



MEMO

RE: What the Farm to School Movement Needs to Succeed

From: Community Alliance with Family Farmers

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The Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) has spent ten years building Farm to School programs in California. As public concern rises over an array of problems—childhood obesity, declining numbers of family farms, environmental and social problems caused by our current food system—we've seen a groundswell of interest in addressing these issues with youth through Farm to School programs.

Farm to School programs are defined in many ways across the country, but CAFF considers comprehensive Farm to School to include education about food and farming while local produce is purchased by food service departments for school meals.

Although there are a growing number of school districts successfully implementing Farm to School programs, these programs are usually driven by a champion who is a child nutrition services director, school administrator or school community member who is willing to navigate a formidable series of obstacles. Without a visionary, committed leader striving to make change, Farm to School programs rarely find a footing in the current school food climate.

The barriers to Farm to School from CAFF's perspective can be broken up into three categories: Food Distribution; Food Purchasing and Preparation; and Education. CAFF has seen that each of these categories of barriers can be surmounted at the school district level through creative problem-solving, but with a few USDA policy changes and more resources, we believe that Farm to School could become a reality in every community.

Food Distribution: Challenges in the Supply-chain

As an alliance of family farmers, CAFF is working on supply-side solutions to Farm to School that would allow small and mid-scale growers to aggregate and sell produce to institutions like school districts. This was prompted by our experiences trying to source local food for schools in Ventura and Davis.

The produce distribution industry has developed long-distance distribution chains that consolidate and move produce around the globe, but that have difficulty getting produce from local regions to local markets. Once produce enters the conventional wholesale market, it becomes anonymous—instead of being a box of Watsonville berries grown by La Milpa Farm, the produce becomes a 12 count flat of berries interchangeable for any other flat on the market and disconnected from the Watsonville region. The result is that even produce companies buying from local growers and selling to local markets often can't identify the farm that grew the produce for a particular customer's order. Individual farmers lose their identities, and their brand value, in this process and institutional customers are disconnected from their local agricultural communities.

Reintroducing traceability and source-verification into California's distribution industry has been a central project at CAFF since 2001. CAFF's Growers Collaborative project started in Ventura with USDA support after none of the local distributors would deliver local produce to the schools. CAFF created a means for institutions to procure source-verified local produce in both northern and southern California as a demonstration project. Along with ALBA, which runs a similar distributor on the central coast, these efforts have encouraged many institutions to request local produce from their main distributors, which has changed the thinking of those distributors.

For many small and beginning growers, the large-scale wholesale market that services institutions has not been a viable avenue for sales. The standard small farm market outlets—farmers markets, community supported agriculture programs, and direct sales to restaurants and retailers—represent only the smallest portion of the produce market. Farmers accustomed to selling produce in these markets may not understand industry standard pack requirements, produce the volume the conventional industry requires, or have the connections to secure a profitable price for their product. Because of the added time and cost required for distributors to receive produce from many small farmers, most companies have streamlined this process, buying only from growers with large operations, who of course are not local to most communities. **As a consequence, the food available to schools—which require standard packs and often pre-processed produce—from their distributors is seldom sourced from local farms.**

To address these problems, CAFF has developed the Educational Marketing Center model, a kind of local food hub, which aggregates produce from small and medium family farmers to be accessed by distributor partners who want to buy local. Rather than create a parallel distribution system for local, the idea is to make the acquisition of local produce simple and accessible for the standard produce distributors. CAFF has developed farmer training and marketing materials that educate beginning growers on proper pack and food handling procedures to allow them access to these markets. CAFF is outreaching to family farmers to encourage them to participate in this distribution system and in Farm to School programs.

Food Purchasing and Preparation: Challenges School Districts Face in Buying and Serving Local Produce

As supply-side challenges are tackled and the distribution industry becomes capable of providing local produce to institutions that demand it, it also must become easier for school food service departments to purchase local foods.

One challenge in bringing local produce to school districts is the current USDA Commodity Food Distribution Program. Although CAFF recognizes that the intention of the Commodity Food Distribution Program is to supplement school meals and feed hungry children, this program allows school districts to receive most of their produce for little more than the cost of shipping. Local farmers and distributors wanting to sell produce to districts cannot compete. Even in districts where food service directors are dissatisfied with the quality or selection of commodity foods, they have a hard time justifying the purchase of local produce when they can instead supplement their meals with free food. *Changes in the USDA Commodity Food Distribution Program that allow family farmers to receive a subsidy for growing produce for school districts would facilitate Farm to School Programs.*

The huge administrative burden imposed by the USDA on school feeding programs is another barrier to making Farm to School work. With confusing, redundant, and onerous amounts of documentation required to provide students with meals, it takes a significant amount of a food service director's time and energy just to keep up with program requirements. Strict regulations around portion size lead creative food service directors to change their menus during USDA audits. One food service director described an auditor who counted the number of peanuts in a trail mix she was offering in order to determine if the mix was eligible for reimbursement. Programs that are pushing the envelope with Farm to School often fail audits, and therefore lose reimbursement dollars or are forced to change their meals, while directors who "play it safe" aren't penalized. Using pre-processed foods made by companies like Sysco, Nabisco, and Kellogg, that are specially designed for school lunch and that often resemble junk foods (corn dogs, chicken nuggets, hamburgers, etc.) pass USDA inspection more easily than foods that use local produce. Food service directors are subject to extreme regulation in the audit process: they have the peanuts and raisins in their trail mix counted to "ensure" proper protein ratios, their home-made muffins are weighed on a scale to guarantee correct proportions of whole grains, and their fruits and vegetables are measured out in quarter-cup increments. With the threat of the USDA denying funding to programs if they don't pass these fine-tooth-comb inspections, it is difficult for school food service to try putting new foods on the menu. *Streamlining administrative requirements and reexamining USDA meal audit procedures would allow food service to be praised, not punished, for creatively producing healthy school meals.*

Most school districts could also use an infusion of capital to restore food preparation and processing capacity. As the preparation of school meals has been outsourced to external meal providers, many districts have fallen behind on kitchen equipment upgrades or even dismantled kitchens entirely. If districts are going to connect with local farms, they need to have cooking and processing capacity, since family farms typically can not provide districts with processed products. A small farmer is generally able to provide a box of broccoli as opposed to bags of florets, or whole bunches of carrots and celery as opposed to sticks. For Farm to School purchasing to work, districts need funds for equipment and labor to process fresh produce. *An increase in the federal reimbursement rate, coupled with a reduction in the administrative burden of the program to reduce overhead costs in the school meals program, would funnel program funds where they should go—to the production of healthy meals.*

Finally, food service staff that operate Farm to School programs need training to improve their culinary skills. After decades of "heat and serve" cooking dominating school menus, food service staff need training in everything from basic nutrition to knife skills to meal presentation. In the words of one long-time Farm to School advocate, to successfully serve farm-fresh meals food service staff will need to "go beyond the can opener." Thriving Farm to School programs have well-trained food service staff that are proud members of their school's educational team. *CAFF and others have begun to produce resources for school food service staff, who need produce handling information and recipe ideas. Funding for professional development programs that allow food service directors to share information and that train food service staff is a key component to moving Farm to School forward.*

Education: The Cafeteria as a Classroom

As any food service director who has taken chicken nuggets or canned peaches or tater tots off the menu will tell you, educating students is critical to the success of any Farm to School program. Food service directors who make changes to their menus that aren't accompanied by efforts to teach students about the importance of choosing healthy, local foods, quickly find that even carefully prepared farm-fresh meals can go to waste. For many American families, high-fat, high-sugar, highly processed foods are daily fare, so students expect to eat those foods at school. Unfortunately, because these foods tend to be the cheapest, this is particularly problematic in low-income areas where students are most dependent on school meals. Most students no longer have direct experience growing fruits and vegetables and have little or no knowledge about the agricultural system that produces our food. Food and farming are not topics often discussed at school and many students don't think twice about how food gets to the grocery store. Reconnecting students with the sources of their food, exciting their minds and their taste buds by teaching them about local farms and produce, can powerfully impact their lifelong eating habits. *CAFF's Know Your Farmer Education Program teaches students about local foods through farm field trips and farmer visits to classes and "Harvest of the Month" fruit and vegetable boxes that let teachers expand their students' palettes. With additional funding and by including agricultural education into environmental, health and science curricula, these types of programs could be expanded to reach far more children.*