



Farm Aid's Farm to School 101: Growing a Better School Food Environment

French fries, pizza, hamburgers, chicken nuggets, ice cream – these foods usually top a child's list of favorite foods, but is this what we want fueling our children during school? What if we were able to create a school cafeteria where fresh carrots were more common than pizza; where a student chooses a local apple over a can of soda? Or maybe even one where the salad bar replaces the fry line?

These images are no longer as fictitious as a childhood fairytale, but a reality in schools across the country. The key to localizing your cafeteria and growing a better school food environment is through farm to school programs, which link family farmers and their healthy products to local schools. As a result, kids are educated about where food comes from and are more interested in trying new foods, especially fresh fruits and vegetables.

The information contained in this packet is intended as a guidebook to introduce you and your community to the world of farm to school programs, with steps, resources, and case studies to help you transform your school cafeteria. With a little work and a supportive cast of characters, your children and the children in your community will soon be eating happily ever after.

A Bounty of Benefits: Farm to School Programs...

- Provide healthier, fresher, tastier foods for the growing minds that need them
- Support local economies and keep money circulating in the community
- Keep family farmers on their land so they can grow high-quality food for generations to come
- Connect kids and families to local roots and local farmers
- Provide children with a meaningful way to explore the connection between healthy land, healthy food, and healthy minds and bodies
- Encourage children to try new fruits and vegetables and increases acceptance of these healthful foods
- Positively effect parent attitudes, food habits, and grocery selections, bringing the benefits home
- Teach kids about farming, food cycles, the environment and nutrition
- Reduce environmental pollution, carbon emissions, and transportation costs associated with our food systems

7 Steps to Get Started on a Farm to School Program

1. Do your homework

There is no single “right way” to begin a farm to school program. Your experience will be unique, just like the program you help to create will be individually tailored to fit the needs of the children in your community. Gathering information and support early on in the process will ease the journey and pave the way for success.

A great place to begin is the National Farm to School Network, an organization that provides support, information, and resources for school lunch advocates just like you. Get the ball rolling by contacting one of the National Farm to School Network’s staff or Regional Lead Agencies to get specific advice, resources, and information for developing a farm to school program in your area.

2. Start a Conversation

Next, contact and initiate conversations with relevant folks in your community. Some instrumental people in the process may include school administrators (the principal, the district superintendent, and the school food service director), parent-teacher organizations, food service staff, other parents, farmers (farmers’ market managers and farm bureaus can be useful resources), nutrition educators, local businesses, as well as various community groups.

3. Gather at the Table

Plan a meeting for interested stakeholders to exchange ideas and map out a plan. You might ask for volunteers to help form a food advisory committee, which can help share the responsibility of creating a farm to school program. Visit the National Farm to School Network website (www.farmtoschool.org) to request sample meeting agendas, organizing tools, and survey materials to help in this process.

4. Take Inventory

Farm to school programs come in all shapes and sizes. Most start small and then continue to grow and change year after year. Some of the variables to consider in the initial planning stages include:

- *The size of the farm produce purchase:* Discuss the amounts and types of fruits, vegetables, and other produce desired, keeping seasonality and regionally-grown products in mind.
- *Options for incorporating farm-purchased items into the cafeteria menu:* Consider using a salad bar, monthly item highlight, single fruit or vegetable display, seasonal selection of products, or regular incorporation of farm items into daily meal production to showcase your local product.
- *The funding needs of your school:* Think about budget requirements, payment methods, start-up and continuing funding sources, and potential monetary limitations.
- *The distribution and delivery strategy:* Some examples of existing methods include farmers’ market pick-ups, partnering with a farmers’ cooperative, using local wholesalers, and joining food service co-ops.
- *The existing school infrastructure:* Think about menus, existing foodservice contracts and suppliers, the current and desired equipment needs of the school, food preparation capabilities of the kitchen and the staff, and any necessary staff training.

5. Think Big

Many schools implement additional educational or activity-based components to supplement the farm to school program. Some options include instituting nutrition education, beginning a school-based garden, allowing farmer visits to the school or student visits to a farm, hanging farm-based information in the form of profiles or posters in classrooms and cafeterias, designing relevant classroom projects, highlighting a particular fruit or vegetable on a weekly or monthly basis, offering parent education or cooking classes, or encouraging recipe exchanges by students and parents. These educational activities are a good start-up activity to get students interested and engaged in locally grown foods.

7 Steps to Get Started on a Farm to School Program

- 1. Do your Homework** – Gather information about the process
- 2. Start a Conversation** – Seek others who might be interested in helping out
- 3. Gather at the Table** – Bring everyone together for an organizing meeting
- 4. Talk it Over** – Consider the characteristics of your local school and food system
- 5. Think Big** – Combine farm to school foods with educational activities and field trips
- 6. Draw up a Plan** – Create an outline, timeline and budget for action
- 7. Look to the Future** – Set up a support network for ongoing community investment

6. Map Your Course

Once your group has decided on an appropriate program, begin to develop an outline that includes the necessary steps and a timeline for implementation. Allocate responsibilities to group members accordingly and plan to continue meeting and communicating regularly.

Funding is important at this stage in the process. Be creative! Use the team you've developed and the resources available from this toolkit to brainstorm ways to secure any necessary funding resources. Soon, you will be surprised with the many options for getting local, farm fresh food into your school cafeteria.

7. Look to the Future

Begin looking ahead by approaching community members with your now well-designed plan. Speak to local businesses, parents, community members, community associations, students, local colleges and universities, and potential volunteers. All of these people and groups can offer some type of support or legwork for the project. Consider forming partnerships with community organizations already in existence. Youth groups, churches, senior centers, volunteer organizations, farmers' market associations, school community service organizations, boys and girls clubs, sports teams, community business organizations, government organizations, nonprofits – each of these groups may be able to provide the valuable time, money, labor, or resources that can turn your dream farm to school program into a reality. The more invested the community is, the more sustainable the farm to school program will be.

Most importantly, remember that there is no such thing as the ideal farm to school program, and there is no singular path to get you there. When concerned communities strive to improve the health of their family farms and the health of their children, there is no such thing as failure. So jump in, get started, and make school lunch exciting!

Take It From Me: Case Studies from Established Programs

Case studies of existing farm to school programs illustrate a variety of program styles, formats, and experiences. Below are a few examples intended to spark your imagination!

New Salads in New Mexico

Lynn Walters is a chef, a former restaurant owner, a mother, and now a farm to school program organizer. Lynn coordinated efforts to bring local foods to area schools in her school district in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She began by arranging a visit to a farmers' market salad bar with school food service staff and the New Mexico Department of Agriculture Staff. Using momentum from the visit, Lynn was able to convince the district to invest in a farm to school program. Now everyone is a believer in the quality and benefits of farm to school!

This particular farm to school program chose to highlight its local produce by creating a salad bar at the high school and one elementary school and serving a side salad at another elementary school. Produce is brought to the school through a farmers' co-op, which combines the efforts of nearly forty farmers to provide the farm fresh food needed for the schools. To enhance the program, the schools introduced nutrition education into the curriculum and created a new Farm to School Coordinator position.

Adapted from Community Food Security Coalition's Case Studies. Available online at: http://www.foodsecurity.org/f2s_case_newmexico.pdf

Wild about Local Food in Massachusetts

Kelly Erwin isn't just helping to bring local foods to her school district; she's bringing local foods to schools across the state. A parent from the Wildwood Elementary School in Massachusetts, Kelly recognized the benefits to her children and to the local economy of promoting locally produced foods in schools. After her experience at Wildwood, Kelly created The Massachusetts Farm to School Project with sponsorship by the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, the Massachusetts Farm Bureau Agricultural Preservation Corporation, MassDevelopment, and Project Bread. Since its creation in 2004, the Project has helped over 75 schools buy locally.

Schools that participate in local purchasing have seen an increase in both the number of school lunches purchased and in the number of children choosing healthy fruits and vegetables. Farmers aren't left out of the benefits either: fifty family farms provide food for the school, amounting to more than \$700,000 in revenue for the farmers. Besides encouraging local purchasing, the Massachusetts Farm to School Project created a website to centralize local food purchases and published an online farm to school cookbook. The enthusiasm of one parent has made the whole state wild about family-farmed foods!

Adapted from the Amherst Bulletin, September 28, 2007. Available online at: <http://www.amherstbulletin.com/story/id/60361/>

Oodles of Farm Fresh Food in Oregon

As a school wellness specialist for Bend La-Pine district in Oregon and a manager of a local farmers' market, Katrina Wiest was able to combine her passion for healthy school and healthy farming communities by helping to start a farm to school program in her school

district. Local farmers provide weekly deliveries of fresh produce – strawberries, blueberries, cucumber, green beans, cantaloupe, watermelons, tomatoes, and carrots – which are then cleaned, prepared, and served by school foodservice staff. Seven schools in the district also began a “Breakfast in the Classroom” project, which uses local fruits in a wellness campaign. The school district uses the local produce as fresh fruit and vegetable offerings that are separate from hot lunch meals. Any leftovers are used to provide snacks to kids in after school programs. In addition to providing the fresh foods for students, some schools began implementing a variety of other farm- and health-centered educational materials, including a planting a vegetable garden, doing cooking demonstrations, building a greenhouse for use by disabled students, and hosting food contests and games.

Adapted from “*Going Local: Paths to Success for Farm to School Programs*,” by Anupama Joshi, Marion Kalb, and Moira Beery. Available online at: <http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi/cfj/publications/goinglocal.pdf>

A Few More Farm to School Snapshots...

Here’s how other schools have managed to make local produce a part of every school day:

New Hampshire: 44 schools purchase only local apples and apple products (e.g. cider) for the school year. Because little preparation is needed to serve apples, no major equipment or training changes needed to be implemented, and because the apples were able to be stored in controlled atmosphere climates, the apples are available year-round.

Illinois: The Chicago Public Schools board works with both farmers and processors within 150 miles of the city, including those in other nearby states, to provide apples and vegetables for students throughout the school year. Freezing the vegetables (corn, peas, carrots, and green beans) within 48 hours of harvest maintains product quality.

California: The Riverside school district is able to offer a full locally supplied salad bar during growing months and one that is 50% local in non-peak production months. To maintain their supply, the school buys primarily from two local family farms but supplements from other local producers if needed.

Iowa: Food service directors in Iowa are able to successfully incorporate local produce despite a short growing season by working with producers to identify products available in the fall, spring, and early summer. During the year, the schools avoid shortages by using a new procurement system, which operates a week in advance to allow the school to identify products that need to be ordered from other vendors.

Florida: This sunny state uses a cooperative, The New North Florida Marketing Cooperative, that pools the resources of multiple farmers to provide three or four produce items to schools. The products vary by season and are usually incorporated into hot meals, served as sides, or offered as fresh fruit desserts.

Roadblock Wreckers

Be ready to combat some of the most common challenges to farm to school programs by reading these solutions to typical arguments and questions.

“There isn’t enough time.”

Do not do it alone. One of your first steps in starting a program should be to seek out help from within the school district and the surrounding community. Delegate responsibilities and tasks rather than try to do it all yourself. The bottom line is that the extra time and effort now leads to tremendous health benefits for kids later down the road.

“Who is going to pay the extra cost?”

Funding opportunities are limitless if you think outside the box and get creative. Try doing some of your own fundraising; proposing a measure on a town ballot to include farm to school programs in the budget; searching for equipment, storage, or transportation donation opportunities; and speaking to local businesses and organizations about possibilities for help and support.

“How can a small farmer guarantee quality and consistency?”

Do some hands-on preliminary research and visit a farm or a farmers’ market in your area. Look, touch, taste, and ask questions. Speak to farmers about types and quantities of different products they are able to produce. If a single farmer can’t provide all you would need on a consistent basis, consider using a cooperative model or arranging a pick up from the farmers’ market to purchase a variety of needed items in desired quantities at the same time. Remember, family farmers produce high-quality produce as a way of life.

“We don’t have a long growing season in my area.”

Work with what you do have and incorporate seasonality into the menu. During peak growing season, consider purchasing extra foods and freezing some for use later on in the year. Even in sparser seasons, try to use whatever produce can be procured locally and stored, including squashes and root vegetables. Anything fresh and local is a great start, so do your best and work around what the local growing season brings you.

“I don’t understand farm to school policies and regulations.”

The current national policy on farm to school programs is essentially contained in two documents. The 2008 Farm Bill allows schools to state a local preference when purchasing fresh produce with federal funds (e.g. “carrots grown in Kansas”). The Child Nutrition Act provides general guidance for federal Child Nutrition Programs (including school lunch and school breakfast), and is currently being “reauthorized” by Congress, something that happens only once every four or five years. The evaluation and renewal of this legislation provides a ripe opportunity to implement and strengthen policies that promote locally and regionally grown foods from family farms in school cafeterias. Visit <http://www.farmentoschool.org/policies.php> for local and national policy information.

“Even with a farm to school program, how do we motivate kids to eat healthfully?”

This is where classroom educational components come in. Get kids excited about the new foods by highlighting fruit and vegetables with tasting tables, recipe distributions, games, and other fun food-based activities. Don’t limit fruits and vegetables to the cafeteria – arrange farmer visits, incorporate nutrition education into the curriculum, or start a school garden. Kids won’t need to be told to eat their fruits and vegetables; they’ll be too busy munching away on them to listen.

Resources and Tools for the Journey

Websites and Organizations:

- *National Farm to School Network*. Sprouting from the desire to support community-based food systems, strengthen family farms, and improve student health by reducing childhood obesity, the National Farm to School Network is comprised of eight regional lead agencies and national staff that provide free training and technical assistance, information services, networking, and support for policy, media and marketing activities. Their website offers the portal of farm to school information including up-to-date state specific information on policies and funding opportunities, case studies, resource directories, and a listing of regional resource offices. Access here: <http://www.farmtoschool.org>

- *Center for Food & Justice, Occidental College*. A part of the Urban & Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College, this center offers assistance in the establishment of farm to school programs through resource dissemination, training provision, and networking assistance. Access here: <http://www.foodandjustice.org>

- *FoodRoutes*. This website provides links to resources, case studies, and readings on farm to school programs across the country. It also provides information on additional ways to eat locally and with sustainability in mind. Access here: <http://www.foodroutes.org/farmtoschool.jsp>

- *Community Food Security Coalition*. A comprehensive farm to school resource website with information on the history of farm to school programs, study results of farm to school programs, organizing tools, funding opportunities, case studies, and resources for program organizers. Access here: http://www.foodsecurity.org/farm_to_school.html

- *USDA's Healthy Meals Resource System*. A farm to school resource and information website, including curriculum planning tools. Access here: http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=14&tax_level=1

- *American Cancer Society*. Provides information on school wellness policies and ways to integrate nutrition into school curriculums. Access here: <http://www.cancer.org/docroot/home/index.asp>.

- *2008 Farm Bill*. Includes a Local Preference for School Food Purchases clause, which allows schools using federal school meal assistance money to specify preference for "local" foods in bidding procedures. Includes all food items: fruits, vegetables, dairy, and meats.

Section 4302. Access here:

<http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/farmbill2008?navid=FARMBILL2008>

A memo with some applicable FAQs:

http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/Policy-Memos/2009/SP_08-2009_os.pdf

- *USDA's Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program*. This program aims to help children learn more healthful eating habits by providing free fruit and vegetable snacks in schools. Access here: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/ffvp/ffvpdefault.htm>

Reading List:

- *Going Local: Paths to Success for Farm to School Programs*. This publication highlights case studies illustrating the development of programs in eight different states. Access here: <http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi/cfj/publications/goinglocal.pdf>
- *Farm To School: An Introduction for Food Service Professionals, Food Educators, Parents and Community Leaders*. This guide introduces the farm to school newcomer to the history of the movement, its opportunities and its challenges. Access here: <http://www.foodroutes.org/eflyers/FarmtoSchoolGuide.pdf>
- *Bearing Fruit: Farm to School Program Evaluation Resources and Recommendations*. This comprehensive assessment of the impacts of farm to school programs provides excellent resources and tools to incorporate when developing or improving a program. Access here: <http://www.farmtoschool.org>
- *Linking Farms with Schools: A Guide to Understanding Farm-to-School Programs for Schools, Farmers, and Organizers*. This guide offers resources, case studies, and detailed tips on overcoming challenges and successfully implementing a farm to school program. Access here: <http://www.foodsecurity.org/pubs.html#linking>
- *Healthy Farms, Healthy Kids: Evaluating the Barriers and Opportunities for Farm to School Programs*. This report examines the availabilities and opportunities for school food purchasing from local farms. Access here: <http://www.foodsecurity.org/pubs.html#healthy>
- *Bringing Local Food to Local Institutions: A Resource Guide for Farm-to-School and Farm-to-Institution Programs*. This document includes a list of funding and assistance programs, program implementation steps, examples of successful programs, and background information. Access here: <http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/PDF/farmtoschool.pdf>
- *Farm to School Legislation: A State by State Listing*. With this free download you can explore legislative information specific to your state. Access here: http://www.farmtoschool.org/files/publications_177.pdf
- *Mapping School Food: A Policy Guide*. This free downloadable guide offers an introductory look at school food service policy. Access here: <http://www.phaionline.org/wpcontent/uploads/2007/11/mappingschoolfood.pdf>
- *Rethinking School Lunch*. This site offers downloadable documents focused on planning school food interventions and creating a healthy school system. Many publications are available, including one that offers a financial calculator and others focused on food policy. Access here: <http://www.ecoliteracy.org/pages/rethinking/rethinking-home.html>
- *Eat Smart – Farm Fresh! A Guide to Buying and Serving Locally-Grown Produce in School Meals*. This pdf was created by the USDA to provide a guide for planning and implementing farm to school programs. Access here: http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Guidance/Farm-to-School-Guidance_12-19-2005.pdf
- *Buying Local Foods for Retail Foodservices*. This packet provides a summary of guidelines and regulations for buying local foods. Order from the University of Iowa website: <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/store/ItemDetail.aspx?ProductID=12747>

Funding Resources

It is important to assess your particular funding needs based on your desired farm to school program. Include in the budget any expenses needed for equipment, training, extra personnel, educational components of the program, delivery costs, and so on. Also, be sure to consider the sustainability of the project at this time. Start-up money may be instrumental, but the program should be designed for long-term maintenance and growth.

Nationally-Based:

• *US Department of Defense.* Offers produce buying services to school and institutions. Has successfully incorporated local foods into school food service systems using Department of Defense procurement and distribution systems. Access here: <http://www.defenselink.mil>

• *US Department of Health and Human Services.* Check for availability of grants and funding assistance for new farm-to-school programs. Access here: <http://www.hhs.gov/grants>

• *USDA Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program.* Provides funding for programs that increase food security through community-based food service projects. Access here: http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/food/in_focus/hunger_if_competitive.html

• *Sustainable Agriculture and Education Program.* Offers grant opportunities and regionally-based resources for programs that encourage sustainable agricultural practices. Access here: <http://www.sare.org>

Locally/Regionally Based:

• *Colleges and Universities*

• *Local Health/Human Services Agencies.* Find local information from the national site or search for your state agency. Access here: <http://www.hhs.gov>

• *State Department of Agriculture.* Search the Agencies and Offices directory of the United States Department of Agriculture for info on specific mission areas
http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/!ut/p/_s.7_0_A/7_0_1OB?navtype=MA&navid=AGENCIES_OFFICES

• *Local Nutrition Services Agencies.* Use phonebooks, local directories, and internet searches to find nutrition service agencies in your area. Access here: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns>

• *Community Foundation Locator.* Search the Council on Foundations' Community Foundation Locator to find public charities in your region. Access here: <http://www.cof.org/Locator>