

## FARM TO SCHOOL MODEL AN OPPORTUNITY FOR FORMER TOBACCO FARMERS

### BEAUFORT COUNTY, NC: REGIONAL RELATIONSHIPS SUPPORT HEALTHY SCHOOLS & LOCAL FOOD

Fifth graders at Bath Elementary school are enjoying a lunch featuring collards from a farm they know. Many of the students have visited Shawn and Tracy Harding’s Southside Farm to pick strawberries, take a hayride and choose a pumpkin. This connection is an important part of Beaufort County’s Farm to School program.



*Local strawberries, blueberries, and collards are just a few of the farm-fresh treats enjoyed by students in Beaufort County Schools. Photo courtesy of Beaufort County School District.*

By the late 1990s, Shawn Harding of Southside Farms knew he would need to be creative, flexible, and open to new processes to transition his family farm in rural Beaufort County, North Carolina, from a primary reliance on tobacco to include other profitable enterprises. He and his wife, Tracey wanted to stay on the farm and raise their family, but knew they had to make a change in how their farm operated.

Today, Southside Farms grows a variety of produce, and serves as a hub for educational farm tours for numerous school groups. Shawn is an active member of his local Farm Bureau, and it was at one of the group’s leadership meetings that he became aware of the possibility of selling produce to the school system, and of the produce safety certifications he must hold to do so.



Shawn met with Gwyn McBride, the Beaufort County School Nutrition Director, and she helped him begin to navigate signing up for the Farm to School program. First, Shawn took the steps he needed to become GAP certified (compliant with USDA’s Good Agricultural Practices voluntary food safety program). GAP certification is a requirement for most farm-to-school

programs and other avenues of institutional purchasing. With GAP certification, Shawn is able to sell into a much wider variety of market channels.<sup>1</sup>

Kids in Beaufort County Schools are now enjoying strawberries and collards from this collaboration, and Shawn and Tracy’s farm is a thriving agriculture enterprise due in part to their work with Beaufort County Schools.

### BEAUFORT SCHOOLS & THE BEAUFORT LOCAL FOOD COLLABORATIVE PARTNER FOR SUCCESS

There were many factors leading up to this profitable, healthy, and community-minded lunch day at Beaufort County Schools.

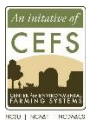
*We love to work with farms nestled right in our community. Our students recognize and appreciate the importance - especially since a lot of our farm families have students that attend our schools.”*

- Gwyn McBride, Beaufort County Schools Nutrition Director

Gwyn was hired as Nutrition Director in 2010, and came into her job with a desire to make the connection between the local agriculture community and healthy lunch options for the county’s kids. The program serves 14 schools and 7,000 students, and has been a part of the North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services’ Farm to School program for ten years.<sup>2</sup> The school district mainly sources watermelons and strawberries

<sup>1</sup> [www.ams.usda.gov/services/auditing/gap-ghp](http://www.ams.usda.gov/services/auditing/gap-ghp)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ncfarmtoschool.com/index.htm>



**“WE CAN TALK EACH OTHER TO DEATH, BUT WITHOUT AN ORGANIZATION LIKE COMMUNITY FOOD STRATEGIES TO HELP US GET TOGETHER AND COME UP WITH A STRATEGY, WE WOULD NOT HAVE MOVED FORWARD WITH A SOLID PLAN. I WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO SUBMIT THAT GRANT SUCCESSFULLY WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF OUR FOODS COMMITTEE.”**

**- GWYN MCBRIDE, BEAUFORT COUNTY SCHOOLS NUTRITION DIRECTOR**

from farms in and around Beaufort County; beginning in 2012, they added local collards. In 2015, the school system processed 2,500 pounds – Gwyn says the kids love the collards!

Gwyn credits Beaufort County’s Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Collaborative as the catalyst for getting this much local produce into the school system kitchens. HEAL contacted staff from Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (CFSA), the Center for Environmental Farming Systems (CEFS), and other partners, who were founders of the statewide Community Food Strategies (CFS) project to support the work of communities seeking to address local food issues.<sup>3</sup>

Utilizing CFS resources, CFSA and CEFS helped to convene a regional discussion and year-long food assessment and strategic plan, hosted by the Mid-East Commission, the regional council of government that governs Beaufort and surrounding counties. The team decided to work on increasing access to healthy, local foods as part of their community food access plan, and included a focus on local schools. (The final action plan can be found [here](#). The Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust funded the work as part of their Healthy Places NC

initiative.)

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### SUPPORTING OTHER REGIONAL FOOD BUSINESSES ALONG THE WAY



Gwyn and Shawn both participated in the food access planning, with the result that Shawn’s farm, and others in the area, ultimately came to play an active role as fresh produce providers to the local school system. Southside Farms achieved GAP certification and Gwyn successfully applied to the USDA Farm to School program to purchase a refrigerated delivery truck. This truck transports food from local farmers to the processing facility at Warren FoodWorks.

[Warren FoodWorks](#) is a rural development project that transformed vacant rural space in Warrenton to a community-driven small-scale food processing facility. One of the co-founders, Gabe Cumming, says that the Beaufort County model is one of their greatest

successes.

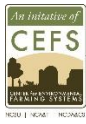
“The school nutrition director found funding for a truck and found the local supplier, which really helped by limiting the supply chain work on our end,” he said. “Ideally, this model can expand and we can serve more districts in the state and add more growers and increase the diversity of produce in more districts.”

(NCGT has [a case study of the Warren FoodWorks model here](#).)

For Shawn, this has meant adding collards to his sales – he delivers strawberries directly, but relies on Warren FoodWorks to transport, process, and deliver cut and bagged collards so they can be used within the constraints of the school food preparation system.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.carolinafarmstewards.org/food-councils/>



But Shawn doesn't take any credit: "Gwyn is the hero in this story," he says. "Without her dedication to local farms and to the kids, we would not have our produce in the schools. It really takes a dedicated nutrition director to make this work!"

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## MOVING INTO THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL FOOD



Students at Beaufort County Schools can now access fresh local produce year-round. Photo courtesy of Beaufort County School District.

Gwyn sees the program expanding as the system seeks to process more local strawberries and blueberries.

The school system is submitting a new grant to the USDA Farm to School program to update a kitchen to process and freeze foods during peak season.

They would like to work with more local GAP certified farms. The ideal goal, Gwyn says, is to work with farmers when they are ordering their strawberry plants and seeds for the coming year; when the partners plan ahead they can meet more of the demand for the 14 schools in Beaufort County.

## MORE INFORMATION

Beaufort County School District | <http://www.beaufortschools.net>

Southside Farms | [www.southsidefarms.com](http://www.southsidefarms.com)

USDA Farm to School Program | [www.fns.usda.gov/farmentoschool/farm-school-grant-program](http://www.fns.usda.gov/farmentoschool/farm-school-grant-program)

Warren Foodworks | [www.workinglandscapesnc.org/foodworks](http://www.workinglandscapesnc.org/foodworks)

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### NC GROWING TOGETHER PROJECT: LOCAL FOOD ECONOMIES INITIATIVE

*An effective way to revitalize the economy in local communities is through support for smaller-scale agricultural enterprises and food entrepreneurship. Local governments, regional councils, and planners and economic developers have a unique opportunity to support the recruitment, retention, and expansion of area businesses through local agriculture efforts, and to build stronger and more resilient communities. NCGT supports those efforts by providing resources, and tools for local governments and small business assistance providers across the state. For more information, contact Emily Edmonds, NCGT Extension & Outreach Program Manager, at [Emily.Edmonds@ncsu.edu](mailto:Emily.Edmonds@ncsu.edu), or Laura Lauffer, Local Food and Farms Coordinator, at [ldlauffe@ncat.edu](mailto:ldlauffe@ncat.edu), or visit these websites, [www.ncgrowingtogether.org](http://www.ncgrowingtogether.org) and [www.localfoodeconomies.org](http://www.localfoodeconomies.org).*