



Meet Colorado Farm to School Champion Andy Nowak!

The Basics:

Name: Andrew Nowak

Organization: [Slow Food Denver](#), and [Cooking Matters Colorado](#)

Title or Role: Project Director at Slow Food Denver, Past President of Board of Advisors and Volunteer Chef at Cooking Matters Colorado

School District: [Denver Public Schools](#), and statewide through school garden technical assistance

Interview Date: March 29, 2012

Questions and Answers:

First, tell us about what you do!

Farm to school as defined by the National Farm to School Network has three legs. It includes learning where your food comes from, or agricultural education, getting local foods into school cafeterias, and also nutrition education -- why is that food good for you? Easily all three of my positions fit into that model very effectively, and it was not by intent, it was really by accident that it worked out that way.



So if we look at "where does your food come from," I would say that my work with Slow Food Denver and the school gardens that we've helped establish primarily within Denver Public Schools but also within six other school districts in the area. For 12 years now we have been programming school gardens and teaching kids how to grow food and showing what they can do with that food. We have three signature programs. Our Taste Education series involves raw tasting straight out of the garden and cooking classes using recipes and flavors from all around the world. In our program we call Garden Cafeteria, produce is going into the cafeteria from the school gardens and the kids are learning how they can

feed their fellow classmates. With the Youth Farmers' Market program kids are learning how to feed their community by setting up farm stands on school grounds.

My part of farm to school of "know where your food comes from" is certainly the Slow Food Denver work. The local procurement work, getting food into the school cafeterias, is actually both Slow Food Denver and Real Food Colorado, another partner organization. With Slow Food Denver, we've been a partner with the food service department in Denver Public Schools (DPS) for now almost four years and we've helped launch their local procurement and scratch cooking programs. We supported DPS by helping to find farmers and ranchers that would be interested in supplying DPS, and we helped form meetings and discussions about the right protocols and everything that was perceived to be a barrier from getting local foods into the school district. We served as a community partner with DPS to break down those barriers. The Real Food Colorado work helps school districts and farmers around the state determine food safety plans so they know the food is safe for the kids, helping farmers understand the school bid process, so that they can respond and get their food into the schools.

And then the last part of farm to school concerns nutrition education and that is my work with Cooking Matters. I have been involved with them for over eight years, teaching courses to low income families on how to get more fresh fruits and vegetables and healthy foods into their family meals while still maintaining a budget. I've been on their Board of Advisors for four years, helping with the overall organizational structure of the organization, too.

What has been your primary focus or involvement in helping to get more local foods into schools?

My role has been to serve as a connector. School districts want to get involved in Farm to School but they don't know where the farms are, they don't know the farmers, and they don't know the ranchers. The farmers think they want to get involved in school food procurement but they don't know who to talk to at the schools. So we serve as that connector role, a facilitator, and then if an issue comes up that we need some expert to come in to help us out, or if we need something written up, then we serve as that support system. But the actual transaction between the farmer and the school district has to happen within the school district system, they can't go through us.

How long have you been involved?

I have been involved in the Slow Food Denver Seed to Table program for 12 years. I have been a volunteer chef for eight years at Cooking Matters.

What first interested you in local foods or Farm to School?

Well I have a PhD in psychology, and I've been cooking in restaurants for over 25 years, but none of that really prepared me for this. What got me into this was moving to Denver. Twelve years ago we brought the family to Denver -- my wife is a surgeon, and she joined a practice in town. I didn't have anything lined up when we came to Denver, so I got a job in the school as a teaching aid where my kids were going to school and started using my

culinary skills to engage kids in curriculum around food. I got into some discussions with kids about where food comes from and got a lot of blank stares from the kids. I proposed a garden for the school and the principal liked that idea so I started a simple salad garden. Right about that time I read about Slow Food Denver and their new garden program. They were just launching a garden program, so I went to a meeting, and my garden became their fourth garden in their program. That teaching position only lasted for a year or so, and I went back and cooked in a restaurant for a little bit. But I didn't feel comfortable there so I came back and became a full-time participant with the Slow Food Project.

What else motivated you or provided that “spark” to get involved? What made it possible or easier for you to get involved?

I think it's more just being a parent and wanting good stuff for your kids. That certainly didn't get me started, the teaching position got me started, and I just saw some fun opportunities to get the kids engaged in gardening. But you know you don't do this for 12 years as an unpaid volunteer if you don't have some internal motivations, and quite honestly I think it was because I'm a parent. And I know I'm a little bit privileged, so I've done things for other kids, and the doors kept on opening for other projects. It just felt good to keep on going through the doors and see what would happen at the next stage.

Were there specific tools, models, partners, programs, or resources that really helped you to get involved? What about them was so helpful?

Besides my cooking background I have certainly not trained in local food procurement, food systems or anything like that. I've been an active gardener for many years. My parents had me in the family vegetable garden from the beginning. I think overall the success of all this is due to the partnerships. Getting into Slow Food, which is an established nonprofit community group, introduced me to other partners, other nonprofits along these lines. Slow Food will be the first one to acknowledge that all the work we've been able to accomplish would not be possible if it weren't for all the partnerships we have in the community. And those partnerships open doors for you, they introduce you to new

projects, new ideas, and I could probably sit down and just trace my whole path due to all these different partnerships we have.



Are there other factors that have contributed to the on-going success or sustainability of your efforts? What specifically?

The fact that I am a 12 year unpaid volunteer, I've got to give a lot of credit to my wife who supports the family through her hard work.

Where do you see your efforts going and growing? What do you see as the next steps?

The next step is to help other school districts get to the DPS level. DPS was very fortunate to obtain grant support, and get some outside help that other school districts don't have right now. I would like to take this Farm to School program across the state to develop models that will make it much easier for any school district to get engaged. We call it institutionalizing Farm to School but institutionalizing it in a good way. You know, making it approachable and easily understandable by both the producers and the school districts so that it becomes a normal practice not a special practice.

What do you think others can learn from or model from what you have done? What would you suggest to others in your role who want to do similar work?

Keep an open mind, leave your agenda at the door, and be willing to listen to other people's ideas. This work we do is all about the kids, that's number one. Whatever's good for the kids will be good for the project. But to make it good for the kids, we have to work collaboratively with the food service department and the farmers. I may have an idea of how to do something, but if it's not going to be consistent with the way a farmer does something, I have to listen to the farmer. I can't impose my ideas onto the farmer. I need to listen to what everyone needs and be in a position to make it happen, either by introducing other people into the discussion or finding tools or finding resources that can be utilized by the people in the equation.

What else would you like to see happen in the state of CO that would help advance your efforts?

I think we need to increase awareness in the general public that local food and the purchase of local food is good for everybody. We need to recognize that if we buy food from our farms that food dollars stay in the state and are multiplied several times because then that farmer will spend that dollar inside the state too. And I guess in order to achieve even that, we need people to put a higher priority on the food that they eat. Be willing to spend a little bit more of their budget on food, be willing to spend a little more time thinking about the food that they eat, be willing to spend a little more time with their families, preparing and enjoying the food. There are so many distractions in our culture right now and they are perceived to be entertainment that everyone thinks is very important. But there's nothing more important than the food that you eat, and the way that food is grown, and if we focus more of our attention on what we put in our bodies, how we grow that food and who grows that food for us, then I think a lot of the other issues our culture is facing will be addressed.