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Developing children's local food programs: One volunteer's perspective

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Abstract

While volunteers are widespread in U.S. local food systems, they have not been the focus of data collection or research. As a result, we have limited understanding of the perspectives and motivations of local food volunteers. In this reflective essay, I describe my insights from volunteering in Alexandria, Virginia. The two initiatives that I focus on were to establish a "Power of Produce" program at my local farmers market and an after-school culinary and gardening program at a private elementary school. The former program I have been able to sustain for three years (as of this writing), whereas the latter program was discontinued after two eight-week sessions. In this essay, I describe my motivations in conceptualizing and organizing these programs. I also describe challenges I encountered due to inexperience or capacity constraints as a volunteer. I conclude by discussing how additional research that examines the roles and motivations of volunteers could be valuable.

Keywords

local food programs, farm-to-school, Power of Produce, POP Clubs, farmers markets, school gardens

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Author Note

Dr. O'Hara was an employee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) throughout the period covered in this essay. However, Dr. O'Hara is writing this article as a private citizen. The activities described in this essay and the writing of the essay were not a part of, and did not occur during, Dr. O'Hara's professional duties. Dr. O'Hara did not self-identify as a USDA employee during the activities described in this essay, USDA funds were not used to support the programs, and Dr. O'Hara received no compensation for his involvement in the programs or in the writing of this essay.

Introduction

Volunteers play a significant role in U.S. local food systems. For context, there are more volunteer U.S. farmers market managers (31,609 in 2019) (U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service [USDA NASS], 2020) than farms that sell at farmers markets (28,094 in

2020) (USDA NASS, 2022). However, little is known about local food volunteers. Farmers market manager surveys are typically administered as one survey per organization (e.g., USDA NASS, 2020). So, they solicit information about the market organization instead of the people that work at them. The Farm to School (F2S) Census similarly does not ask questions about the roles of volunteers in F2S programs (USDA Food and Nutrition Service [USDA FNS], n.d.-b).

The local foods literature has historically focused on the drawbacks of unpaid labor. For instance, farmers market volunteers have high training costs due to frequent turnover, as well as less experience, than paid staff (O'Hara, Wolnik et al., 2021; Stephensen et al., 2008). High transaction costs, and reliance on market actors absorbing these costs, have similarly been identified as an impediment to F2S programming (Bobronnikov et al., 2021; Conner et al., 2014). The justification for and use of grant support, and interest in professionalizing these roles, is motivated by overcoming the obstacles from relying on unpaid labor (Farmers Market Coalition [FMC], 2019; O'Hara & Coleman, 2017).

While the challenges associated with volunteers are well documented (e.g., Stephensen et al., 2008), research on volunteers' perspectives could provide insight into understanding the importance of U.S. local food systems. Volunteering at a farmers market or school can provide volunteers an opportunity to feel more connected within their community, improve their self-confidence through interacting with others in a public setting, and contribute to a values-based project that provides gratification and fulfillment. Since volunteering is a privilege that is not available to everyone, this research would need to entail caution and nuance before reaching general conclusions about the role of volunteers in U.S. food systems.

In this essay, I reflect on two initiatives that I undertook as a volunteer. First, I founded and currently administer a Power of Produce (POP) program at my neighborhood farmers market. Second, I organized an after-school culinary, nutrition, and gardening program at a private elementary school. Both efforts were centered in the Del Ray neighborhood of Alexandria, VA, which is located just outside of Washington, D.C.

There has not been extensive literature on the two types of programs that I describe. While anecdotal resources are available about POP programs at farmers markets, they have not been the focus of research or systematic data collection. Educational school gardening and after-school programming are each implemented by about one-fifth of schools with farm-to-school programs (Bobronnikov, Prenovitz et al., 2021). However, like Power of Produce programs and farmers markets, after-school programs have not been a focus of the farm-to-school literature. This is because only a fraction of students participate in after-school programs, and the participating students may not be representative of the entire student body (Prescott et al., 2020).

Since I focus on my own experience, I do not attempt to draw overarching generalizations about the tens of thousands of local food volunteers in the U.S. There are some critical ways in which my own experience as a volunteer likely differs from others:

- I have the privilege of volunteering due to my relatively high socioeconomic status. My wife and I both have white-collar day jobs, and my volunteering occurred on nights and weekends. Unlike others, I was not volunteering due to a lack of paid employment opportunities in my field.

- Professionally, I worked on local food research and policy issues over a 10-year period (2011–2021) at the Union of Concerned Scientists and USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. That experience afforded me opportunities to engage directly with the leading local food organizations across the U.S. Other volunteers are unlikely to have had the educational or networking opportunities to draw on in the same way that I was able to.

- The Del Ray neighborhood provided a great setting for children's-based local food programming. This is because it is an affluent, family-oriented neighborhood with

strong social networks that I was able to leverage.

The projects that I describe in this essay could have been performed by a paid staff person instead of an unpaid volunteer. However, unlike a paid staff person, as a volunteer I was not pursuing these projects backed by the authority of an organization. Instead, I was responsible for the conceptualization, execution, and emotional energy and enthusiasm for the projects. I provide these perspectives in this essay and describe how the programs evolved over time through learning-by-doing.

Another difference between a paid staff person and volunteer—at least in my context—is that the emotional fulfillment I obtained from volunteering needed to exceed the effort that I put into the projects, or else I would not do them. So, I explain the motivations that I had in volunteering. Since there are many types of volunteers working in local food systems, in the Conclusions section I speculate on how my experience as a volunteer varies from others.

Establishing a Power of Produce Club

Background

This story occurs in Alexandria, Virginia, which is one of the largest cities in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. Like Washington, D.C., Alexandria has income disparities and racial segregation between neighborhoods. The city's public schools were not integrated until 1965, which was popularized in the movie *Remember the Titans*. Del Ray, the community where I live, is an affluent community with high housing prices and a population that is largely white, highly educated, and progressive.[1]

Del Ray is residential with a vibrant "Main Street" that has independent restaurants and retail businesses. Del Ray also has strong social capital bonds and numerous neighborhood events throughout the year. The Del Ray Farmers Market was founded in 1994. For context, this market is three years older than the Washington, D.C., region's flagship farmers market at Dupont Circle.

In March 2019, I began volunteering at the Del Ray Farmers Market. The notion of volunteering was intriguing. At the time I felt isolated from my community. I had also become increasingly depressed and disillusioned by national politics. I wondered if volunteering could provide fulfillment in a more localized context.

Also, while being a subject matter expert on local food systems had been great for my career, I wondered whether the converse was true. How much of a difference did my professional activities make? I saw volunteering as a way to break down the wall that had compartmentalized my personal and professional lives.

Farmers Market Volunteering

The Del Ray Farmers Market is a typical "boutique (also called a niche or neighborhood)" farmers market (Wolnik, 2013, p. 2):

- It is centrally located in Del Ray so that neighborhood residents can easily walk to the market;
- It is a food and beverage–only market (no crafts, etc.), with products not found in supermarkets;
- It is a Main Street market that is a member of the Del Ray Business Association; and
- Its volunteers reside in Del Ray and typically work only on market day.

The Del Ray Farmers Market operates year-round on Saturday mornings. The market is run by volunteers who are white and predominately older women, with four having volunteered at the market for several decades. This includes the market's founder, who is still managing the market as of this writing. The market's volunteers rotate shifts so that one volunteer is always on-site while the market is open. The other volunteers are active in the Del Ray community. The market founder also annually organizes a major art festival in Del Ray in October, which is the only Saturday during the year that the farmers market is closed.

[1] In 2022, the median household income in Del Ray and the neighboring Rosemont community was $188,538. Del Ray/Rosemont is 73% white with 83% of the population having a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

The footprint of the market expanded from one parking lot to two during the COVID-19 pandemic. The original parking lot is anchored by the stalls of five farms that have been at the market since the 1990s. Many of the baked good and non-farm vendors are in the second lot. The street connecting the two lots is where the POP Club is situated, along with an on-site composting station, a dog treat vendor, and guest nonprofits. The market does not estimate foot traffic and instead relies upon the interest level of vendors in having a market stall as a proxy for attendance.

I surmise that the responsibilities of Del Ray Farmers Market volunteers are consistent with other boutique/niche/neighborhood farmers markets. However, this is challenging to corroborate since the USDA NASS farmers market manager survey does not collect information about the responsibilities of volunteers on market day (USDA NASS, 2020). One task that we volunteers do not perform, that may be performed at other markets, is to collect data from vendors. Data collection is more common at markets that accept food assistance benefits (Wilson et al., 2018), which the Del Ray Farmers Market does not.

Volunteering at our market is busiest during the opening and closing of the market. Premarket tasks include setting up traffic cones and signage; ensuring that vendors and nonprofit guests are in their correct location at the market; managing traffic flow; and assisting vendors with parking, unloading, and set-up. Closing the market entails doing these steps in reverse.

Volunteers have less to do while the market is open. Our responsibilities include enforcing our no-dog policy, staffing vendors' stalls if they need to use the restroom, and ensuring that political campaigns are not posting signage or handing out pamphlets inside the market. Before COVID, when shoppers typically used cash, we used to make quick bank runs for vendors to ensure they had change for customers. Once I called the police to report that someone robbed one of our vendors, but that is uncommon at our market. Volunteers only have minor tasks on non-market days. For instance, I manage a schedule among four dog treat vendors to ensure that only one is attending on a given market day.

In meetings of volunteers over the years, we have offered our motivations for volunteering and how we thought the market could improve. I observed that the other volunteers exclusively focused on making the market more efficient. For instance, the other volunteers discussed improving our signage, attendance levels among our vendors, and clarifying our policy that allows nonprofits to table at our market.

I was the only volunteer interested in outward-facing community engagement. In our discussions, it became clear that if our market were to offer formal programming, then it would need to be a program that I would mostly be administering on my own. The other volunteers were not opposed to children's programming, although they were apathetic since few had school-age children. Since children's programming was not a priority for them, they were not going to devote significant time to support it.

POP Club Conceptualization

I first became familiar with POP Clubs when I visited the Oregon City Farmers Market in 2011. Oregon City is a former mill town in the Portland metropolitan area. This market had the first POP Club in the U.S. I was invited to tour this market with Farmers Market Coalition (FMC) staff. FMC advocates for and provides technical support to farmers market organizations across the U.S., and at the time had a strong interest in POP Clubs (FMC, n.d.).

In its typical form, a POP Club provides vouchers to children that they can redeem for fruits and vegetables at the market. POP Clubs can either be administered to children of need exclusively, such as in conjunction with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) incentives, or to children of all income levels. POP Clubs are sometimes accompanied by an enrichment activity that teaches children about healthy food choices, gardening, or farming. The goals of POP Clubs are to encourage children to interact with vendors and neighbors at the market, increase children's familiarity with seasonal and local produce, and empower children's purchases of local fruits and vegetables. The target ages of a POP Club are between five and 10.

In contrast to SNAP benefits, there is no systematic data collected about POP Clubs at farmers markets. This is presumably because there are not the same regulatory implications to farmers markets associated with offering POP Clubs as there are with accepting SNAP benefits. USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) tracks the farmers markets and direct marketing farmers that are authorized SNAP retailers (USDA FNS, n.d.-a). Also, questions about the acceptance of SNAP and other federal nutrition program benefits at farmers markets are included in USDA NASS surveys (USDA NASS, 2020, 2022).

Anecdotal information about POP Clubs indicates that they are not prevalent. When I contacted the Virginia Farmers Market Association, they were aware of three active POP Clubs in Virginia (Fredericksburg, Petersburg, and Williamsburg). University of Minnesota Extension (UME) identified nine POP Clubs in their state (UME, 2017), and FMC has seven case studies from 2016 on its website (FMC, n.d.). To my knowledge, there are no other POP Clubs in the Washington, D.C., area.

The idea of establishing a POP Club at the Del Ray Farmers Market occurred to me several months after I began volunteering. I felt that our market was ideal for a POP Club. While it is a family-oriented neighborhood, many families do not shop at the market. I observed that young kids came to the market until about the age of five, and then aged out of attending. The soaring property values in Del Ray resulted in many long-time residents (and market shoppers) selling their houses and moving away. In many instances, they were replaced by younger families with children but who had no connection to the market. I thought that a POP Club could attract new families to the market, or at least retain the families that currently came.

As I started discussing the idea of a POP Club with others, two delicate equity-based questions arose. First, I was asked why our market would install a POP Club when it did not accept SNAP benefits at the time. In discussions among the volunteers, we agreed that without external assistance, our market did not have the capacity to absorb the administrative costs and weekly commitment associated with accepting SNAP benefits.

I was also asked why I was setting up a POP Club in an affluent white neighborhood instead of at a farmers market in a neighborhood of higher need. While I was willing to assist other markets if mutual interest existed, I did not have the time or ability to start a POP Club in another neighborhood, which could potentially come across as patronizing.

I first suggested a POP Club to the other volunteers in the fall of 2019, although I postponed the idea due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I eventually took a preliminary step in the spring of 2021 as the co-leader of my daughter's Girl Scout troop. I organized a meeting at the market for the troop to earn the Making Choices badge. The troop toured the market to distinguish between wants and needs. Borrowing an idea from FMC (2023), I bought and sliced up vegetables at the market so that they could make vegetable art with toothpicks. We concluded by composting the vegetable art projects at our market's drop-off station.

I was emboldened by the Girl Scout meeting. First, the troop enjoyed undertaking food-related art and craft activities at the market. Second, while the troops lived in Del Ray, most of them did not attend the market. I observed that after our meeting concluded, many of them shopped at the market with their parents for perhaps the first time. Third, excited young children created an infectious positive energy at the market. After discussions with the Del Ray Farmers Market, I decided to launch a POP Club in 2022.

POP Club Structure

I reviewed online resources on how to administer a POP Club and ideas for enrichment activities (FMC, n.d.; UME, 2017). Still, I struggled with structuring the program. The biggest unknown was the number of children who would participate. Would 300 kids show up or would 30? I also did not know if we would find sponsors for the program. This uncertainty, in turn, made it hard to create a budget or establish the number of sessions. Eventually, I decided to offer the program for six consecutive weeks from mid-April through May and to set the fruit and vegetable vouchers at a level of US$5. The vouchers would not be needs-based (i.e., they would be available to all participating children).

Some POP Clubs operate only with vouchers for the sake of simplicity (UME, 2017). However, ours would have an accompanying enrichment activity. Vouchers would unlikely be sufficient to attract Del Ray families, since their participation would not be needs-based. An activity that enhanced the experience of participating children would be more attractive. Also, a mission of POP Clubs is to teach young children about farming, nutrition, and sustainability. For 2022, I created enrichment activities for each of the six weeks that were largely arts-and-crafts focused (Table 1). We also created lanyards so that kids could track the weeks they attended the program with stickers. We secured external sponsorships, and I promoted the POP Club with signage and by attending community events and meetings.

The six-week pilot program went by quickly. We averaged about 100 kids per week. So, our initial budget ended up being only a few hundred dollars short of our eventual expenses. Personally, I was caught off-guard at how physically draining it turned out to be. However, it made me feel more connected within Del Ray and I enjoyed being interacting with kids at the market.

I retained the basic structure between the 2022 and 2023 POP Clubs: six sessions, US$5 vouchers for fruits and vegetables, and an enrichment activity at each session. Other volunteers wanted to shift the program from six consecutive weeks to a monthly program across six months. This was because once the POP Club expired at the end of May in 2022, our market did not have a way to engage the community for the rest of the year. Also in 2023, my eight-year old daughter began regularly accompanying me to the market to assist with the program.

External sponsorships in 2023 were like 2022. In addition, my daughter's Girl Scout troop undertook a bake sale in the winter of 2023 (as well as in 2024) at the market as part of a service activity. They sold US$250 worth of baked goods and became a POP Club sponsor. Organizing a bake sale at the market had several benefits: it (a) promoted the POP Club during an off-peak time, (b) provided a way for the community to support the program, and (c) provided kids with a way to be contributors to the program as well as beneficiaries of it.

The parental feedback I received in 2022 indicated that while kids enjoyed some of the arts-and-crafts activities, these were unpopular with the parents. Instead, the parents liked the activities that got the kids walking around the market and interacting with vendors.

Based on this feedback, in 2023 I repeated the two most popular activities from 2022: a scavenger hunt and writing thank you cards to vendors. I also brought in some outside guests for other activities. We again averaged between 100 and 120 kids per session in 2023. Many of the families from 2022 returned, and for the most part the same families came consistently across the months.

As in 2022, the success of the 2023 activities was mixed. On the one hand, the three activities with outside guests were popular. On the other hand, I had not anticipated that repeating activities between years would reduce the novelty and enthu-

Table 1. POP Club Structure, 2022–2024

	2022	2023	2024
Schedule	6 consecutive weeks from mid-April through May	Monthly from April through September	Monthly from April through September
Vouchers	US$5 tokens to kids for fruits and vegetables at market	US$5 tokens to kids for fruits and vegetables at market	US$5 tokens to kids for fruits and vegetables at market
Outreach activities	Scavenger hunt; vegetable art with toothpicks; chalk sidewalk drawing; hand out seeds and soil in egg cartons; make and decorate bumble bees from balloons; vendor thank-you cards	Scavenger hunt; market tours; vendor thank-you cards; local restaurant; farmer with bee display; local artist with origami	Cooking demos from Del Ray restaurants with seasonal fruits and vegetables

siasm for them. In 2023, for example, some parents complained that the scavenger hunt was too hard, and I found it challenging to develop one scavenger hunt across such a wide age range. Also, my attempt to organize market tours and talks from farmers at specified times proved to be too challenging to schedule and coordinate. As I struggled to conceptualize new activities, I invited a local origami artist to the market for the last session even though the origami activity was unrelated to food and farming.

After the 2023 POP Club, I was at a crossroads. The voucher program was well-received. The vendors indicated that the extra revenue from the tokens was valuable and appreciated that our reimbursement system was simple. Most farmers liked engaging with children at the market, as that aligned with their personal values. Also, the children liked the vouchers since it empowered their own ability to choose fruits and vegetables.

At the same time, I was becoming increasingly demoralized with trying to conceptualize original activities for each session. After evaluating several potential directions for the POP Club, we decided to premise it around local restaurants in 2024. The structure would entail inviting local restaurants to the market for cooking demonstrations with seasonal fruits and vegetables. I had invited one Del Ray restaurant with Southern California/Mexican cuisine to the market in 2023 to make guacamole and salsa, and it was popular with both children and adults.

Tightening the bonds between the market and local restaurants aligned with the market's objective of supporting small businesses. Featuring food samples from local restaurants could make attending the market enticing for adults without children as well. Also, having restaurants providing cooking demonstrations is synergistic with promoting awareness around culinary and nutrition issues. Finally, this structure allowed us to obtain a higher sponsorship from the Del Ray Business Association (DRBA) than the levels we obtained from sponsors in 2022 and 2023, since we stipulated that that invited restaurants must be DRBA members.

For 2024, we secured commitments from six DRBA restaurants to participate in the POP Club. Unlike the 2023 restaurant session, in 2024 I asked that the recipes feature seasonal fruits and vegetables available at the market, which I posted online (Del Ray Farmers Market, n.d.). We have had five out of six sessions as of this writing. The restaurants that participated in April, May, and July presented roasted root vegetable, asparagus spring salad, and Caprese salad samples, respectively. In each instance, these recipes were premised around menu items at their restaurants. In June, the featured restaurant prepared biscuits with whipped cream and local blueberries, and in August we had smoked corn on the cob. It is premature to evaluate this new structure until the 2024 program is completed, but for the first five sessions I have been able to maintain attendance and interest levels among Del Ray families.

Evaluation

Some of the POP Club goals were to bring new families and extra revenue to the farmers market. Did that occur? Did kids try new or more fruits and vegetables? Did attending the market and participating in an activity increase the knowledge of kids about farms and food systems? At the end of the 2022 POP Club, I administered a survey of parents to better understand the answers to these questions.

The responses indicated that some of the participating families came every week anyway. Others indicated that they came occasionally, but because of the POP Club, they made attending the market more of a priority. I observed that some new families were attending, but in general the participating families were market regulars. Upon reflection, I was not surprised by this result given our market's social media limitations and reliance on word-of-mouth promotion. I also was not disappointed by this outcome. A fundamental concept from business school is that it is more important to retain existing customers than to acquire new ones.

Some, but not all, of the families indicated that they spent more money to due to the program. What came through clearly in the responses was that the kids found the vouchers empowering, and it resulted in them buying fruits and vegetables that they would otherwise not have purchased. I was relieved by this feedback. Since these vouchers were not based on need, if this was not empower-

ing for children then this would have called the purpose of the program into question. Subsidizing the vouchers was the main use of our sponsorship funds.

Understanding why the POP Club was empowering was beyond the scope of my survey. If parents handed their children a five-dollar bill and told them to buy whatever fruits or vegetables they wanted, would that have had the same effect? Or was it coming to the market, receiving the voucher from a stranger, and seeing other kids excited about making these purchases that made them feel empowered? Or, instead, did the participation in an activity make children feel like they had earned the voucher and thus more excited to spend it? Additional research on POP Programs could provide insight on these questions.

While there have been studies on how SNAP benefits at markets have affected farmers (Mann et al., 2018) and the effect of fresh fruit and vegetable vouchers on the health of disadvantaged children (Jones et al., 2020), there have been few studies of POP Clubs. While the POP Club had a positive effect on attendance and revenue, I did not know the magnitude from my survey. Is expanding POP Clubs a strategic opportunity for the farmers market sector? Estimating the number of U.S. POP Clubs and determining their impact on market revenue would be helpful in determining whether promoting them is important to direct-marketing farms.

Organizing an After-school "FoodPrints" Program

Conceptualization

My daughter attends a small kindergarten-through-eighth-grade (K-8) private school with approximately 20 children per grade, which I will refer to as "the school" for anonymization purposes. Most of the students come from higher-income families.

There was no farm-to-school (F2S) program at the school when my daughter began kindergarten. The National Farm to School Network (NFSN) defines F2S implementation as when a school does at least one of the following: (a) procures local foods to serve in the cafeteria, (b) maintains a school garden, or (c) integrates educational issues about food, health, and farming into the curriculum (NFSN, n.d.). While the school occasionally organized field trips to local farms, the school's garden beds were only periodically used, and the school did not have educational content about F2S topics formally integrated into the curriculum.

The school was receptive to my interest in this topic and generously agreed to sponsor the POP Clubs in 2022 and 2023. I promoted the POP Club through the school and met other school families with children interested in F2S topics. The parents told me that their children would be interested if I developed F2S programming at the school. I felt like I had found a critical mass of interested families to pursue a formal program.

I was particularly interested in FRESHFARM's cooking, gardening, and nutrition educational program called FoodPrints (FRESHFARM, n.d.). I had collaborated with FRESFHARM's farmers market staff professionally (O'Hara, Woods et al., 2021; O'Hara et al., 2022), which provided an entry point for me to connect with its FoodPrints director. FoodPrints is a well-regarded program with lessons covering soil health, plant parts, seasonality, life cycles, applied math, and food culture. FRESHFARM offers FoodPrints in 20 public elementary in Washington, D.C., via a grant from the D.C. government. As of 2022, FRESFARM had never offered FoodPrints outside of D.C. or on a fee-for-service model.

At the school's Association of Parents meetings, I described FoodPrints and my interest in developing analogous F2S programming at the school. At these meetings, other parents (predominately mothers) advocated for other important activities, such as those that promoted diversity and inclusiveness, service, and interactions among families. I was unique in asking the school to do more F2S programming. The school told me that teachers develop the class-based curriculum without parental input. However, they also told me that I could develop and offer an after-school F2S program during the 2022–23 school year, which would be my daughter's second grade year. The school wanted to resurrect its after-school programming, which it had discontinued because of COVID. FRESHFARM was intrigued by the idea of piloting FoodPrints as a fee-for-service after-school pro-

gram and agreed to scope the logistics of offering it at the school.

I began to work with the school and FRESHFARM to develop the logistical details. FRESHFARM ultimately agreed to offer FoodPrints in the winter of 2023, conditional on sufficient participation, with an enrollment fee that FRESHFARM estimated represented their costs of offering the program. The weekly sessions would occur for 90 minutes on Tuesdays for eight consecutive weeks in January and February. The curriculum required extensive teamwork, journaling, a discussion of local ingredients, cooking, eating together, and take-home recipes. Table 2 presents the weekly agendas. There would be two instructors present. The lead teacher developed the weekly agendas, purchased supplies, brought the cooking equipment, and led the sessions. There was also a rotating assistant teacher, who was a FRESHFARM staff member.

FRESHFARM offered the program to 2nd and 3rd graders, due to challenges to developing a curriculum across broader age ranges. FRESHFARM established minimum and maximum enrollment sizes of 12 and 15, respectively. Since the school had only about 40 children in total in second and third grades, I needed a high interest level for this to proceed. I began informally promoting the program and even came into the school to meet with the students to generate excitement.

Fortunately, once I sent out the enrollment announcement, we had 15 children (12 of whom were girls) register right away. The class immediately sold out. While I was initially elated, I had not anticipated that the program would be oversubscribed. It was agonizing to tell some parents, and especially interested kids, that they could not participate.

Implementation

On the first day, the students were jumping, clapping, and chanting with excitement as they waited in line for FoodPrints to begin. At the end of the first day, some of the students shouted "everything!" when asked about their favorite part of the day. In the second class, the adrenaline veered in the other direction as the student's excitement became undisciplined. Some of the students were unfamiliar with the recipes but did not know how to express their discomfort.

For the third class, the teachers went over norms and expectations with the class. Having the students agree to a code of conduct proved effective at allowing the course to be positive and engaging, but also focused. Over a period of several weeks, the initial adrenaline subsided, and class-

Table 2. 2023 After-School FoodPrints Curriculum

	Winter		Spring	
Week	**Recipe**	**Skill**	**Recipe**	**Skill**
1	Apple sauce	Knife	Radishes with bread and butter	Seed tape
2	Muffins	Measuring	Spinach pesto pasta with spring peas	Read seed packets, plant seeds
3	Salads	Knife	Crepes with veggies	Create terrarium with recycled materials
4	Root veggies	Mincing/grating	Multigrain waffles with local honey	Plant herbs and flowers
5	Chili	Seasoning	Mini green pizzas with spinach and herbs	Plant native perennials
6	Stir fry	Flexible recipes	Hummus with spring veggies and pita	Compost with greens and browns
7	Tacos	Tortilla press	Strawberry mint lemonade and salad with vinaigrette	Harvest from garden
8	Plant parts pasta	Sauteing	Strawberry rhubarb compote with yogurt	Harvest from garden; plant seedling to take home

room dynamics became established so that each of the 15 children was actively participating. In the final class, each child received their own aprons that everyone in the class signed.

Based on the high level of enthusiasm from the winter program, FRESHFARM agreed to offer an eight-week spring version of FoodPrints at the school for April and May. Since it was going to be warmer outside, FRESHFARM modified the curriculum so that it was more integrated with gardening. We ended up with 11 students in the spring, with seven winter students reenrolling. While this was one fewer student than their minimum size, FRESHFARM was comfortable with a smaller class since three of the new students had food allergies, which would require customization of the recipes. The smaller size meant that the class was far easier to manage for the two teachers. My perception was that the smaller size led to a better overall experience for the kids since they had more direct interaction with the instructors and the classroom was not as crowded or noisy. The spring program similarly had a high level of engagement from the students.

Discontinuation

As the 2022/23 school year wound down, I tried to establish the conditions for FoodPrints to return the following year. From my perspective as both a parent and program organizer, the 16-week pilot was incredibly successful. Unfortunately, I quickly found out that having FoodPrints back at the school for the 2023/24 school year was not a top priority for either the school or FRESHFARM.

The school was fine with FoodPrints returning as an after-school program. However, the school was going to expand its after-school program offerings in 2023/24. This implied that FoodPrints would have to compete with other alternatives to generate enrollment, which would affect whether it could be offered. Also, the school was beginning a strategic review of its science/technology/engineering/math (STEM) curriculum for grades three through six that summer and wanted to give that process one year before assessing whether FoodPrints might formally fit into their curriculum.

FRESHFARM also had reservations about continuing. Since most of the FoodPrints staff lived in D.C., it was challenging for FRESHFARM to provide a teaching assistant each week from their staff. This issue reflected a more general concern of FRESHFARM's, which was whether the opportunity cost of working with the school diverted its focus too far from its top priority of working in low-income D.C. public schools. FRESHFARM also had concerns about the effort its staff exerted in bringing the dishes back and forth each week, since the school's small kitchen did not have the storage space for them. Finally, FRESHFARM experienced a scheduling change to its D.C. programming and decided to not offer FoodPrints at the school in 2023/24. While it was a privilege to have FoodPrints at the school during 2022/23, I was disappointed that it would not continue.

My inability to sustain FoodPrints at the school may be related to a well-established literature finding that larger schools and school districts are more likely to have F2S programs (Bobronnikov et al., 2021). Unlike larger public school districts, the school does not have the staff capacity or scale to easily procure external grants. Also, its student body is so small that FoodPrints would have been hard to sustain as an after-school program even if it was offered.

The disparity in sizes between Washington, D.C., and Alexandria was also likely a factor. Washington, D.C., has a population of over 700,000, its own food policy council, and many innovative local food nonprofits. In contrast, Alexandria has 22% of D.C.'s population, has no food policy council, and receives few spillover benefits from the great work occurring in D.C. FoodPrints would likely have been easier to sustain if there were a cluster of Alexandria schools interested in the program. Unfortunately, outreach at that scale was beyond my capacity.

Evaluation

The school's FoodPrints program did not have enough students or duration for a formal evaluation. However, St. Pierre, Sokalsky, and Sacheck (2024) classified the impacts of FoodPrints across three stages. Using their terminology, the impact of FoodPrints on the school's students was "immediate" (p. 8). The immediate benefits they character-

ize are (a) enjoyment of food experiences, (b) hands-on learning of food skills, and (c) fostering connection with peers through shared experiences. They classify the second and third stages as "beyond the classroom" and "sustained," respectively (p. 9). These latter stages would be impacts experienced by older children and alumni. What I observed was consistent with their first stage since FoodPrints is highly interactive and the agendas kept children busy for the entire 90 minutes.

Conclusions

This essay reflects my experience trying to establish children's local food programs in an affluent and highly educated community. In both case studies, ethical questions arose about whether scarce resources should be directed toward privileged children instead of needs-based children. While there was a consensus that all children should have access to local foods programming, questions arose about whether I was striking the right balance.

On the one hand, many Del Ray children have countless opportunities available to them that needs-based children do not. For instance, one challenge I confronted is that children in Del Ray are highly scheduled with after-school and weekend activities. With the POP Club, FoodPrints, and my Girl Scout troop, I have had to "compete" for their time and attention against soccer, swimming, and other activities. Given their available opportunities, mission-focused nonprofits may not see working with these children as a priority. Also, giving these children vouchers at a farmers market made some uncomfortable, since the vouchers were not needs-based. On the other hand, how our society sustainably produces food, feed, fuel, and bio-based products is likely to be one of the most important societal issues in the next several decades. As the school's FoodPrints cohort aged, a program like FoodPrints could have been a great entry point for these issues and could have taught them about food security and some of the advantages they possess living in Del Ray.

While Del Ray children have access to many activities, particularly with organized sports, I found that there was little in the way of engaging local food programs. This deficiency, along with my professional background, is where I perceived that there was an opportunity for me to contribute to the community. More generally, volunteering has made me appreciate that understanding the motivations of volunteers is important for the functioning of local food systems. Types of volunteers include:

- Younger volunteers seeking a path toward paid employment;
- Older and perhaps retired volunteers wanting to stay busy and connected to their community;
- Mission-focused volunteers motivated to assist communities of need; and
- Working parents who volunteer to educate children (as in my case).

In general, I feel that I met my goals in volunteering, although they evolved across three stages. I first started volunteering to feel more connected within my community and to address a sense of hypocrisy I felt as a local foods professional who was ignorant about my own neighborhood market. As I became more comfortable and confident, my goals moved toward developing formal programming. After some mixed success and fatigue over the three-year period, my goal became simply to sustain an activity that my daughter and I enjoyed doing together. As of this writing, I have not decided whether I will continue the POP Club for a fourth consecutive year in 2025.

Research that focuses on understanding volunteers' motivations and characteristics could increase awareness about the contributions they provide. Why do people volunteer to support local foods instead of using their time in other ways, such as volunteering for some other cause? What do volunteers seek to get out of offering their time? What kind of difference can an individual volunteer make in their community? Understanding the answers to these questions might inform why farmers markets and local foods have become so established in the U.S. in recent decades.

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