

# Farm to School Spotlight

*Colonial School District & Historic Penn Farm  
New Castle, DE*



The Delaware Farm to School Success Stories were created by the Delaware Farm to School Committee to highlight the wide range of activities occurring throughout the state in K-12 schools. We hope that through the stories, you will be able to learn, adapt and apply some of the information into your own Farm to School Program.

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## Background

Historic Penn Farm, a 112-acre farm with a legacy stretching back over 300 years, is located adjacent to William Penn High School in Delaware's Colonial School District. In 2012, the district began leasing a portion of the farm, now expanded to seven acres, as part of a hands-on agriculture program for high school students. Originally launched with support from two USDA Farm to School Implementation Grants (2014 and 2018), the program continues to



thrive today with sustainable support through the district's Nutrition Services department, which now funds the farm manager position.

Students enrolled in the agriculture pathway play an active role in every stage of production—from crop planning and greenhouse propagation to field planting and harvesting. Harvests are integrated directly into school meals with Nutrition Services staff processing farm-grown produce to ensure students have access to fresh, local ingredients throughout the year. Many products are included in a 14-week Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program for community members over the summer as well.

## How Colonial Brings Farm to School to Life

- **Local Food in Cafeterias:** Produce grown at Penn Farm and other local farms is featured prominently in school meals across the district, transforming school lunch into a farm-fresh experience for students.
- **Investing in People:** A dedicated farm manager, funded by Nutrition Services, coordinates crop planning, seed orders, and daily operations in alignment with school meal needs.
- **Summer Processing for Year-Round Use:** Nutrition staff process and freeze surplus summer harvests to extend availability into the school year; over two tons of produce have been preserved in recent summers.
- **Hands-On Learning:** Students enrolled in the high school agriculture pathway manage everything from seeding to harvesting. Younger students also get a taste of the farm through field trips and school gardens, supported by nonprofit partner Healthy Foods for Healthy Kids.

## Processing of Summer Harvests



To keep the bounty of Penn Farm available throughout the school year, Colonial has developed a streamlined processing system using tools already in school kitchens. Standard operating procedures that have been developed through years of trial and error ensure quality and consistency.

When a harvest is received, products are cleaned, chopped, and blanched. The product is then placed in an ice bath, laid out in a single layer on baking sheets, placed in a blast freezer, and vacuum sealed.

With this process, Colonial's Nutrition Department has been able to process approximately two tons of produce to be used during the school year.

*"The sequence of events for processing is vital. In the past, skipping blanching and proper freezing left us with mushy, unappealing vegetables. Now, we've got it down to a science."*

**-Jenna Morris, Nutrition Specialist**

## Menu Planning and Recipe Development

Planning begins months in advance. The nutrition team and farm manager meet twice a year, once in winter to align crop choices with menu needs before seed orders are placed, and again in summer to assess fall harvests. This coordination helps ensure menu consistency, minimizes food waste and informs the Farm Manager in ordering seeds and planning the planting schedule accordingly. Local items are penciled into the menus at least 6-months in advance based on meetings with the Farm Manager.

One highlight: as part of its [Passport to Global Flavors](#) series, a monthly event that highlights cuisines from around the world, Colonial featured [roasted okra](#), grown at Penn Farm, in a traditional East African dish.



## Keys To Success



- **Strong Leadership:** The program benefits from consistent backing by the district's Child Nutrition Director.
- **Menu Alignment:** Strategic crop planning ensures that what grows is what's served.
- **Community Engagement:** Transparent communication builds excitement among staff, families, and students.

## Lessons Learned

- **Start with What You Can Handle:** Growing too fast created bottlenecks, but also highlighted gaps in equipment and systems, many of which were resolved through grant funding.
- **Expect the Unexpected:** Weather delays and labor shortages can disrupt the best-laid plans. Colonial built contingency plans into its process.
- **Iterate and Improve:** Mistakes in early processing led to better systems. Today, standard operating procedures help preserve both produce quality and program sustainability.

**By planting seeds of knowledge and nourishing students with food they helped grow, the Colonial School District is cultivating not just healthier meals, but a community focused on sustainability and stewardship.**

For more information about the Delaware Farm to School Program, contact: Delaware Farm to School Coordinator [Scott Schuster](#) RD, LDN, SNS; or visit [Delaware's Farm to School Website](#).