

## TOPIC: HOW DO I ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOCAL PRODUCERS?



Photograph by Mark Lara

A year ago, the student lunches in the North Conejos school district featured frozen carrots and tater tots.

"It's incredible, the opportunity we have if we can figure out how to reestablish the farming community."

-Mark Lara

Today, the potatoes come from across the Valley at Hamilton Farms. Behind the change stands Mark Lara, the school district's food director. With a small budget and a grand vision, Mark wants to reestablish the local vegetable farming community by reinventing the school lunch. His passion grows from deep roots in the community and a deep concern for giving kids a healthy start. And it's working. All 14 school districts in the valley are now working together to create a market for local farmers.

The Farm to School program is new, but it grew from relationships Mark has long nourished as a valley native and member of his San Luis Valley Local Food Coalition. The coalition produced a consumer guide to locally grown produce, and Mark used that booklet as a starting point for the school program. He visited the farms, met the farmers and learned who could sell to him. Meats were harder to find, but Mark just searched out a local producer of beef. Again, the previous relationships helped by providing a referral network.

## How Can School Districts Find Local Food Producers?

Mark looks for allies and avenues everywhere he can. "When I started working with the schools eight years ago, the student council bylaws included improving the food in the cafeteria! It was part of their mission statement," Mark recalls. Student demand for better food dovetailed nicely with Mark's goal of improving access to fresh foods, and he was able to begin building his network using one of the school's most powerful resources: the kids. "You can start with the school to find where the passion is for local food. Reach out to parents and the community within the school. Put out a questionnaire to find who is growing what," advises Mark.



## How Do You Approach Local Producers and Communicate Your Needs?

While the Internet may be a good way to initially find and locate local producers, Mark believes that Sneaker-net methods work best for establishing relationships. He gets out of the office, visits the farms, shakes hands, and meets the farmers face to face.

“As school food service directors, we can affect the health of our students,” said Mark. “Farmers are nurturers. They get that. So in talking to the farmers, I always go back to something we all share, which is care for the children.” From that point, Mark found farmers ready to sign on and then they brought their own ideas to the table.



Photograph by Mark Lara

## How Do You Maintain and Strengthen Your Network?

Mark says regular communication throughout the year is key to keeping the people in his network connected and on board. He uses a variety of approaches that reflect the organic way his network grew. One producer, Robert Middlemist, is also a vocational agriculture teacher at one of the schools in Mark’s district. Both Mark and Robert share a dream of a self-sufficient community independent of outside markets. Mark sees him almost daily. Together with the help of students and vocational departments, Mark and Robert dream of starting an aquaculture program that hydroponically feeds plants for use in the school cafeteria. Other producers are acquaintances in the community whom Mark visits regularly to learn what’s available and what’s possible. “Regular, face-to-face contact with people is always very important,” he says.

Mark believes the network will grow via what might be called a “Field of Dreams” strategy: if you build it, they will come.

By building a market for local produce, more producers will come forward to participate. “If somebody grows an acre of beans, and they know there is a market for them, it’s going to encourage other people to grow as well,” he says. For inspiration one needs only to look into the eyes of children as they taste the essence of fresh fruits and vegetables picked from the Earth beneath them. ■

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### Colorado School District Map





Photograph by Mark Lara

## Models & Resources

### **Eat Smart- Farm Fresh: A Guide to Buying and Serving Locally-Grown Produce in School Meals**

USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2005

[http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/guidance/Farm-to-School-Guidance\\_12-19-2005.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/guidance/Farm-to-School-Guidance_12-19-2005.pdf)

This is a handbook that offers information on procurement, types and examples of Farm to School distribution models, how to find locally grown food and farmers, menu planning considerations, and strategies for success.

### **Tips for finding local producers for your Farm to School program**

Colorado Farm to School, 2010

[www.coloradofarmtoschool.org](http://www.coloradofarmtoschool.org) > Resources > Schools > Find a Farmer

A step-by-step guide for finding and communicating with Colorado fruit and vegetable growers.

### **A Guide to Purchasing and Serving Local Food in Schools**

DC Farm to School, 2010

<http://dcfarmtoschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/DC-Farm-to-School-Toolkit.pdf>

Great advice on how to connect with local producers on a personal and business level.

### **Rethinking School Lunch Guide**

Ecoliteracy, 2010

<http://www.ecoliteracy.org/downloads/rethinking-school-lunch-guide>

Replacing prepackaged meals with fresh, locally grown, seasonably available foods from smaller family farmers is a challenge for procurement. An important part of this transition is locating and establishing relationships with local farmers. Building these bridges will take thought, time, and dedication. But, as a number of school districts nationally and internationally have learned, it can be done successfully. This section offers suggestions for how to think about procurement.

### **How Local Farmers and Food Service Buyers are Building Alliances**

USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, 2000

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELDEV3102250&acct=wdmgeninfo>

Explains in detail the specific needs and desires of local producers and how to build successful relationships with farmers. Provides advice for how to reach out to local producers and make Farm to School beneficial for all involved.