Exploring Urban Agriculture, Food Access, and Public Transit Through Professional Development

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Introduction

Urban agriculture continues to grow as an important strategy for improving food access, promoting environmental sustainability, and strengthening community engagement. As urban agriculture grows in popularity, school-based agricultural educators must work to better understand the unique challenges and opportunities found in urban agricultural settings. Historically, agricultural education has primarily focused on rural communities. This leaves many educators with limited exposure to urban agricultural systems (Martin et al., 2024). Professional development experiences that expose educators to urban agriculture can strengthen agricultural literacy and encourage the inclusion of diverse agricultural perspectives in school-based agricultural education.

A professional development exercise designed for agricultural educators in the Dallas–Fort Worth region was conducted by East TX A&M University to showcase urban agricultural initiatives through experiential learning. Participants visited two urban farms, engaged in discussions and reflected on the interconnectedness of agriculture, food access, environmental stewardship, community development, and public transit access.

Public transportation is rarely included in conversations about agriculture; however, it plays a significant role in shaping access to food, employment, and community resources in urban environments. This tour was developed with the vision of utilizing Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) to visit urban farms.

Steps/Phases

Planning for this professional development experience began well before the event. Restorative Farms and Big Tex Urban Farms were contacted to coordinate farm visits and help facilitate the tour. A travel route was developed, and a schedule was coordinated around the availability of the nonprofits and the frequency of DART trains. While weather conditions prevented DART travel, future workshops will incorporate public transit to provide educators with firsthand experience navigating a mass transit system utilized by 220,000 riders daily (DART, 2026).

After the tour participants ate lunch together at a local restaurant, providing additional time for networking and professional discussion. Conversations focused on observations from the tour and ways urban agriculture can be integrated into classroom instruction and student learning experiences. Each participant completed a brief reflection sheet describing key takeaways, potential classroom applications, and recommendations for future professional development.

Results to Date and Implications

Eight agricultural educators, two graduate assistants, and two professors registered for this professional development activity. Eight participants ultimately attended, as four agricultural educators were unable to attend due to unforeseen family obligations. Although attendance was lower than expected, participants remained actively engaged throughout the experience and contributed to discussions at each location. The smaller group size also allowed for deeper engagement with farm-specific questions and observations.

Participants discussed the broader role of urban agriculture in addressing food insecurity and supporting community revitalization in urban areas. Urban farms are often located in or near historically underserved neighborhoods that are food deserts. These farms demonstrate how localized food production and education initiatives can increase access to fresh food while also providing spaces for community engagement, education, and workforce development. Urban agriculture functions not only as a food production strategy but also as a tool for strengthening communities (Ilieva et al., 2022).

Future Plans

Future professional development programs will incorporate public transportation as originally intended. In addition to visiting urban farms, future tours may include riding the DART to a grocery store, purchasing groceries, and returning by train to help participants better understand how transportation infrastructure influences food access within urban communities. Additionally, workshops will continue to promote agricultural literacy and strengthen educators' understanding of urban agriculture and food access. This professional development was funded through a grant. After the grant period ends, workshops will require a cost-recovery registration fee.

Costs and Resources

Expenses included transportation and participant meals. DART passes were pre-purchased. Due to weather conditions, the group traveled together in a passenger van.

Costs included:

- Public transportation day passes: (12 X $6) $72
- Passenger van and fuel: $100
- Participant lunch: (8 X $15) $120
- Estimated Total Cost: $292

References

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