



Farm Aid's Farm to School 101 Toolkit: Transforming School Cafeterias with the Family Farm

Pizza, hamburgers, chicken nuggets, ice cream – these foods usually top a child's list of favorite foods, but should they be fueling our children during the school day? What if we created a school cafeteria where fresh carrots were more common than french fries? Where a student chooses a locally grown apple over a can of soda? Or maybe even one where the salad bar replaces the burger line?

This is all within reach. Farm to school programs are the key to fostering better school meals, linking family farmers and their healthy, farm fresh products to schools in their community. As a result, our kids have access to the healthiest, tastiest, most nutritious foods available and are more knowledgeable about how our food is grown and who grows it.

This packet serves as a guidebook to introduce you to the world of farm to school programs, with steps, resources and case studies to help you transform a school cafeteria in your community. With a little work and a supportive farm to school team, children in your community will soon be enjoying good food from local family farms during the school day.

A Bounty of Benefits

Farm to School Programs...

- Provide healthy, fresh and tasty foods for growing minds and bodies
- Support local economies and connect community members to local food and farmers
- Keep family farmers on their land, growing good food for generations to come
- Allow children to explore the connection between healthy land, healthy food, and healthy minds and bodies
- Encourage children to try new fruits and vegetables and increase their acceptance of these healthful foods
- Positively impact parent attitudes, food habits, and grocery choices, bringing the benefits home
- Teach kids about farming, food cycles, the environment and nutrition
- Reduce environmental pollution, carbon emissions, and transportation costs associated with sourcing food for school meals

7 Steps to Starting 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 as the program you help create will be individually tailored to fit the needs of your children, your schools and 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 for specific advice, resources, and information for developing a farm to school program in your area.

2. Start a Conversation

Next, 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, parents, farmers (farmers market managers and farmer organizations can be helpful), nutrition educators, local businesses and 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 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 grow and change each year. Some of the variables to consider in the initial planning stages include:

- **Scope of product sourcing:** Discuss the amounts and types of fruits, vegetables, dairy products, meats and other foods desired, keeping seasonality and local foods in mind.
- **Incorporating farm 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.
- **Financials:** Think about budget requirements, payment methods, start-up funding, continued operating expenses and potential monetary limitations.
- **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.
- **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

Given the many unique learning opportunities around nutrition, food, farming and the environment tied to farm to school programs, many schools introduce educational and activity-based components. These include nutrition lessons, farm product taste tests, starting school

gardens, inviting farmers to visit the school, farm field trips, displaying farm information in classrooms and cafeterias, designing relevant classroom projects, highlighting a particular fruit or vegetable on a weekly or monthly basis, parent education courses, cooking classes and encouraging recipe exchanges between students or parents. These are all fantastic activities to enhance farm to school programming and get students interested and engaged in locally grown, healthy foods.

6. Map Your Course

Once your group has designed a farm to school program, outline the necessary steps and a timeline for implementation. Allocate responsibilities to group members accordingly and plan to continue meeting and communicating regularly.

Seven Steps to Starting 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. ***Take Inventory*** – 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. ***Map Your Course*** – Create an outline, timeline and budget for action
7. ***Look to the Future*** – Set up a support network for ongoing community investment in the program

Funding can become 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. You will be surprised by 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 well-designed plan. Speak to local businesses, parents, community members, community associations, students, local colleges and universities and potential volunteers. They can all offer some type of support for your farm to school program, be it time, money, labor or other resources that can make your program a reality. Consider forming partnerships with existing organizations—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 and nonprofits. The more invested the community is, the more sustainable your farm to school program will be.

Remember that there is no ideal farm to school program, and there is no singular path to creating one. 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 your children's school meals healthy and exciting!

Sowing the Seeds for Farm to School: Tips for Farmers

Every child deserves fresh, delicious, nutritious food, and America's family farmers are in the best position to provide it. Farmers can play a central role in designing farm to school programs and educating children, parents, school faculty and administrators about good food, farming and the natural world. Interested farmers should consider the following tips:

- ***Be Prepared.*** As you would with any customer, market yourself with pictures of your farm and your products, information about your business practices, product lists and harvesting schedule, and visions you have for building a farm to school program for children in your area. Offer taste tests or a harvest basket of your products.
- ***Meet with your Food Service Director.*** Most of the food on a child's lunch tray is sourced at the district level, not by individual schools. Your district's Child Nutrition Services Director or Food Service Director is generally responsible for coordinating school meals in your area, and is a key person to connect with. Smaller school districts may have a cafeteria manager or head cook who should be approached instead.
- ***Assess the district's capacity to buy from you.*** Some school districts may already have a procurement system with local farmers that you can join, while others may be hungry to build connections with local farmers, but face a number of hurdles to launch a farm to school program. They may lack the infrastructure to process fresh produce, or may only be able to do so in a central kitchen that distributes food to individual schools. Others face regulations or very tight budgets, limited storage capacity or have specific volume and distribution needs. They may require specific kinds of liability insurance or food safety certification from their vendors. Understanding the nuts and bolts of your local food service program will help you design a successful program that can be maintained and grow over time.
- ***Low-Hanging Fruit is Your Friend.*** Given the hurdles involved in shaking up school meals for the better, starting small can be the smartest approach to designing a farm to school program. Whole fruits like apples or pears, which require little processing and easy storage options, often provide strong foundations for farm to school programs. From there, you can outline with your school district what produce is available on your farm, at what volume, and when, to design menus over time with your products.
- ***Don't forget the protein!*** Dairy farmers, local meat and poultry producers can get involved too. Many school districts source their milk and dairy products, for example, exclusively from local farmers, who can provide them all year long. These products are important elements of well-balanced, healthful meals; so if you're interested, give it a go.
- ***Money Talk.*** Be upfront, realistic, and flexible about your pricing needs, do your homework to calculate prices and remember that schools have to produce their meals on very tight budgets—often between \$2 and \$3 per meal. That amount includes equipment, labor, benefits—it doesn't just cover food! This customer is different than others, likely offering you lower profits but a more stable, steady market.

Case Studies in Success

Farm to school programming is not one-size-fits-all. There is a great variety of successful programs across the country. The following case studies are intended to spark your imagination!

New Salads in Santa Fe

Lynn Walters is a chef, a former restaurant owner, a mother, and now a farm to school program organizer. Lynn coordinated efforts in her school district in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to bring local foods to area schools. 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 the momentum from this visit, Lynn was able to convince the district to invest in a farm to school program. Now everyone in Santa Fe is a believer in the quality and benefits of the program.

Santa Fe's farm to school program chose to highlight local produce by creating a salad bar at the high school and one elementary school, and serving a side salad with school meals at another elementary school. Produce was sourced through a farmers' cooperative, which combines the efforts of nearly 40 farmers to provide the 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.

Case study 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' Schools

Kelly Erwin isn't just helping to bring local foods to her school district; she's bringing farm to school to an entire state. A parent from the Wildwood Elementary School in Massachusetts, Kelly recognized the benefits enjoyed by both her children and her local economy from using food from local farms in schools. To bring those benefits to a wider audience, 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 250 schools buy local food for their student meals.

Participating schools have seen an increase in both the demand for school lunches and in the number of children choosing healthy fruits and vegetables at meals. Farmers have been reaping benefits as well: the fifty family farms providing food for the schools generated more than \$700,000 in additional revenue for their operations. The Massachusetts Farm to School Project also created a website to centralize local food purchases and published an online farm to school cookbook. It's an exciting illustration of how the enthusiasm of one parent at one elementary school has made a whole state wild about family farmed foods.

Visit the Massachusetts Farm to School website at: <http://www.massfarmtoschool.org/>

Oodles of Farm Fresh Food in Oregon

As the school wellness specialist for the Bend La-Pine school district in Oregon and a manager of a local farmers market, Katrina Wiest was able to combine her passion for healthy school food and strong farming communities by starting 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 to bolster its student 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.

Adapted from “*Going Local: Paths to Success for Farm to School Programs*,” by Anupama Joshi, Marion Kalb, and Moira Beery. Available online at:
<http://agmarketing.extension.psu.edu/Wholesale/PDFs/goinglocal.pdf>

A Few More Farm to School Snapshots...

Here’s how other schools have managed to make good food from local farms a part of every school day:

California: The Riverside school district is able to offer an entirely locally supplied salad bar during the growing season and one that is 50% local in non-peak production months. To maintain their supply, the school buys primarily from two local family farms and supplements with produce from other local farmers when needed.

Florida: This sunny state uses a cooperative, The New North Florida Marketing Cooperative, to pool 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.

Illinois: The Chicago Board of Education works with both farmers and processors within 150 miles of the city 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 so that students get the freshest and most nutritious food possible in their school meals.

Iowa: Food service directors in Iowa have successfully incorporated local produce into school meals three seasons of the year, working with producers to identify products available in the fall, spring and early summer. During the year, schools avoid food 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.

New Hampshire: Over 40 schools in the state purchase only local apples and apple products, such as apple cider, for the entire school year. Because little preparation is needed to serve apples, no major equipment or food preparation training has been needed, and because apples are able to be stored in controlled atmospheres, they are available year-round.

Resources and Tools

Organizations:

- *American Cancer Society* Offers information on implementing school wellness programs. <http://www.cancer.org/Healthy/MoreWaysACSHelpsYouStayWell/SchoolHealth/>
- *Center for Food & Justice, Occidental College* This center offers assistance in the establishment of farm to school programs through resource dissemination, training provisions and networking assistance. <http://www.foodandjustice.org>
- *Community Food Security Coalition* A comprehensive farm to school resource with information on the history of farm to school programs, research on farm to school programs, organizing tools, funding opportunities, case studies and resources for program organizers. http://www.foodsecurity.org/farm_to_school.html
- *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. <http://www.foodroutes.org> or <http://www.foodroutes.org/farmtoschool.jsp>
- *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 who provide free training and technical assistance, information, networking and support for policy, media and marketing activities. Their website offers up-to-date state-specific information on policies and funding opportunities, case studies, resource directories and a listing of regional resource offices. <http://www.farmtoschool.org>
- *USDA's Healthy Meals Resource System* A resource that includes tools for curriculum planning. http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=14&tax_level=1

Reading List:

Bearing Fruit: Farm to School Program Evaluation Resources and Recommendations. This comprehensive assessment of the impacts of farm to school programs provides excellent tools to utilize when developing or improving a program. Download at: <http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi/cfj/bearingfruits.htm>

Bringing Local Food to Local Institutions: A Resource Guide for Farm-to-School and Farm-to-Institution Programs. Includes a list of funding and assistance programs, program implementation steps, examples of successful programs, and background information. <https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/summary.php?pub=261>

Buying Local Foods for Retail Foodservices. This packet provides a summary of guidelines and regulations for buying local foods. Order or download from the University of Iowa website: <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/store/ItemDetail.aspx?ProductID=12747>

Eat Smart - Farm Fresh! A Guide to Buying and Serving Locally-Grown Produce in School Meals. USDA created this guide for planning and implementing farm to school programs.

http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Guidance/Farm-to-School-Guidance_12-19-2005.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.

<http://www.foodroutes.org/eflyers/FarmtoSchoolGuide.pdf>

Farm to School Legislation: A State by State Listing. Explore legislative information specific to your state. http://www.farmtoschool.org/files/publications_177.pdf

Going Local: Paths to Success for Farm to School Programs. This publication highlights case studies of farm to school programs in eight different states.

<http://agmarketing.extension.psu.edu/Wholesale/PDFs/goinglocal.pdf>

Healthy Farms, Healthy Kids: Evaluating the Barriers and Opportunities for Farm to School Programs. Examines the opportunities for school food purchasing from local farms.

<http://www.foodsecurity.org/pubs.html#healthy>

Linking Farms with Schools: A Guide to Understanding Farm-to-School Programs for Schools, Farmers, and Organizers. This \$10 guide includes resources, case studies and detailed tips for overcoming challenges in farm to school programming.

<http://www.foodsecurity.org/pubs.html#linking>

Mapping School Food: A Policy Guide. This guide offers an introductory look at school food service policy to help anyone trying to start a farm to school program understand the laws and policies behind school lunch. <http://www.phaionline.org/2007/11/06/mapping-school-food-a-policy-guide/>

Marketing Michigan Products to Schools: A Step-By-Step Guide. Tailored for Michigan farmers, but helpful for any farmer considering farm to school programs.

<http://www.mifarmtoschool.msu.edu/index.php?q=marketing-guide>

Planting a Farm to School Program, Tips for Farmers. This guide provides advice for farmers on how to approach school districts and do appropriate business planning for farm to school programs. http://caff.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Farmer_tips_F2S.pdf

Rebuilding America's Economy with Family Farm-Centered Food Systems. A Farm Aid report highlighting the untapped potential of America's family farmers to rebuild our nation's economy through local and regional food systems, including farm to school programming.

<http://www.farmaid.org/es>

Rethinking School Lunch. The Center for Ecoliteracy's site offers downloadable reports focused on planning school food interventions and creating healthy schools.

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

2008 Farm Bill. Includes a Local Preference for School Food Purchases clause, allowing 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. FAQs:

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

Funding Opportunities

It's essential to assess the funding needs of your desired farm to school program. Consider any expenses for equipment, training, personnel and education components of the program, delivery costs and so on. Be sure to consider the sustainability of the project. Start-up money may be instrumental, but the program should be designed for long-term maintenance and growth.

National:

Funding Opportunities for Investing in Family Farm-Centered Food Systems. A sister document to Farm Aid's report, *Rebuilding America's Economy with Family Farm-Centered Food Systems*, this guide covers federal grant programs and resources that can be harnessed to create a healthier food system, including farm to school programs. <http://www.farmaid.org/opportunities>

US Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. Working with the USDA, the Department of Defense (DoD) has successfully incorporated local foods and fresh fruits and vegetables into their procurement and distribution systems. Interested states or individual schools can now order fresh produce through the DoD. <http://fns.usda.gov/fdd/programs/dod/default.htm>

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

USDA Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program. These grants fund programs that increase food security through community-based food service projects. <http://www.nifa.usda.gov/fo/communityfoodprojects.cfm>

USDA's Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. Aims to encourage more healthful childhood eating habits by providing fruit and vegetable snacks in schools. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/ffvp/ffvpdefault.htm>

Local/State/Regional:

Colleges and Universities

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

Local Nutrition Services Agencies. Find nutrition service agencies in your area that can support farm to school programming. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns>

State Departments of Agriculture. Search the Agencies and Offices directory of the United States Department of Agriculture to identify relevant agencies in your state: [http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=AGENCIES OFFICES C](http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=AGENCIES_OFFICES_C)
OR use the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture website: <http://www.nasda.org/cms/7195/8617.aspx>

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program. Offers grants and resources for programs that encourage sustainable agricultural practices and new marketing opportunities for farmers at regional and state levels. <http://www.sare.org>

Getting Past the Roadblocks

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”

Don’t go it alone. One of your first steps in starting a program should be seeking out help from within the school district and the surrounding community. Delegate responsibilities and tasks rather than trying to do it all yourself. The bottom line is that the extra time and effort now will lead 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. Several national and local funding opportunities exist (see the “Resources and Tools for the Journey” section of this toolkit). Try doing some of your own fundraising; proposing a measure on a town voting 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 their 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 growers cooperative or arranging a pick up from the farmers’ market each week to purchase a variety of items in desired quantities at the same time. Remember, family farmers produce high-quality food 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. Even in sparser seasons, try to use whatever produce can be procured locally and stored, including squashes and root vegetables. Remember, anything fresh and local is a great start, so do your best and work around what the growing season brings you.

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

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 the fun to the cafeteria; arrange farmer visits to the classroom and field trips to the farm, 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.