants. Program administrators have observed positive changes in knowledge about healthy eating, obesity and cancer prevention and in behavior regarding healthy eating. The Farm to School Partnership seeks to decrease childhood obesity rates in the state of Georgia.

An analysis of the project revealed the following changes:

- 89.5% of students learned about kale's nutritional value
- 63% learned about how kale prevents cancer
- 67% learned about how kale prevents obesity
- 69% wanted to incorporate more fruits and vegetables into their diets
- 94% wanted to participate in more taste tests

### Contact

#### Marilyn Hill

East Georgia Cancer Coalition

Athens, GA 30602

Phone: (706) 542-6443

<http://www.eastgeorgiacancer.org>

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

These findings serve as a call to action for local stakeholders, to make the connection between student participation in Farm to Table experiences and empowering students to make healthier food choices. Through exposure to healthy food and education about nutrition, the program's ultimate goal is to empower its participants and significantly reduce childhood obesity in Athens-Clarke County.

Future program implementation will include these measures:

- The Athens Land Trust and the East Georgia Cancer Coalition will continue to provide Athens Clarke-County students with educational Farm to Table learning experiences.
- The Athens Land Trust provides staff, Food Corps Service members, relationships and supplies.
- The East Georgia Cancer Coalition provides funding for the food used in class and in the take-home bags.
- Cooking Matters™ will conduct survey evaluation after each course