

Getting to Know Your Community

Community engagement is essential for successful programming. It is just as important to understand how your school functions as it is to form relationships within the broader community. You will rely on members of your school's community to support taste tests, get involved in family cooking nights, and sign their children up for after-school clubs. Community members are not only the parents and caregivers of the students you teach but also the people who support fundraising efforts, participate on the school board, deliver the extra load of soil you need to get your garden growing, and help maintain the garden in the summer.

The community engagement strategies outlined in this section offer recommendations for how to support your school and community using a meaningful approach that recognizes the complexities of our nation's food system.

You have an exciting opportunity to learn about your community as you get to know individuals in your school. During the process, listen closely and deeply: share about yourself, and ask your school community members about who they are and what their lives are like. Be sure to consider how you can create a space that welcomes all members of the community. The "Facilitating" section of this guide covers ideas for bringing people together. FoodCorps strives to make change that endures beyond an

individual FoodCorps member's term. To make lasting change, ownership of this important work must live not with our members or our national organization but with the school communities we partner with. The community engagement strategies outlined in this section offer recommendations for how to serve your school and community using an inclusive approach that recognizes the complexities of our nation's food system.

Asset-Based Community Development Strategies

FoodCorps encourages members to become familiar with Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) strategies. Asset-based community development focuses on leveraging existing strengths within the community (a glass-half-full approach). This approach contrasts with needs-based community development, which emphasizes local deficits and looks to outside organizations for resources (a glass-half-empty approach). John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann developed the ABCD approach, and the Asset-Based Community Development Institute supports it. It emphasizes that solutions to community problems already exist within a community. The institute highlights the following principles that guide ABCD strategies (Rowland 2008):

- *Everyone has gifts: Each person in a community has something to contribute.*
- *Relationships build a community: People must be connected for sustainable community development to take place.*
- *Citizens at the center: Citizens should be viewed as actors—not recipients—in development.*
- *Leaders involve others: Community development is strongest when it involves a broad base of community action.*
- *People care: Challenge notions of “apathy” by listening to people’s interests.*
- *Listen: Decisions should come from conversations where people are heard.*
- *Ask: Asking for ideas is more sustainable than giving solutions.*
- *Inside-out organization: Local community members are in control.*
- *Institutions serve the community: Institutional leaders should create opportunities for community member involvement, then “step back.”*

Rowland, Stan (26 April 2008). «What is Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)» (PDF). Collaborative of Neighborhood Transformation.

Using these strategies, FoodCorps members can play an important role in changing the school food environment. As you get to know your school, keep in mind that all community members bring something to the table. By asking questions and listening to the needs of the community, you can develop strong schoolwide goals and program goals.

Community Demographics and Access

Learning about the demographics and histories present in your community is an important first step in preparing to offer students foods and

activities that celebrate local traditions. This knowledge is also key to sharing accessible resources, like take home recipes, with your students and their caregivers. When you have the opportunity, listening to people’s personal accounts is one of the richest ways to understand their backgrounds and experiences.

To better understand your community’s demographics, you can research the following:

- Percentage of students eligible for free or reduced cost school lunch programs
- Average household income
- Transportation access to grocery stores
- Languages spoken within the community
- Percentage of people in the community who utilize the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Keep in mind that demographic statistics are a one-dimensional method to get to know a community. Think about how you might create opportunities to welcome families of all backgrounds into the classroom, cafeteria, and school garden. Can you find a volunteer translator/interpreter for special events? Can you offer family activities at different days and times throughout the school year, in order to accommodate different work schedules? How might you survey families about how they’d like to be involved? Just like kids have different learning styles, every family engages with their child’s education differently—and it’s important to make them all feel valued.

Community History

Take time to understand the history of the community you are in. If you are from the place where you are serving, you may have

the opportunity to recontextualize your role and responsibility in the community as a FoodCorps member. Consider the perspective you bring, and make an effort to spend time in areas that you don't know. Reach out to individuals who can share a variety of perspectives. Learn the local narratives that might not be formally documented. How have neighborhoods changed? What are the local gatherings, festivals, and celebrations? Where have people traditionally congregated? Is there community trauma that you should learn about and navigate with compassion? Who are the local leaders; elected officials; and people with personal, political, or economic influence? Who are the people who may not have influence but are equally important to engage?

It takes time to learn about any community, and setting intentions about your strategy for doing this is important.

Local Grocery and Agricultural Landscape

Understanding your city or town's local agricultural context is incredibly helpful to understand what people eat and where they get their food. Questions to consider include the following:

- What does local food production look like? Are there farms you might visit? What do they grow and sell?
- Are there local farmer's markets? Do they accept SNAP funds, electronic benefits transfer cards, or the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) WIC funds? Do they offer produce vouchers and rewards that your students' families might use?
- Explore a variety of places to get food within

your community. Where do locals go? This can include farmers markets, grocery stores, and corner stores.

Communication

Communicating effectively and appropriately with people in your community is important in building successful relationships. As you develop relationships at your site and in your school, consider these tips for being a thoughtful communicator:

- Are there any language barriers that might shift the manner in which you communicate? If you do not speak a community member's language, how might you find the resources to communicate as best and as thoughtfully as you can? School and district staff, like a school administrative assistant, can help you find local resources to communicate across multiple languages.
- Learn the best methods of contacting community members because not all community members may have access to a phone or email. Use in-person conversations to ask people about the best way to stay in regular contact.
- It is important to speak to community members in a way that respects their narratives and stories. Be mindful to listen, and refrain from making assumptions about an individual's background and needs. If needed, follow up with thoughtful and respectful questions.
- Use inquiry. Seek to understand the experience and points of view of the people you are speaking with.