

# FOOD CO-OPS & HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS PROJECT

## Cooperative Fund of New England & Neighboring Food Co-op Association

### The Putney Food Co-op: Marketing, Education, & Outreach A Small Co-op Makes a Big Difference in Their Community

The Putney Food Co-op, in Putney, Vermont, was founded in 1941 when wartime fuel shortages limited access to some grocery items. Although it is smaller than many of the other area food co-ops, this Co-op has continued to provide Putney, the surrounding area, and seasonal tourists with a variety of produce and grocery items. Today, with 3,000 sq. feet of retail space, the Co-op sells four million dollars of goods annually, and has 1,015 members in a town of 2,634 people. As a community-minded organization in a tight knit town, the Co-op recently decided to use much of its marketing budget to promote the Co-op while providing services to local youth. The Co-op's Marketing, Outreach, & Education Coordinator teaches three weekly classes to youth, focused on cooking local food. The Co-op also provides food at discount prices for the Healthy Snack Program at local schools.

#### The Programs

The Co-op started these healthy food programs in 2011, partnering with the Putney Central School, Putney Family Services, and the Bellows Falls Boys & Girls Club. Each of these organizations runs youth enrichment classes and sought fun activities for young people. The Putney Central School hosts two of the Co-op's programs: Vermont's Junior Iron Chef competition and an after school program with Putney Family Services. The state-wide Iron Chef competition gives students five local ingredients and asks them to develop meals that could be easily made in large quantities at their schools.

Kristina Israel, the Co-op's Marketing, Outreach, & Education Coordinator, spends an hour and a half per week at each of the programs teaching 3-10 young people about food, nutrition, and cooking. Kristina sees this as an opportunity to expose students to new healthy foods and to food co-ops. Many of these students' families drive miles to conventional stores for items they could purchase at the Co-op for a similar price. Students of all ages enjoy these classes; younger kids love getting messy making pasta and baked goods while older students gain confidence cooking on the stove top. The atmosphere of the classes, especially the Jr. Iron Chef Competition, sparks students' curiosity about healthy foods. As one participant mentioned, "My favorite thing about doing Jr. Iron Chef was when we were at the competition, just the anticipation of waiting to see if all our hard work had paid off. And even though we didn't win, I had tons of fun learning how to make something new with my friends." Often, students take home leftovers to their family, and every student takes home a recipe card for meals they made that day. These cards not only



PUTNEY FOOD CO-OP Putney, VT

#### Putney Food Co-op

Putney, VT

**Established:** 1941

**Members:** 1,015

**Annual Sales:** \$4 Million

**Retail Space:** 3,000 sq. ft.

**Product Mix:** Mostly Natural & Organic Products



include the recipe ingredients, but what each item costs at the Co-op. With many of the ingredients coming from the bulk section, the dishes made in these classes fit most budgets.

In addition to these educational programs, the Co-op collaborates with the Putney Public School to provide items for their Healthy Snacks Program. These items are sold to the school at a 15% mark up, which is discounted but covers the cost to the Co-op. This offers the school a chance to provide items like nut butters, yogurt, and whole grain crackers to students at a cost the school can afford. This access to healthy snacks supports students' healthy eating habits at a young age.

### **The Cost to the Co-op**

Participating in the education programs costs the Putney Food Co-op staff time and money, yet these resources largely come from the Co-op's marketing budget and offer the Co-op great exposure in an alternative format. The Co-op provides \$25 worth of goods per class, plus Kristina's time, which--including preparation, travel, and class time--is around 10 hours per week. Robyn O'Brien, the Co-op's General Manager, says this marketing technique is, "about being relevant to the community and having a face in town beyond the retail space."

### **Challenges**

The greatest challenge in this program is measuring how it benefits stakeholders. Although it is easy to count the participants and calculate how much discounted food you are providing, it is much harder to measure how these programs make your co-op accessible and relevant to more people. Doing surveys with the students on their families' eating and shopping habits both before they begin taking classes and after they have been in class for some time is a good way to see how your classes are influencing them and if they have been shopping at the co-op.

### **Suggestion for Replication**

Finding collaborative partners that are in need of these types of services is essential. The collaboration with each of the Putney Food Co-op's partners has provided an opportunity for a mutually beneficial relationship where each organization can rely on its strengths and focus on the services it is familiar with. The schools and organizations involved provide the space and students, and the Co-op provides the produce and education. These relationships allow each stakeholder to meet their mission and leverage their organizations' resources for a common goal.

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