

AGENDA PRIORITIES

9. Expand opportunities for youth to develop entrepreneurship skills and learn about career opportunities related to good food that support youth and community economic development.

MICHIGAN CAN GROW TALENT, JOBS WITH FOOD AND FARMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

Andrew Lammers, a junior at Springport High School south of Lansing, is already busy building his career thanks to skills and introductions he gained through the small rural school's innovative agriscience program.

Along with the buzz of bells and teenage voices in school hallways, Lammers' days are filled with the hiring, pruning, harvesting, processing, and marketing cycles of two local wineries that he now manages. "Until a year ago, I had no idea these opportunities were out there, and that it was something I could make a living with," he says.



Photo by Patty Cantrell

It was Springport's focus on helping students get a foothold in the new world of smaller and specialized agriculture businesses that helped prepare Lammers for the summer jobs that turned into real, ongoing work.

Sixty percent of the high school's 330 students are enrolled in Springport's agriscience classes, which combine classroom and hands-on learning. Classes like biology, zoology and mechanical technology (shop) each have components that take place in the fields, barn buildings, and greenhouse attached to the school. Shop students, for example, pour concrete for a new composting area, and others study which milk replacer formula works best for the calves they are raising and will later sell.

In addition, 100 percent of Springport's agriscience students are involved in the school's Future Farmers of America chapter, which consistently takes home top state and national awards. FFA is part of the school day, like band is in many schools. Students lead FFA activities, which in Springport include older students teaching younger students about nutrition and food production.

"It's really a whole school thing, and a whole community thing," says senior and FFA treasurer Sierra Rogers. Local residents helped build the school's greenhouse last summer, and local families, along with customers in nearby cities, buy the pasture-raised chickens, lambs, and other meats the FFA students raise and sell.

Opportunity

The "agri-preneurial" spirit that Springport fans in its students is popping up in schools and community-based youth programs across Michigan. In Flint, for example, youth are learning food production and leadership on urban farmsteads operated by King Karate/Youth Karate Ka Association and by the Mr. Rogers' "Just Say No" program with Catholic Charities of Genesee and Saginaw counties.

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The skills, discipline, and inspiration youth gain are valuable for any future job or business pursuit. They are also valuable for Michigan's growing food and farm economy, in which business owners are constantly in search of capable and reliable people.

Nic Welty, for example, is a young farmer with a growing and profitable business selling lettuce and leafy greens year-round from three passive solar greenhouses north of Traverse City. He says he could have tripled sales in 2011 if he had been able to find the four full-time and three part-time people he needed. The top impediment to his farm's growth, he says, is the lack of knowledgeable and motivated employees.

Programs that both train students in agriculture and connect them to nearby farm and food businesses are key to building new career paths for youth. They're also key to supplying Michigan's agri-food industry with the capable and inspired people it needs to thrive.

Need

Youth entrepreneurship and summer employment programs are common in Michigan and across the country. Until recently, only a rare few included food and agriculture. At the same time, traditional agricultural youth development programs like 4-H and FFA have dwindled over time as communities and families became more urban and suburban.

Ramping up agri-preneur training and opportunities for youth will require re-focusing on the sector as a job and business development area while also reaching out to the farming community for guidance and experiential learning opportunities.

Action

The Michigan Good Food Charter outlines several steps local and state leaders can take to leverage growing interest in food and agriculture into job success for Michigan's youth and agri-food employers. Priorities in the charter's Youth Engagement and Opportunity report include:

- *Launch an initiative to match Michigan students to apprenticeships with farmers, food system entrepreneurs, and non-profits through the Michigan Works! Summer Youth Employment Program.*
- *Expand pipeline programs to help students gain college and career readiness related to food system activities.*
- *Expand agriscience and FFA program models to more Michigan students and enhance sustainable agriculture and local food system entrepreneurship education through FFA leadership projects and supervised agricultural experiences (SAE).*

1-2-3 Go!

Get started in your community by setting up an exploratory meeting of people involved in agriculture and youth employment. Candidates include students, teachers, and school administrators; vocational education instructors; 4-H and FFA chapters; Michigan Works! staff and farm and food organizations, such as local Farm Bureau chapters and food policy councils. One of these organizations might also be willing to host the meeting.

On your agenda: 1) learn what people and organizations in your community are already doing; 2) gauge interest in pursuing an agri-preneur focus and 3) identify short-term and long-term action opportunities.