The Situation

Continued school closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have presented a challenge for educators who provide hands-on, ‘aina-based education for youth in Hawai‘i. In many places, school gardens, cafeterias, and farms are not accessible to teachers and/or students, therefore, there is a need for farm-to-school opportunities appropriate for distance and hybrid learning models.

Informal and formal needs assessments are integral to seeking community input for developing community-relevant, farm-to-school programming that is responsive to the current pandemic climate and builds a model to meet future needs.

Extension’s Response

To meet the need for distance learning, new professional development opportunities, curriculum, and digital content have been created.

• A mushroom cultivation curriculum, as an indoor solution for distance learning, was piloted with educators during summer 2020.

• To bring farm experiences to children in the absence of field trips, interactive virtual-reality farm field trips are being developed in partnership with four community farms.

• New online resources to promote consumption of locally grown foods have been developed and posted on the CTAHR Grow Eat Think (GET) Local website and social media.

• School Garden talk story connects 116 Hawai‘i school garden teachers with representation from every island to assess and meet teacher needs.

• The Garden To Cafeteria (GTC) program teaches students how to grow and harvest food safely to be used in the school cafeteria’s salad bars and in scratch-cooking recipes.

Impacts/Outcomes

Growers Place-based educational programs are expected to increase the currently low levels of student engagement in distance learning, thereby increasing youth knowledge about agriculture, food systems, and nutrition while fostering a sense of connection to local farms.

Forty teachers participated in a Ready to Fruit: Mushrooms in the Classroom program, 60% of whom reported they are likely to integrate mushrooms into their program this year, where 100 students statewide are expected to cultivate mushrooms utilizing the curriculum in the second quarter with the guidance of their teacher.

In the long-term, the program is expected to increase the students’ willingness to consume mushrooms, which could support a stronger mushroom industry as well as add to a nutritious diet for youth in the future.
CTAHR F2S Extension Agents were guest speakers at GTC talk story sessions, helping garden teachers gain better understanding on delivering distance taught garden lessons that focus on place and reinforce relevancy to their site. F2S Extension Agents coordinated training on food safety protocols for Moloka‘i school garden teachers and teachers gained a better understanding of growing, harvesting, delivering, and foodservice-handling best practices.

Moloka‘i school garden teachers who completed the food safety training are now able to provide fresh produce from the school gardens to the school kitchen. It is expected that school food service departments will purchase school garden produce. Funds would then go back into the school garden program, thereby covering the costs of maintaining gardens and increasing school garden sustainability.

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NIFA Critical Issue:
Youth/Family/Community Development and Health

Pre-COVID Days: A 2019 gathering of Marshall and his students in the program’s original outdoor setting.