Concerned about the high incidence of obesity and chronic disease in the population, community partners in Buffalo and Pepin Counties want to educate children and families about nutrition and healthy food choices. Implementing a school garden will focus attention on nutritional needs at a grass roots level by involving children in healthy food choices all the way from gardening and meal preparation to food harvesting and preservation. Involving community members and teachers as partners and educators will provide an effective channel for health promotion efforts in this rural area.

The taskforce will design a school garden project in two communities, seeking support and input from the school systems, teachers, parents and the community. A formal partnership with each school will be developed, defining roles and responsibilities. Relationships will be established with community partners, families, gardeners, service organizations, and homemaker groups. Curriculum coordination models will be evaluated. Food service personnel will identify menu changes to support the nutritional goals of introducing more fruits and vegetables while reducing overall fat content in the school lunch program. Evaluation methods will be developed to measure the school gardens’ impact on healthy eating habits and nutrition.

The taskforce consists of leaders from churches, community organizations and local schools who have come together because of their concern for the children in our communities. Both Public Health departments are respected and active in the community and work closely with the schools and the community. The administration and food service directors have pledged their commitment to the school garden project in order to improve the nutritional standards of the school lunch program. The University of Wisconsin Extension program works extensively with the farming community and provides expertise in the areas of community development, agriculture and family nutrition. The faith community is invested in mental and social wellness to draw family and communities together. Our MCW partner’s expertise and interest in children’s health issues and community health improvement processes gives us a solid background to evaluate and design a project that could be used as a state model for setting up a school garden project.

Establishing outcome indicators based on SMART objectives will help assess improvement in the project goal areas. These objectives will include the number of participating students and families, garden project correlation to class work, student improvement in such areas as nutrition knowledge, attendance, exercise, teamwork, organizational and social skills, and community spirit.

Our community is committed to investing themselves and their resources in the school garden project. Surveys will be used to locate local assets and determine availability of in-kind donations and monetary donations. The school systems will be more aware of their role in educating children regarding health and nutrition issues, dedicating more of their budget to this area. Fiscal sponsors will be identified to provide support on a regular basis. Fundraisers and activities will promote the program with plant sales, seed exchanges, nutritional meal planning and cooking demonstrations. Sustainable gardening practices will be incorporated, using composting and other sustainable measures. The food service program will appreciate savings through the use of fresh produce and healthier eating habits will result in a reduction in waste products.

The successes of the program and the feasibility of replicating the project in other Wisconsin communities will be shared through such resources such as the Health Alert Network summary of the obstacles encountered and possible solutions will be generated. The Departments of Health and Human Services will present the program at state conferences. The school system will feature the garden project at regional and state conferences. Articles will be published in journals and newspapers and public media will be invited to film the project for public television broadcast.