

Planting a FARM to SCHOOL Program, Tips for Farmers

What is FARM to SCHOOL?

Farm to School Programs connect farms with school cafeterias and classrooms. These programs can include everything from farm field trips to nutrition education in the school garden to farm-fresh salad bars. The programs come in all shapes and sizes, but they fall into two main categories:

**Farm to School Education programs and
Farm to School Produce Distribution programs.**

A comprehensive Farm to School program puts both elements together: Fresh, locally-grown produce appears on the school menu, while students learn about local agriculture.

Farm to School programs are sprouting up across the country! **As a farmer, you can play a role in educating students and Selling your produce to schools. Ideally, you will have the opportunity to strengthen your connection to your community by doing both, though many farmers simply sell produce to schools.**

Follow these steps to get started selling produce:

1) Meet with your nearest Food Service Director.

When it comes to school food, the food service director, often called the child nutrition services director, holds the keys to the kingdom. School food is purchased at a district level, generally not school by school, so even if you'd like to just supply one or two schools, the district's director is the one in charge.

He or she is the one to talk to first, though you may end up working with a produce purchaser. Contact information for the director can typically be found on the school district website, or by calling the district office.

2) Figure out the district's capacity to buy directly from a farmer.

With the growth of the Farm to School movement in the last five years, you might find that some school districts are eager to establish connections with local farmers. CAFF and others have been working to ensure that they're familiar with the idea. Nonetheless, the national school meals program is a very complicated to administer and school food service departments often have their hands tied in many ways. Many districts have little or no capacity to process fresh produce (even cutting

Since 2001, CAFF's **Farm to School Initiative** has developed and coordinated on-the-ground programs connecting schools and school children to their local farming communities, while also creating resources, workshops and materials that help further the Farm to School movement in California. CAFF runs Farm to School programs in Monterey, Humboldt, Santa Cruz and Santa Clara counties, and connects local farmers to school cafeterias in the Sacramento Valley, Ventura and Bay areas.

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broccoli heads into florets might be too much), may need the produce distributed to all school sites equally or several times throughout the week because of limited storage capacity or might have a hard time setting up and dealing with invoices. On the other hand, you may find a champion food service director or a motivated Wellness Committee in the district that is fired up about local produce and will make the relationship work. Be sure to use active parents, administrator or teacher contacts that you have to create support for Farm to School.

3) As you begin selling produce, keep these suggestions in mind:

Start with the Seasonal Low-Hanging Fruit. And that's fruit. Whole fruit requires no extra processing, is easily added as a side dish or healthy dessert without having to change the main menu, and the enhanced taste is instantly enjoyed.

Create a Short List of Seasonal Swap Out Options. To make this project manageable for you and the district, pick a handful of items you produce in abundance between September and June and work with your director to swap out out-of-season items for ones that you grow. Your food service director might not be very aware of produce seasonality and it might be helpful to locate a seasonality chart or guide (or share your farm's planting/harvesting schedule) to educate them.

Be Up-Front and Realistic about Pricing. This is an important conversation to have at the outset of the project and you should be prepared to do a little math to translate food service portion requirements into cases of produce to calculate prices. School food service typically work within extremely tight budgets—meals are produced for anywhere between \$2.10-\$3.00 and often directors have between \$.10 to \$.25 per serving of a fruit or vegetable. There's a USDA Food Buying Guide to help translate portions and student numbers into cases and pounds, if your director hasn't purchased the items you arrange to sell. Keep in mind that schools may not be your highest profit markets, but they can be reliable, large volume customers and may help build your future markets by reaching children in your community.

Be Flexible. This is Different. Commit to keeping up good communication with the school district and check in regularly about quality, needs and expectations. For instance, a director may be used to having all peaches the same exact size, and may be unhappy with, or even reject, peaches that are variable sizes. If you talk about it, however, you may discover the director uses some recipes that could accommodate variable sizes. Be open to packing or sizing your produce in new ways as well. There are several good guides to wholesale markets that can help you to understand your director's expectations; we recommend the guide produce by Family Farmed, which can be found on familyfarmed.org.

Sound like a lot to organize? Don't be overwhelmed. The strongest Farm to School programs start small and grow like pumpkin plants, extending vines in many directions and producing fruit that slowly ripens! If you're inspired to plant the seeds of a Farm to School program, start with a manageable project and have fun.

