

**Youth Advocacy Starts Here:
Bringing Student Voice into Food Education**

Sydney R. Friedman
sydneyf3@illinois.edu

Amy M. Leman
bunselme@illinois.edu

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications
905 S. Goodwin Ave., 174 Bevier
Urbana, IL 61801

Introduction: Why Food Advocacy

What happens when 5th, 6th, and 7th graders start asking questions like, “why don’t we have fresh vegetables at lunch?” or “what’s in this snack I eat every day?” These are the kinds of questions that students are encouraged to ask through a new food and agricultural education program — Feeding Futures, powered by Pilot Light, designed to teach youth the knowledge and attitudes necessary to develop a positive relationship with food and agriculture. This program serves to integrate food education into a regular classroom environment within five Illinois schools located in East St. Louis, Decatur, and Chicago, and it culminates with students developing an advocacy project to support action in their school or community about a food and agriculture related issue.

Evidence-based advocacy programs exist for youth obesity prevention programs (Millstein et al., 2016), healthy snacking interventions (Gangrade et al., 2023), community health disparities (Altares et al., 2022) and substance use prevention (Altman & Feighery, 2004). However, these programs are aimed at middle school and high school aged youth. This new program brings food advocacy to life in elementary school classrooms where students previously had little exposure to agriculture or food education.

Advocacy projects not only create opportunities to inform the public about issues, but they also lead to increased confidence and knowledge-sharing among youth (Gangrade et al., 2023) as well as positive youth development outcomes (Altares et al., 2022). Most importantly, teaching youth advocacy provides youth experience to understand and challenge the adult decision making that impacts their lives (Dalrymple, 2004). Advocacy related to food and agriculture gives youth an opportunity to become better consumers, diving deeper into how important agriculture is within their community.

How it Works

Feeding Futures is grounded in seven Pilot Light Food Education Standards (2021), which were created collaboratively by teachers, nonprofit leaders, and food systems experts. These standards are publicly available and nationally recognized. They include the following: (1) Food connects us to each other. (2) Foods have sources and origins. (3) Food and the environment are interconnected. (4) Food behaviors are influenced by external and internal factors. (5) Food impacts health. (6) We can make informed food choices. (7) We can advocate for food choices and changes that impact ourselves, our communities, and our world.

Each food education standard introduces a new topic or idea surrounding food systems, agriculture, and personal connection. Teachers must complete at least one lesson in each of the standards. Rather than being a standalone curriculum teachers implement these standards into their daily classroom curriculum, weaving the activities into the existing core subjects like English Language Arts, science, social studies, and math. This cross-curricular integration makes the program both unique and more accessible to teachers. It emphasizes that food is not an isolated topic, and it can be connected to everything that students learn. Currently, the program is being implemented by ELA, science, and social studies teachers in five Illinois schools. For example, students practiced persuasive writing in ELA while creating food posters, explored the life cycle and farming in science, investigated cultural food traditions in social studies, and analyzed fractions in recipes during math lessons.

The culmination of this program is a student-created advocacy project. The projects give students a sense of ownership, purpose, and connection. This format is aligned with Millstein and Sallis’s (2011) model of youth advocacy related to childhood obesity, which includes education and skill development in advocacy, then behavior change. As youth develop plans to advocate for changes, they can draw on their own experience and behaviors when asking for broader engagement with the public.

Findings

Currently, 9 teachers and 327 students participate in the Pilot Light program and are piloting the curriculum and advocacy projects. During end-of-program interviews, teachers noted that students initially had no language for “advocacy,” but quickly began demonstrating it through behaviors and reflections. As one teacher said, “they didn’t know what advocacy was... but they were doing it.”

Examples of student-led projects demonstrate how advocacy can be implemented in schools. In one school, students designed and distributed a family cookbook featuring healthy recipes and food stories. Another classroom created a pollinator garden after researching how insects support food systems and sustainability. Other advocacy projects included hosting school-wide food tastings, creating educational posters for display, and teaching younger students about nutrition.

In one memorable example, students researched the origin of different foods and presented their findings to older peers. A teacher reflected: “They watched a video, and after that, they became so responsive. They were pointing out where foods came from, and they started teaching others about it.” These findings showcase how advocacy projects aim to deepen engagement, improve student confidence, and encourage critical thinking.

Future Plans and Advice to Others

Looking ahead, researchers will collect and analyze more student artifacts including journals, drawings, posters, and cookbooks from Year 2 of the Pilot Light program to assess the impacts these artifacts have on both students and their communities. The collected artifacts will be developed into toolkits including lesson adaptations, student work, reflections, and flexible project ideas. The steering committee for the project is also working with the state board of education to adopt food education standards as part of state education guidelines.

For Extension professionals looking to lead the program in classrooms or facilitate teacher adoption of the program, remember that youth advocacy is based on youth empowerment. Begin by introducing food and agricultural examples and concepts and let students find their interest among the potential topics and projects for advocacy. Successful advocacy comes when students must feel personally connected to the issue and have the space to make decisions and lead their peers.

Resources/Costs

In the first year of the program, curriculum development was supported by Pilot Light staff, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign faculty, and a graduate student in Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications. Direct costs included teacher stipends for professional development, classroom materials such as journals, art supplies, garden kits, and food tastings, and the material costs have been grant funded. The lessons are all openly available through Pilot Light’s website. Many of the lessons require simple classroom materials. However, the teachers prefer to use the lessons that involve making food with their students, which is an added cost. Most teachers reported that they spent less than \$50 on materials for each lesson.

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