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Beanstock, a new curriculum series by the Nebraska Department of Education, celebrates locally grown, plant-based proteins

Beanstock is launching during National Nutrition Month in March to inspire students to learn more about healthy, Nebraska-grown food

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LINCOLN, Neb. — To promote Nebraska-grown, plant-based proteins in schools, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) is launching Beanstock — a campaign and curriculum series teaching students about one of Nebraska's healthiest, most important commodities.

Beanstock, which is officially launching in March to coincide with National Nutrition Month, includes free, flexible lessons available to middle and high school educators that explore the history, art, cooking, nutrition, agriculture, economics and history of dry beans and other specialty crops. A class of Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) majors at Wayne State College wrote the presentations, quizzes and activities, and an FCS teacher ensured the lessons matched NDE curriculum standards.

NDE then developed a fun, festival-like brand, inspired by the energy found at Woodstock and Junkstock, to unify the curriculum and promotional campaign to excite both teachers and students. Beanstock is part of NDE's Farm to School program, which enriches the connection communities have with fresh, healthy food and local food producers by changing food purchasing and education practices at schools and early care and education settings.

"Dry beans are delicious, affordable and packed with protein — and they also have a fascinating story to tell about Nebraska's history and economy," said Jessie Coffey, director of NDE's Whole Child Program. "Through these engaging, educational and beautifully designed lessons, we hope to inspire Nebraska students to learn more about Nebraska agriculture and healthy, locally grown food products."

Activities included in the lessons include a plant-based protein word search, a classroom-friendly chickpea parfait recipe, a TikTok challenge and dozens more. Beyond the classroom, students will have opportunities to enjoy dry bean recipes at lunch through school-focused recipes and compete in a statewide recipe competition.

Payje Rayback, one of the Wayne State College students who has since graduated, developed a lesson called "From Beans to Protein: A Mathematical Journey." She said participating in Beanstock helped her hone her lesson-writing skills and the tools needed to develop effective units. Rayback and her classmates researched bean production in Nebraska, which elements would be most beneficial to students and how the lessons could incorporate activities like art, music and reading in addition to food science.

Once the lessons were developed, experienced educators provided feedback. Rayback and her classmates also conducted a taste-test lab to try out different recipes, understand how different cooking techniques change the taste, texture and appearance of dry beans and which lessons young people may enjoy.

"I think it's very important for students to understand where their food comes from and what is native to them in their own state," said Rayback, who is now a first-year Family and Consumer Sciences teacher at Howells-Dodge Consolidated School District. "Teaching students about the produce and plant-based proteins grown in Nebraska, and how it can be incorporated into their everyday lives, creates a stronger connection that may motivate them to explore other local foods."

Dry beans are an important part of the local economy: Nebraska is one of the top producers of dry beans in the entire country, ranking as the No. 1 producer of Great Northern beans and No. 2 producer of Pinto beans. Much of the state's dry bean production occurs in western Nebraska, where the climate is arid and warm days and cool nights provide excellent growing conditions for dry edible beans. In 2023, Nebraska's dry edible beans production resulted in $82.4 million from 92,000 acres harvested, according to USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Dry beans are mature seeds which are allowed to dry on the vine and shelled after they reach maturity. They must be rehydrated by soaking prior to being cooked and consumed.

"From research to production to promotion, dry beans in Nebraska are rooted in the foundation of our local economy," said Lynn Reuter, executive director of the Nebraska Dry Bean Commission. "We're thrilled to support the Nebraska Department of Education's Beanstock campaign to help engage and inspire the next generation's interest in this crucial field."

Educators in Nebraska can now download the first two Beanstock units. The remaining seven units will be released monthly through summer 2025.

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About the Nebraska Farm to School program:
The Nebraska Department of Education's Nebraska Farm to School program enriches the connection communities have with fresh, healthy food and local food producers by changing food purchasing and education practices at schools and early care and education settings. There are three core elements of Farm to School: Procurement, Education, and School Gardens. Farm to School works to provide resources to promote local Nebraska grown and raised products in the classroom, cafeteria and community. Learn more at education.ne.gov/ns/farm-to-school.