

School-Based Model

A relatively new and innovative model of grocery store operation is one where the grocery store is run through the local school system. While schools throughout the U.S. have a history of running various small businesses, these enterprises have traditionally been incubated and run through a school club or a particular classroom on school grounds. There are at least a very few instances where local schools are now running grocery stores as standalone businesses at off-site locations.

Defining Characteristics

There are several defining characteristics of this form of rural grocery operation. First, it is highly collaborative. Second, this form of grocery operation is grounded in the belief that food is a public good and that public institutions (school boards, school administrations, and teachers) should invest in this form of commerce. It also serves business interests by creating jobs and paying taxes. Third, this model of grocery store operation functions as an educational laboratory where the store becomes a powerful learning center for a variety of students. Through hands-on experience, students are exposed to a variety of subjects and are able to develop new skills. Finally, this form of grocery operation may function in a particular way to sustain local community. The idea is that by working at the grocery store and obtaining a better understanding of operating a small business in a rural community, students come to understand and more fully appreciate life in that community.

Challenges

- **Limited scope.** Historically, school-based grocery stores are very small-scale and have a very narrow assortment of product offerings.
- **Limited hours of operation.** The store is usually only open when school is actually in session and sometimes only when the club or class meets.
- **The store may be singularly a school enterprise.** This structure can ultimately lead to a lack of connections to external partners. Partnerships are key to building capacity and longevity.
- **Transactions must take place on school grounds.** For some community members, school policies can create barriers to entry on school grounds.

Benefits

- **Better student-teacher relationships.** When teachers interact with students beyond the traditional classroom setting, mentoring relationships can be developed.
- **Teaching students life skills.** Leadership and responsibility are a few skills developed from real-life experiences thus preparing students for future careers.
- **Engaging disadvantaged populations.** Schools are often involved in charitable activities. As public institutions, schools can act as community outreach centers offering food access services.
- **Creating community bonds.** Communities are supportive of school activities. Community members are able to witness the positive outcomes as youth have the opportunity to interact with them.

Case Study: Leeton, Missouri

The Challenge

Leeton, Missouri is a town of just over 600 people. Located 75 miles east of Kansas City, Leeton had been without a grocery store for nearly ten years. The only access to food in the community was a Casey's General Store and the next nearest grocery store was more than 15 miles away in either Warrensburg or Clinton. A school-based enterprise was an option for consideration, but there are very few instances where local schools run grocery stores as standalone businesses at off-site locations.

Key Partnerships

The key to addressing the loss of the local grocery store in Leeton was developing key partnerships.

Local Community Leaders, Financial Institutions, and School Administration: The inspiration for the local public schools running a grocery store came about in 2007 when a local community leader approached the superintendent, Susan Crooks. The community leader also convinced the local Sunflower Bank to lease an unused bank building to the school to serve as the downtown grocery storefront, although the district would be responsible for its maintenance. Sold on the idea, Crooks then approached two high school teachers and, ultimately, the school board with the plan. The school board approved the plan and committed \$20,000 to renovate the bank building and initially stock the facility with groceries.

School Teachers: Marijayne Manley, the Leeton High School entrepreneurship and marketing teacher, and Bonnie Seymour, another Leeton High School teacher in agriculture business, agreed to help oversee the grocery store. Amber Wilson, an elementary school teacher, also came on board to help. Both Manley and Seymour run the store as a part of their curricula.

Students: The Bulldog Express is operated by 11 program students, seven of which are on payroll. The students are responsible for customer service, maintenance, stocking, ordering, merchandising, and bookkeeping. The students are able to run the store during school hours. The store is open Monday through Friday from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. and from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturday. Those students working throughout the school day earn class credit and evening student workers are paid minimum wage.

Local Farmers: The partnership between the Bulldog Express and the farmers market provides community members with additional access to healthy foods. The partnership is set up two ways: Farmers bring in produce and the store sells it with a ten percent markup. Farmers are then paid once a month. Oftentimes, farmers donate their produce as well.

The Result

With a sign over the door reading “Out of books...into life”, Leeton’s Bulldog Express opened in January 2009 as school-based enterprise bringing groceries to the community. Unlike other student-run stores, the Bulldog Express is an off-campus facility rather than a classroom or organization-affiliated store. In March 2011, the grocery store both physically expanded and expanded its food offerings to include a deli, a coffee shop, and now also offers home deliveries to citizens within Leeton. The Bulldog Express is a joint education, economic, food access venture that is collaborative, initiated and supported by local citizen leaders, and run by the Leeton public school district.

The Bulldog Express serves as a community educational laboratory for the Leeton students. The two high school teachers have developed curricula in ag business and entrepreneurship for their high school students. Other public school classrooms bring their students to the grocery store to learn about everything from math to marketing to management to nutrition. The grocery store provides students with the opportunity to receive civic engagement credit as well as pay for the work they do at the store. The grocery store also gives the students real-life work experience and is open year-round with the exception of school holidays. Although the grocery store offers a limited inventory, it

does successfully provide the community with a variety of healthful food choices including dairy, meat, and fresh vegetables.

Additional School-Based Enterprises

Circle C Market in Cody, Nebraska

Tiger Mart in Rothsay, Minnesota

References

Personal communications with David Procter.

Williams, C. and Stevens, B. (2015). Bulldog Express of Leeton, MO. *A.Q. Miller School of Journalism and Mass Communications*. Retrieved from <http://jmc.k-state.edu/student-work/ruralgrocery/leeton.html>