

Annual Impact Report 2023



Dear friends and supporters,

It was Spring of 2020 when Midwest Food Connection left the actual classroom and moved into virtual learning. This past 2022-23 school year finally marked our full return.

Children at 35 schools in 7 school districts experienced our work, all of it in person. Students learned how to grow a cucumber, the delight of mixing their own fresh garden salad, the smell of cooking risotto, and the taste of a fresh tamarind. As we returned week after week, children cheered and were filled with anticipation—yet quickly became attentive, knowing that enjoyable and important learning was ahead.

Highlights of the year include our first farm trips since 2019, our Community Food Educator model coming to Bethune Arts Elementary in North Minneapolis, and collaborations with urban farms



A garden plan for cucumber seedlings

in St. Paul. We also began our work to strengthen the cultural relevancy of our curriculum with the help of two special grants—one to study the history of Hmong food in Minnesota, a second to improve our teaching of Native food traditions.

We remain a small organization with a broad reach—5,065 students and their families benefitted from our teaching this year.

We come out of the Covid pandemic strong because of our partners, our donors, and our friends. Special thanks go to the co-ops, grant makers, and individual donors who recognize the life-changing power of active and inspiring experiences with great food!

The expressions of the children in this report say it all.

With gratitude,

Uli Koester
Executive Director

Paul Eaves
Board President

“We loved everything! The students were completely engaged, instruction was exceptional, can’t say enough good things about your programs!!”

—Teacher, Groveland Park School, St. Paul



Food adventures indoors and out

"I have seeds!"

As I sat in the school hallway awaiting a first grade class to return from lunch for their food education class, I heard the patter of small feet quicken near me and a booming, proud voice announce, "Ms. Missy, Ms. Missy, I have seeds!"

My young, hallway friend slowly opened his palm and revealed a small wadded-up piece of paper napkin, which he held like the most valuable of treasures. Without speaking, the treasure was slowly unwrapped and from the wad, eight tiny bell pepper seeds tumbled into his hand. Smiling, our eyes locked, as if we shared the best of unspoken secrets: the bell pepper seeds had been saved from slices served at lunch. Aha! I now understood: "I have seeds."

Later I entered the classroom and we gathered to sit in our conversation circle, excitement was in



Making discoveries in the soil

the air about the growing plants (from our seeds planted last week). Our cucumber seedlings had sprouted, each growing new leaves and bending toward the light. As this day's lesson unfolded, students dug deeper as they role-played the patterns of the sun, designed their own imaginative gardens in their journals, and tasted a quick cucumber pickle dish we made together in class.

As I packed up at the end of the lesson, little hands were still raised, and a barrage of questions chased me to the door. "How tall will our plants grow?" "How big will the cucumbers get?" "What will we do next week?" As I turned to look back, gazing over this ever-growing sea of curiosity, I waved my goodbyes until next week and thought to myself: "I have seeds!"

—Missy McDonald, Program Educator

"The pacing was great and kept them engaged. The hands-on activities, the tasting, and great photos was awesome."

—Teacher, Bethune Arts, Minneapolis



From farm to table

What's that taste?



**Sweet and sour is easy. Bitter is harder.
Umami a mystery.**

These are the four tastes our students study in Midwest Food Connection's winter unit "A Time for Tasting." Each of the four lessons in the unit centers on one of the tastes. It is a chance to build awareness of what exactly our taste buds are signaling to our brain.

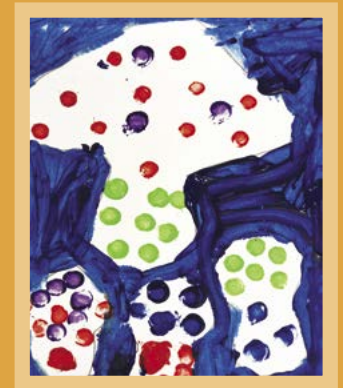
Take, for example, chocolate for the taste bitter. In this lesson, children try broccoli, orange zest and the vegetable bitter melon, and rank them on their personal "less bitter—more bitter" continuum chart. Then comes chocolate with 65% cocoa bean. Excitement buzzes through the room.

Finally, we wrap up the lesson with an optional "challenge chocolate" of 85%. Almost every student accepts enthusiastically. Bitter has made its mark.



A week later it is umami's turn to shine. You can bet every child is ready for their next adventure in taste. Mushrooms are the heroes of the hour—their astounding colors, their shapes, their gills, and of course their umami flavor.

With the eye-popping mushroom paintings by Yayoi Kasuma for inspiration, students paint their own creations in the dot design style she made famous. The exuberant response to this joy in color continues as the children taste a triple umami risotto—parmesan cheese, button mushrooms, and vegetable stock-cooked to a delicious blend right in the classroom.



Students always remember us a year later, what we taught and assigned and explained. But what they recall the most is what they ate. Taste and smell, the longest of memories.

—Uli Koester, Executive Director and Teacher

“Plenty of hands-on activities made the lessons come alive.”

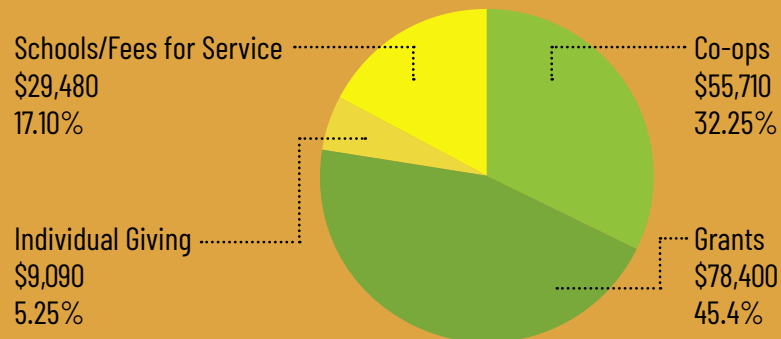
—Teacher, Bruce Vento School, St. Paul

Financials

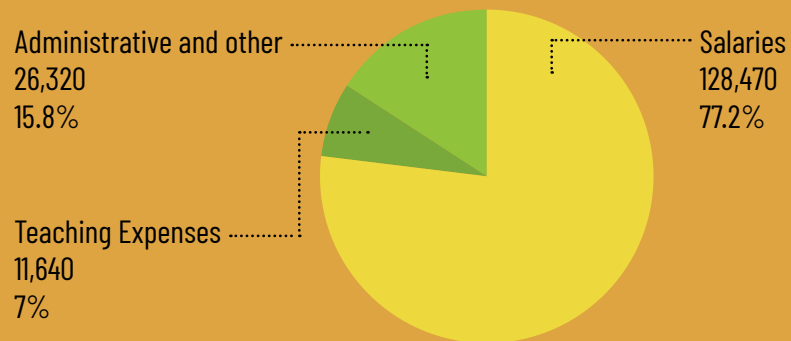
Revenue and Expenses 2023

(fiscal year ending 6/30/23)

Revenue \$172,680



Expenses \$166,430



Major Direct Financial Contributions

\$30,000–\$35,000

Seward Community Co-op

F.R. Bigelow Foundation

\$10,000–\$20,000

Valley Natural Foods

\$5,000–\$10,000

Minnesota Historical Society*

First Universalist Foundation

Eastside Food Co-op

*Made possible by the people of Minnesota through a grant funded by an appropriation to the Minnesota Historical Society from the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.

Metrics

*“Cultural cooking right in front of students—
great pacing, timing, food testing.”*

—Teacher, Expo School, St. Paul

35

PARTNERING SCHOOLS



7

SCHOOL DISTRICTS



5,065

STUDENTS TAUGHT



87

LESSONS IN THE GARDEN



617

LESSONS TAUGHT



Human treasures

STAFF

Hailey Dickinson, Communications Lead

Uli Koester, Executive Director

Bonnie Lohman, Educator and Curriculum Lead

Missy McDonald, Program Educator

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**We're constantly looking to
expand our work. If you're
interested in supporting this
mission, we'd love to connect.**