



Testimony

Of Andrew Heck

Generation Healthy Kids Coalition, Garden Educator

to the

Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, and Research - Public Hearing

Committee on Agriculture

U.S. House of Representatives

at the hearing to review

*RE: Opportunities and Challenges in Direct Marketing - A View From the Field*

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to the subcommittee today. I am honored by your invitation and welcome the opportunity to share my experiences as a market farmer, Illinois Stewardship Alliance board president, and from my position with Generation Healthy Kids where I am the Garden Educator.

I grew up in the small town of Mechanicsburg, a rural farming community in central Illinois. I attended the Tri-City school district from kindergarten until graduation. I graduated from Southern Illinois University with a Bachelors of Science in biological sciences, and received a secondary teaching certificate. I taught high school and junior high biology, chemistry and physics, in addition to leading various extracurricular activities.

During my first summer vacation, I began farming part-time on a small scale to supplement my beginning teacher's salary. In 2004, I started selling produce at the Old Capitol Farmers' Market in Springfield, IL. As my knowledge of direct market farming grew, I realized this could be a viable and fulfilling career and not just a hobby. I eased into farming gradually, and diversified my farming income in the same manner. The first season's crops were solely marketed at the farmers' market. I soon realized that market sales are directly proportional to the weather, and inclement weather equals poor sales. It was at this time I decided diversifying farm income was the only way to secure steady income as a direct market vegetable farmer.

At first, I introduced myself to chefs in the area and started taking them samples of products. This proved advantageous, because several chefs began ordering consistently each week. Sales to retail stores came next, and were also not dependent on unpredictable weather.

The next marketing attempt came in the form of selling produce to schools. Unfortunately, the logistics of a direct market farm selling to a school district proved to be challenging. For example, many schools lack the refrigeration required to store produce safely. Due to minimal resources available to schools, processing of fresh produce became cumbersome on cafeteria staff.



Then I started a Community Supported Agriculture program. In a CSA model, customers prepay in the winter for a weekly share of vegetables during the growing season. The duration of a CSA generally coincides with the growing season in a particular geographical region. When the growing season arrives, CSA customers pick up their weekly share of vegetables at the farm. This model aids the farmer by creating a flow of income during the winter months, when income is traditionally scarce. Diversifying income on a direct market vegetable operation can aid in its financial stability, but the reality is a successful operation requires arduous physical labor, and work days that start at sunrise and easily end after the sun sets on a daily basis.

Most direct market farmers are truly passionate about their livelihood and sacrifice a steady paycheck with higher wages in exchange for the health benefits that are associated with growing and consuming fresh, nutrient dense foods, and the amount of healthy physical activity associated with farming.

For the past three years, I have served as a board member for the Illinois Stewardship Alliance. Several weeks ago I was elected as the board president. Illinois Stewardship Alliance is a statewide non-profit organization (headquartered in Springfield, Illinois) whose mission is to promote environmentally sustainable, economically viable, socially just, local food systems through policy development, advocacy, and education. Illinois Stewardship Alliance envisions a system where soils are treated as a precious resource, local food producers earn a fair, living wage, local food education is integrated into all levels of education, and infrastructure is rebuilt to accommodate local food systems and good food is available for all.

Illinois Stewardship Alliance's Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign was and is still integral in connecting new and existing farmers with potential marketing opportunities. This campaign enabled me to meet and create working relationships with several local chefs, retail outlets, and created an outlet to advertise our CSA which sold out surprisingly fast its first year. Fortunately the CSA members are quite loyal and many of the original families still participate in the program 8 years later.

Last November, I decided to combine my knowledge of farming and gardening along with my formal education as a science teacher. I joined Generation Healthy Kids as the Garden Educator. genHkids is a non-profit located in Springfield, IL. genHkids mission is to create a generation of healthy kids through education, empowerment, improved nourishment and increased physical activity. The genHkids Coalition was founded by Kemia Sarraf, M.D., M.P.H in partnership with a wide array of local organizations, associations, public health institutions, businesses and educational establishments. Since its inception, the genHkids Coalition has generated tremendous excitement in the region with its hands-on, grassroots approach to improving child health. The genHkids Coalition is comprised of health professionals, educators, fitness experts, nutritionists, parents, and other concerned citizens, all dedicated to creating generation Healthy.

Today, genHkids is a leading voice in Sangamon County with regards to the promotion of childhood wellness programs, having created and implemented more than a half-dozen early childhood education, physical activity, nutrition-based and community programs. Our genHkids programs are visible in more than 30 elementary, middle, and high schools throughout Sangamon County.





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As garden educator, I visit several schools on a weekly basis to implement the Grow Your Grub curriculum. In addition, I oversee the weekly activities and duties of our community gardens.

Through genHkids' community gardens, we grow sustainable and beautiful gardens in Springfield in full partnership with families who live around the gardens. In 2015, we harvested over 2,000 pounds of food that was either used in our cooking programs or given back directly to the community. Community participation is a critical component in creating a garden that is maintained by surrounding residents. genHkids' farmers organize and encourage these community gardens, engage participant families and educate and empower garden participants. genHkids Educators and Chefs provide training in school kitchens on how to prepare meals from the harvest, and how to preserve surplus for the winter.

In the long-term, genHkids envisions community garden locations throughout Sangamon County, including numerous additional sites on Springfield's east side, providing participants with increased access to fresh produce, nutrition and stewardship education, skills training and strengthened neighborhood social networks.

In addition to community gardens, genHkids has built more than a dozen school gardens with our partner school districts. Schools benefit from genHkids' experience in garden creation, funding assistance, location selection, design, building, planting, education of students, harvesting and consumption of that harvest by students. Vegetable gardens connect children with the source of their food, introduce new flavors and textures, provide physical activity, and expand math, science and reading curriculum to real world situations. Our Grow Your Grub program teaches children to grow their own food, provides lessons in nutrition and stewardship, and allows them to harvest food and sample the fruits of their labors.

I have seen first hand that when children plant the seeds, water the plants, and then hand-pick their own fruits and vegetables, they are much more likely to actually eat fresh and nutritious vegetables. Last season, we saw neighborhood children, like Mikey, picking and eating whole peppers right off the plant at our community garden in downtown Springfield. His mother was very surprised and exclaimed that she was pretty sure that was the first time he had ever eaten a fresh pepper. It is now a pretty common occurrence to see Mikey grazing on a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables whenever he is at the community garden. The labor in this garden is shared by many members of the community, including Representative Davis's staff, who volunteered at our community garden in downtown Springfield during last years' National Day of Service.

### **genHkids Eat Real at School Program**

We envision schools where children gather in the cafeteria twice daily to consume nutritious and delicious foods prepared from-scratch, and every calorie served the children is nutritive, nourishing their growing bodies and minds.



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## What is Eat Real at School?

genHkids' Eat Real at School program is designed to provide nutrition education, skills training, menu planning and daily menu "lesson plans" to food service personnel in schools. genHkids aids schools and districts in the transition from a processed, "heat and serve" fast food menu to a nutritious, fresh and seasonal from-scratch menu. The program also encourages schools to transform their cafeterias into additional classroom environments, educating children about the food on their trays and encouraging the consumption of fresh, new offerings. A logical next step for genHkids farm to school program is to incorporate local foods into these menus by substituting non-local items with products sourced from local farmers. Many of our schools also have salad bars which are the perfect opportunity to serve locally grown produce. With access to locally sourced ingredients, schools can develop new recipes and expand educational opportunities such as Harvest of the Month programs featuring local farmers.

To educate the parents on the importance of supporting the from-scratch lunch menu, genHkids implemented a program called Destination Dinner Table. Destination Dinner table is an evening cooking program with the parents and children incorporating fresh seasonal produce into recipes that they can prepare at home. genHkids' staff and volunteers work with the children, teaching them to set the table, working on basic etiquette, playing nutrition games and participating in Brain Breaks. When the meal is ready, all participants sit down to eat together family style. At the program's conclusion, parents leave with important nutritional information, a weekly menu and shopping guide, and a sense of accomplishment and increased confidence in their ability to cook at home.

One of the most important steps families can take to improve their overall physical health is to begin preparing and eating from-scratch meals at home. The health community has become increasingly aware that the quality of calories we consume matter as much as the quantity of those calories. Cooking at home with fresh, real (unprocessed) ingredients is the best way to ensure your children are consuming high quality, nutrient-dense calories.

Unfortunately, over the past 30 years the number of parents who feel secure and competent with basic food preparation has declined. Many parents feel they lack the skills necessary to cook a nutritious meal, in a timely fashion, within their budget — especially one that their children will eat!

In the 2014-2015 school year genHkids saw an increase in the number of Eat Real at School programs. In its second year at Ball-Chatham Elementary, genHkids supported menu development and training for kitchen staff. The district served 252,654 made-from-scratch lunches, an incredible increase of 45% over the prior year. At the same time, the district saved 10% in its food acquisition costs over the prior year.

One of the most common concerns that parents and schools have with the implementation of new, healthier items on school lunch menus is the possibility of increased food waste due to the preferences of children for familiar, less healthy items. genHkids has undertaken several measures to combat plate waste in schools where we operate.



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Using grant funds, genHkids staff planned a plate waste study protocol measuring food waste before and after the implementation of new menu items and programs. Food items were weighed before and after food service, and the results gathered included several pieces of data around the amount of food served, the amounts wasted before and after interventions, and the factors impacting food waste.

Interventions to promote healthier food include school gardening classes, cooking classes for children and parents, “cafeteria coaching” where adults eat alongside children, recess before lunch, elimination of food or treats as rewards during the day, and school staff training and education.

## **Conclusion**

Through genHkids Eat Real at School program, we aid schools in the transition from a processed, “heat and serve” fast food menu to a nutritious, from-scratch menu. Ideally, the next step is to work with the schools on procuring fresh, locally sourced ingredients.

However, there are still many barriers to overcome such as easing regulations on farmers to sell to schools and creating incentives for farmers to diversify their crops; for schools, minimizing barriers such as the bidding process, increasing school lunch reimbursement rates, and providing incentives to schools that source locally.

Through my work as a direct market farmer, as President of Illinois Stewardship Alliance, and now at genHkids, I have seen the demand for increased farm to school programs.

As a result, I would urge all members of Congress to support the passage of the Child Nutrition Act reauthorization in time for it take effect for the new school year this fall, and to support increased funding for the USDA Farm to School grant program as part of the reauthorization. With increased resources, organizations like genHkids will be able to work with local schools and farmers to increase the procurement of local produce in schools.

U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Agriculture  
Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, & Research  
The Honorable Rodney Davis  
United States Congressman

Dear Chairman Davis:

My name is Kayla Worker and I am a Family and Consumer Science teacher at Springfield Southeast High School in Springfield, Illinois. I first became involved with genHkids in June 2015. As a teacher, I'm privileged to have summers off to pursue personal interests and become more educated in my practice. I wanted to expand my knowledge of gardening for quite some time because of it's practical application in cooking and many nutritional benefits of fresh produce and herbs. I hoped to supplement my Nutrition and Culinary Arts I and II classes with this education. genHkids had developed an empty lot about a mile from my house into a community garden. It became the perfect opportunity for me to learn more about gardening, and fortunately for me, much more.

Through volunteering at the community garden on 3rd Street and Canedy Street I was able to get to know the genHkids staff. The organization brought nutrition access and education to kids in Springfield area, just like I did as a Family and Consumer Science teacher. genHkids had something I didn't have – gardens. Gardening allowed kids to take ownership over the healthy foods they would eventually happily eat. Getting kids to eat healthy foods is hard. Every year I have a new recipe for my students to try to get them to try more vegetables. Some liked the foods but some refused to try them. The kids in the genHkids garden would pluck tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers right off the plant and eat them! It was amazing.

I asked the executive director, Jen Dillman, who I had become friends with through our biweekly gardening sessions, how a school could get a garden. Soon after, we were planning a garden at Springfield Southeast High School for my students to use in the Nutrition and Culinary Arts classes and for the rest of the school to utilize. When the word got out that there would be a school garden, teachers began planning ways to use it in their curriculum. The biology teacher asked me about using it for his photosynthesis unit, the chemistry teacher asked if she could get compost worms to do a unit on breaking down food, the art teacher asked if her students could paint and mosaic in the garden, and the list goes on.

None of this would have happened without genHkids. They were there to help me plan the garden, build the beds, raise money for the garden (we've raised \$3,200 so far!), and educate the students and me about gardening. The gardening education is beginning before the gardening season with the Grow Your Grub curriculum being taught to 20+ students an hour every week led by genHkids staff.

I'm so excited for all of the good times, education, and exposure this garden will provide for students at my school. This organization has made such an incredible impact in my life, in my students' lives, and in the city of Springfield. I know with increased access to funds and resources this organization will continue impact the lives of many children and families in Sangamon County and beyond.

Please feel free to stop by the Spartan Garden this spring to see the garden in action.

Very Sincerely,

Kayla Worker





# NOURISH & GROW







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