

## **Developing communities, providing opportunities**

*Fort Valley State Cooperative Extension receives grant to assist Baldwin County Schools and farmers*

*By Russell Boone Jr.*

Fort Valley State University's Office of Community Development and Outreach, a part of FVSU's Cooperative Extension Program, recently received a \$224,914 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture's (NIFA) Food and Agriculture Service Learning Program Grant.

From October 7, 2020 until August 31, 2022, the grant (CFDA 10.522) will fund a first-time collaboration between FVSU's Cooperative Extension Program and the Baldwin County School District (BCSD).

This will allow the Baldwin Grows Farm to School Community Action Committee, a collaborative group fostering innovative strategies, to strengthen their existing Farm to School (F2S) programming within the school district.

Joy Moten-Thomas, assistant Extension administrator for community development and outreach, explained the selection of Baldwin County. "I was excited to learn that we were one of five awardees in the country.

In the area of community and economic development, we had already begun exploring opportunities in the Baldwin County area with the possibility of adding Extension staff in the near future to meet the needs of persistent poverty farmers and limited resource clientele in this area of the State," Moten-Thomas said.

Expansion of the BCSD's F2S programming provides multiple benefits for students including nutrition, health, social and emotional skills, academic achievement and school engagement. In addition, this funding can help increase and sustain current F2S efforts through the implementation of the following goals.

Moten- Thomas said this includes increasing capacity for food, garden and nutrition education within the cafeterias and in the classroom. Developing a model program that complements and builds on the efforts of BCSD's award winning F2S program.

Promoting activities that advance the nutritional health of children and nutrition education in elementary and secondary schools. Lastly, fostering higher levels of community engagement and supporting the expansion of national service and volunteer opportunities.

Furthermore, funds will allow for the purchase of a greenhouse and small garden equipment to educate students about farming practices such as row gardening, hydroponic and aquaponic gardening.

Funds will subsidize the hiring of FoodCorps service members along with supporting professional learning opportunities for teachers and local farmers.

In addition, it will afford the Baldwin Grows Food Agriculture Service Learning Program (FASLP) to further contribute to the community's health and sustainability by increasing child access to healthy and nutritious food options and improving farmer profitability by providing them access to stable, local markets. The project's goals and objectives outlined in this proposal align directly with FASLP project goals.

The FVSU assistant Extension administrator said the purpose of the collaboration is to provide increased awareness about the benefits of gardening and adding fresh foods to one's diet. It also provides funding for agricultural education programs in their primary and secondary schools for teachers.

Moreover, the collaborative provides funding opportunities for small and limited-resource farmers in Baldwin County to become Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) certified. Lastly, it allows them to become vendors for the Office of School Nutrition to provide fresh produce to support the school systems' breakfast and lunch programs.

"This opportunity yields us a new opportunity to leverage our land-grant status to benefit some of the challenges experienced by the rural communities we serve. Baldwin County School District's Office operates within a rural persistent poverty county where at least 20 percent or more of their clientele is categorized as being limited resourced," Moten-Thomas said.

In addition to being classified as a limited resource area, the district serves households that encounter challenges, such as difficulty in achieving food security, housing stability, financial stability, and other socioeconomic challenges. "We hope that this partnership will yield us the outcomes we desire," Moten-Thomas said.

For more information about the programs in Baldwin County, contact Moten-Thomas at (478) 825-6954 ([thomasb@fvsu.edu](mailto:thomasb@fvsu.edu)). FVSU Cooperative Extension is one of five awardees in the country to receive this grant. The USDA and NIFA made awards totaling \$960,000.

