



Food Guide

Farm to School: Serving Local Food in the Cafeteria

School cafeterias and college dining halls serve meals to millions of students every day, and in most cases little of the food served comes from local farms. Building farm-to-school connections, in which locally produced and processed foods are incorporated into school meals, is one way to build a local food system that improves the nutritional quality of school meals and strengthens the local agricultural economy through direct and brokered food purchases.

Benefits of Farm to School

Partnerships among food service directors, farmers, suppliers, agriculture and nutrition extension educators, policy-makers, state agencies, and food and farming organizations link schools and farms to help children develop healthy eating habits while enhancing the viability of small and mid-sized farms. Children, farmers, and communities benefit from improved access to fresh, nutritious, locally grown foods.

During the past decade, there has been growing national concern over the nutritional quality of children's diets. In 1993, the USDA launched the School Meals Initiative to improve the nutritional content of the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs. Recent statistics on the prevalence of childhood and adolescent overweight, increased incidence of diabetes, and high blood pressure have prompted health professionals to develop strategies to improve the quality of children's diets. One likely way to improve the nutritional quality of school meals is to offer more

fresh fruits and vegetables as well as low-fat dairy and meat options.

At the same time, small and mid-sized farms across the United States are having difficulty remaining profitable. According to the USDA Census of Agriculture,¹ over 5 million acres were lost from agriculture in the Northeast between 1978 and 1997, representing over one-sixth of all farmland. The number of farms in the region declined by over 2,600 (16 percent) in the same period. The 1997 Census of Agriculture showed that the number of farms increased slightly between 1992 and 1997, suggesting that these downward trends may be coming to an end. One way to increase farm revenues is through direct or brokered sales to local institutions including schools. For more information on agricultural trends in the Northeast, see our fact sheets *Agriculture in the Northeast Region: Challenges and Innovations* and *Healthy Eating for a Healthy Economy: Why Regional and Seasonal Eating Is Important*.

Common Issues and Strategies

While most people will agree that a farm-to-school connection is a good idea, establishing these linkages isn't always easy. It requires significant adjustments on the part of farmers, distributors, and cafeteria managers. The Cornell Farm to School Program (www.cce.cornell.edu/farmentoschool/) offers useful tips for dealing with some of the following common issues.

Many of the foods produced in the Northeast region are available only at specific times, and much of the harvest season does not overlap with the school year.

The good news is that Northeast farms produce a wide variety of foods, and food service directors have many opportunities to take advantage of delicious seasonal products.

Resources such as the Northeast Regional Food Guide, state departments of agriculture, and local extension offices can help food service directors learn about the seasonal availability of regional products.

Food service directors can adjust menus and develop recipes to take greater advantage of seasonal products. They can also encourage their produce suppliers to make regional products available in season.

Interested farms and schools may have difficulty locating one another.

Food service directors and food distributors can locate farmers through county-based extension offices, state departments of agriculture, and farm organizations such as the Farm Bureau. For example, the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets established the Pride of New York Program (www.prideofny.com) to promote New

York products. You can use the department's Product Search for Institutional Purchases (www.prideofny.com/PONYSearch.asp) to find products and farmers who sell them. Farmers interested in selling to schools can contact their state education department for information on school districts and the number of meals served in each institution.

Farmers can learn about what foods schools need by investigating school web sites and talking directly with food service directors.

S Schools rely on suppliers who provide reasonably priced high-quality products, an easy way to order, and dependable delivery. Most small farmers do not have systems in place to deliver small quantities of food to many different locations.

It may be most practical for farmers to work together through regular distributors, farmers' markets, or cooperatives to sell and deliver food to schools.

While the need for better food distribution is a barrier to making farm-to-school connections, it is also an opportunity for developing networks among farmers and suppliers interested in supporting both regional agriculture and the health of children and young adults.

Farmer cooperatives, in which groups of farmers collaborate to enhance supply, have the potential to meet the food needs of schools, which often require larger volumes than a single farmer can deliver. Cooperatives can also organize one delivery for several producers, thus decreasing the distribution burden on any one farmer.

S Schools need many products in slightly processed forms (washed, peeled, chopped, and/or shredded) that individual farms cannot usually supply.

Schools tend to use products that already have been partially processed or "value-added." This trend is driven in part by the need

to keep labor costs low. Farmers are sometimes able to develop ways to add value to the products they grow. For example, some farmers have acquired equipment for washing, peeling, trimming, or cutting vegetables and fruits or have contracted with local businesses for this service. Schools can also occasionally handle whole products, doing all the necessary preparation in-house. It is important for farmers, processors, and distributors to meet with food service directors so that all parties can better understand the needs and possibilities within the system.

As regional food processing increases, more products will be available in the form that schools commonly use.

S Public schools are often required to obtain competitive bids on products before purchasing them.

There may be special provisions for purchasing local products. Contact your state director of child nutrition programs for information about any procurement provisions in the normal bidding procedures. The child nutrition coordinator for the New York State Education Department recommends that New York State public schools wanting to purchase directly from a local farmer take the following steps:

1. Place a notice in the local paper or school newsletter that states the intent to purchase locally and directly from farmers producing on land taxed by the local district without competitive bidding;
2. Find out the wholesale price in effect on the date of purchase, because the price paid to the farmer cannot exceed the wholesale price; and
3. When the total purchase price of the product exceeds \$1,000, divide the purchase among all eligible producers who respond to the notice with similar products of equivalent quality.

Organizing a Farm-to-School Project in Your Community

Much needs to be done to make successful farm-to-school connections. You can get things started by organizing a meeting of interested persons such as

- food service directors and staff
- school superintendents, principals, and teachers
- farmers and farm organizations
- suppliers and distributors
- parents and children
- community members
- student councils, clubs, and organizations

The National Farm to School Program (see "Farm to School Resources" below) offers a sample agenda to help you organize a successful first meeting. Other guidebooks and reports can give you specific advice on how to tackle the many issues raised by farm-to-school projects.

Small Things You Can Do Right Now

You can begin building farm-school partnerships by taking one or more of the following small steps.

- Celebrate the harvest in school. One example of a statewide celebration is New York Harvest for New York Kids Week, which takes place every fall. During this yearly event, schools focus on farms and foods of New York with educational programming, serve New York State foods in their cafeterias, invite farmers to visit, and plan other inventive activities. Eleven food service directors in two counties created a New York lunch menu that they served during New York Harvest for New York Kids Week in October 2002.
- Serve seasonally available New York foods at school meetings or banquets. Regional crops that store well, such as apples, onions, potatoes, and other roots and tubers, are fairly easy to find year round. In the fall, cool-weather crops such as broccoli, carrots, kale, spinach, apples, and pears can be featured. A wide range of foods such as milk, cheese, yogurt, meats, poultry, fish, breads,

and cereals are also produced in New York and are less affected by seasonal availability.

- Food service directors can tell produce suppliers that they prefer products from the region. They can also highlight the regional and seasonal foods that do appear on school menus.
- Arrange for students to visit a local farm or farmers' market or invite a farmer to visit the school and talk with students.
- Plant a school garden. In addition to providing students with a taste of home-grown food, school gardens enable innumerable hands-on lessons in ecology, plant biology, and cooperation.

Farm to School Resources

Bringing Local Food to Local People: A Resource Guide for Farm-to-School and Farm-to-Institution Programs. Fayetteville, Ark.: National Sustainable Agricultural Information Service (ATTRA). This resource includes profiles of programs, potential funding sources, and an annotated bibliography. For a free electronic copy, go to <http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/farmtoschool.pdf>.

Buy Local Food and Farm Toolkit: A Guide for Student Organizers, Oxfam America's Change Initiative program. This report describes how to incorporate local food into college dining operations. For a free electronic copy, go to www.oxfamamerica.org/pdfs/food_farm_toolkit.pdf.

The Cornell Farm to School Program is dedicated to linking farms and schools in New York State. Visit the web site (www.cce.cornell.edu/farmtoschool) for tips and resources.

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The Crunch Lunch Manual: A Case Study of the Davis Joint Unified School District Farmers Market Salad Bar Pilot Program and a Fiscal Analysis Model, by Renata Brillinger, Jeri Ohmart, and Gail Feenstra. March 2003. Davis, Calif.: U.C. Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SAREP). This manual describes

how the Davis school district project initiated and supported a farmers' market salad bar for its first two years. To obtain a PDF copy, go to the SAREP web site (www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/cdpp/farmtoschool/). For more information or a hard copy, contact Gail Feenstra (gwfeenstra@ucdavis.edu, 530-752-8408) or Jeri Ohmart (jlhmart@ucdavis.edu, 530-752-5987).

The Edible Schoolyard (www.edible-schoolyard.org/homepage.html), in collaboration with Martin Luther King Junior Middle School, provides urban public school students with a one-acre organic garden and a kitchen classroom. Using food systems as a unifying concept, students learn how to grow, harvest, and prepare nutritious seasonal produce. Experiences in the kitchen and garden foster a better understanding of how the natural world sustains us and at the same time promote the environmental and social well-being of our school community.

Expanding Local Food Systems by Marketing to Iowa Institutions, Practical Farmers of Iowa. With a focus on Iowa, this publication describes four different programs linking Iowa farms and institutions. To download for free, go to www.pfi.iastate.edu/Local_Food_Syst/Expanding_Local_Food_Systems_by_Marketing_to_Iowa_Institutions.pdf.

Farm-to-Cafeteria Connections: Marketing Opportunities for Small Farms in Washington State. Olympia: Washington State Department of Agriculture. 87 pp. Although developed for use in Washington state, this handbook can help farmers, food service professionals, and community members throughout the country bring locally grown foods into schools, nursing homes, hospitals, and other institutions. The handbook explains how to start a farm-to-cafeteria program and includes numerous resources and case studies of successful projects. To order a free copy, contact Kelli Sanger, coordinator of WSDA's Small Farm and Direct Marketing Program (360-902-2057 or ksanger@agr.wa.gov) or download it from the WSDA web site (<http://agr.wa.gov/Marketing/Small-Farm/>).

The Farm to College Program and Farm to School Program of the Community Food Security Coalition (www.foodsecurity.org) provide workshops, technical assistance, and a wide array of information and resources to help in starting farm to school or college projects. The web site includes successful case studies and lists possible funding sources.

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K-12 program: www.foodsecurity.org/farm_to_school.html

College program: www.foodsecurity.org/farm_to_college.html

Farm to School: An Introduction for Food Service Professionals, Food Educators, Parents and Community Leaders, by Alison Harmon et al. 2003. 73 pp. Los Angeles: Center for Food and Justice, Urban and Environmental Policy Institute. This manual introduces school food service professionals to purchasing regional and seasonal foods for school meals directly from farmers in their communities. Challenges to local buying are outlined as are successful strategies employed by different school districts. The manual may also be helpful for food educators, teachers, parents, and school administrators. To order, contact the National Farm to School Program, Occidental College, Center for Food and Justice, Urban and Environmental Policy Institute, 1600 Campus Road, Los Angeles, CA 90041

FoodRoutes Network, www.foodroutes.org/farmtocollege.jsp offers resources for students interested in starting a farm to college project.

From Asparagus to Zucchini: A Guide to Farm-Fresh, Seasonal Produce, Monona, Wisc.: Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition (MADSAC). 135 pp. Along with introductory essays about the state of the food system, this great resource offers information and simple, delicious recipes for garden products along with seasonal recipes. To order a copy, contact MADSAC, c/o Wisconsin Rural Development Center, 4915 Monona Drive, Suite 304, Monona, WI 53716, telephone 608-226-0300, fax 608-226-0301.

Growing Home: A Guide to Reconnecting Agriculture, Food and Communities by Joanna Green and Duncan Hilchey. 151 pp. Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y.: Community, Food, and Agriculture Program. This guidebook covers the “whys,” “whats,” and “hows” of local food systems. Participants in farm-to-school projects will especially appreciate the chapter “Making It Happen in Your Community” and an appendix of work sheets to support effective group decision making. For more information visit the web site (www.cfap.org). To order a copy, contact Gretchen Gilbert (607-255-9832 or gcg4@cornell.edu).

Healthy Farms, Healthy Kids—Evaluating the Barriers and Opportunities for Farm-to-School Programs. 2001. Community Food Security Coalition. 64 pp. This report presents the background and history of farm-to-school programs. To order a copy, contact the Community Food Security Coalition (310-822-5410).

How Local Farmers and School Food Service Buyers Are Building Alliances. 2000. USDA. 32 pp. This report describes lessons learned from a USDA Small Farm/School Meals Workshop held in Kentucky in May 2000. It provides examples, checklists, and resources helpful in linking farms and schools. To order a copy, contact Debra Tropp (202-720-8317 or Debra.Tropp@usda.gov).

Innovative Marketing Opportunities for Small Farmers: Local Schools as Customers. USDA. 52 pp. This report describes and evaluates a farm-to-school pilot project in North Florida in which a group of small farmers organized a marketing cooperative to grow a niche crop for local schools. To order a copy, contact Debra Tropp (202-720-8317 or Debra.Tropp@usda.gov).

How Local Farmers and School Food Service Buyers Are Building Alliances: Lessons Learned from the USDA Small Farm/School Meals Workshop, by Debra Tropp and Suarajudeen Olowolayemo. Transportation and Marketing Programs, USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service (www.ams.usda.gov/tmd/mta/publications.htm). This publication describes considerations in working with food service, including barriers and recommended strategies for approaching the food service market, case studies, and information on government programs.

Local Food Connections: Food Service Considerations, Iowa State University Extension. This publication is geared toward food service professionals. To download a free copy, go to www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1853A.pdf.

Local Food Connections: From Farms to Schools, Iowa State University Extension. This publication is geared toward farmers and producers interested in selling to schools. To download a free copy, go to www.leopold.iastate.edu/pubs.other/other.htm.

Local Food Project: A How-to Manual, by Gary L. Valen, director of operations, the Glynwood Center. This manual offers strategies for planning and implementing local food projects. To order a copy, call 301-258-3075.

Schools Come to the Farm is a planning guide designed for farmers who want to offer tours to schools and other groups or improve the tours they already give. The guide, which was supported in part by NY Farms! with funding from the Wallace Genetic Foundation, describes the benefits of giving tours, logistics, how to make tours exciting and educational, examples of successful farm tours, suggestions of resources, and pre-designed forms. To order a copy, contact the Cornell Educational Resource Program (607-255-9252 or cerp@cornell.edu).

TEAM Nutrition (www.fns.usda.gov/tn/), a USDA initiative, is designed as an implementation tool to improve school meals and motivate children to make food choices for a healthy diet. Resources include nutrition education materials for school and home as well as recipes that meet the Dietary Guidelines.

¹USDA. Census of Agriculture. National Agricultural Statistics Service, 1978–1997. www.nass.usda.gov/census/.

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