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**For Immediate Release**

**USDA MAKES GRANT TO SUPPORT FARM TO SCHOOL PROJECT  
IN MANISTEE AND BENZIE COUNTIES**

**Onkama and Frankfort, Michigan** - Healthy and good tasting meals for Manistee and Benzie County students and increased revenue for area growers and food processors is the goal of a \$60,000 grant from the U. S. Department of Agriculture - Rural Development for a *Farm to School* program involving the Frankfort-Elberta Area School District, Onkama Consolidated Schools and a host of others.

The grant will be administered by the Manistee-based Alliance for Economic Success. Other participants include the Manistee Intermediate School District, Traverse Bay Intermediate School District, the Michigan Land Use Institute and area farmers and food processors.

Farm to School programs are a relatively new national trend to connect K-12 schools and local farms with the goals of serving more healthy meals in school cafeterias, improving student nutrition, educating students and communities about locally grown foods to improve health and nutrition and providing an added source of economic support for farms, farmers and food processors.

One goal of the grant is to implement the highly successful Farm to School program that has been developed by Frankfort-Elberta Area Schools in Benzie County in the Onkama Consolidated School District in Manistee County beginning in the 2010-2011 school year, laying the ground for all Manistee County schools to participate in the future.

Under the leadership of Frankfort-Elberta Area Schools, the Farm to School program coordinated by staff member Renee DeWindt has dramatically increased student, faculty and family use of their food service that now emphasizes locally grown foods and food products, now serving over 2,500 students in Benzie County school districts.

“With the completion of our new kitchen, food preparation, food storage and cafeterium at Onkama Consolidated Schools, it only made sense to learn from our partners in Benzie County and leverage our new facilities as well as the great foods grown by area farmers,” said Kevin Hughes, Superintendent of Onkama Consolidated Schools. “At the center of all of this is our students and their families who will be healthier and more fit by integrating fresh foods into their daily diets. The program will also foster great learning opportunities involving agriculture that will benefit our kids as well as our entire community.”

“We’re delighted with the opportunity to help Onkama and Manistee County benefit from our experience,” said Frankfort-Elberta Area School Superintendent Tom Stobie. “Particularly during these difficult economic times, we need to be doing everything we can to collaborate across county and school district lines to share good ideas and initiatives like the Farm To School program so that all of our students can benefit, now and in the future.”

Another important goal of the program is to engage as many local growers and food processors as possible in the supply chain for the Farm to School Program. Food and agricultural businesses are now Michigan's second-largest industry, employing about one-quarter of the entire workforce.

"The Farm to School program will provide an added source of income for area growers," said Cyndy Fuller, Executive Director of the Alliance for Economic Success. "It will also help us learn together how we can integrate our bounty of local foods and food products into the food service supply chain."

The Farm to School project will involve four phases.

Phase 1 will include formation of a Leadership Team to help guide the project, an assessment of school assets, an identification of growers and food processors who can participate in the program and setting concise objectives for the program involving operations, student and community education, menu and meal preparation and grower participation.

Phase 2 will include training and education of school staff, mentoring of school food service personnel, educating students and community members and development of farm to school-related projects that can be integrated into school curriculum.

The Farm to School program will be implemented during Phase 3. This will include the beginning of the program at Onekama Consolidated Schools during the fall of 2010 and the expansion of the program in Benzie County schools.

The final phase will involve development of a plan to expand the program within Benzie County and Onekama Consolidated Schools as well as all of Manistee County. The expansion plan will also identify sources and uses of funds to support expansion and sustainability of the program.

"With careful planning and training of food service staff, we've found that we can integrate locally grown foods into breakfast and lunch menus and actually lower the overall costs of our food service program," said Renee DeWindt, who will oversee the project working in tandem with both school districts. "We continue to find new, locally grown foods and food products that are wholesome, good tasting and affordable. Student, faculty and community participation in our breakfast and lunch programs has increased remarkably since the program began - this is truly a win-win effort for our schools and our communities."

"We gave this grant application an A+," said Shelley Fuller, Area Director for the U. S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Development. "Through collaboration among two of our county school districts, we will develop and expand a program that will help our farms and farmers, support the health, nutrition and learning capacity of students, and make our communities more aware of the benefits of making locally grown foods and food products a priority in their daily diets. This project will be exemplar for other communities throughout Michigan and even nationwide."