



Hmong-Focused Farm to School Helps Students Connect With Culturally Relevant Foods

Public Health Challenge

In many Wisconsin schools, students rarely encounter foods that reflect their cultural lives at home. This is especially true for Hmong students. Vegetables such as purple cilantro, mustard greens, squash, and yardlong beans are common in Hmong cooking, yet they seldom appear in school-based nutrition lessons or taste-testing activities. As a result, students miss meaningful learning opportunities, and farmers miss key market connections. Wisconsin is home to one of the largest Hmong communities in the United States, and Hmong is the third most commonly spoken language in the state.

Our Approach

UW-Madison Extension's La Crosse FoodWIse team aimed to bridge this gap in schools by introducing Hmong cultural foods as part of classroom nutrition education. The work was supported by a USDA-funded, one-year Spark Grant, awarded through the Lake Michigan School Food Innovation Hub to foster community-driven collaborations that reimagine school meals. The grant project was designed and led by Extension's Community Food Systems (CFS) Program, with key contributions from La Crosse FoodWIse educators and support from an AmeriCorps Farm to School Specialist. The project took a coordinated, cross-institute approach that supported both school programming and Hmong growers.



At Hamilton Elementary, FoodWIse educators introduced students to foods commonly used in Hmong households through lessons and taste tests. Educators used simple preparation methods so students could focus on smell, texture, and taste. Culturally specific food fact cards, developed through the project, helped introduce each ingredient and supported conversations at home. Students sampled purple cilantro, mustard greens, cucumbers, long beans, and squash during a series of nutrition lessons.

The project reached students in ways that felt familiar and new at the same time. One class compared the scent of cilantro stems before tasting them. Another group was excited to see a full-length, yard-long bean before trying the chopped pieces. Across the project, students completed 1,449 taste tests, engaging 368 learners in hands-on food exploration.

A longstanding partnership with GROW La Crosse added another dimension. With support from the Spark Grant, teams created a greenhouse area dedicated to Hmong produce. During winter field trips, students saw how these vegetables grow and learned why they matter in Hmong culture and cuisine. In spring, they planted seedlings in school gardens and checked on their progress throughout the season.

Results

Teachers noted how quickly students connected with the foods. One educator shared a moment from a classroom tasting: "When tasting the purple cilantro, the teacher, Mrs. Vang, noted she likes to add it to her pepper dip. Another student said she liked it on top of her food at home."

These conversations created space for students to see their culture represented, and they helped classmates learn about foods that might be new to them. By combining classroom learning with community partnerships, the project showed how intentional collaboration can make nutrition education more connected, respectful, and meaningful for everyone involved.

*To support these lessons, the team created culturally specific **Hmong Food Fact Cards** that helped students learn about each ingredient and encouraged conversations at home. These cards featured the vegetables used in class taste tests, such as cilantro, mustard greens, winter squash, cucumbers, round zucchini, and long beans, along with growing information, preparation tips, and traditional uses. The cards are intended for half-sheet, double-sided printing.*