

# Growing Farm to School at the Local School Level

## A Guide for Child Nutrition Directors and Managers

### What is farm to school?

Farm to school allows schools to feature and expose students to a variety of locally produced foods in the school nutrition program. The program looks slightly different in every school site, but always includes one or more of three core components.

- Procurement, or purchasing, of local foods that are promoted and served in the school meal, in taste-tests with students or as a snack in the classroom. More information on defining local foods is available at Geographic Preference: What It Is and How to Use It, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/f2s/GeoPreference.pdf>.
- Educational activities related to agriculture, food, health and nutrition. Resources related to educational activities are available at Oklahoma Ag in the Classroom ([www.ag-classroom.org/ok](http://www.ag-classroom.org/ok)) and Farm to You (<https://humansciences.okstate.edu/fcs/cnep/farm-toyou/>).
- School gardens that provide students with hands-on, experiential learning experiences.

This fact sheet focuses on procurement of local foods, including school gardens, for use in school nutrition programs.

### Why should my school participate in farm to school?

Farm to school emphasizes the use of local foods. When local foods are featured in school nutrition programs, everyone benefits!

- Students have increased access to high-quality, fresh foods and tend to choose these foods more often. Students who have healthier diets tend to do better in school.
- Schools tend to see an increase in students' participation in the school meal program.



Because students prefer fresh foods, there is less food waste.

- Farmers and local producers gain a significant revenue source by opening doors to food service markets. This has potential to create new jobs and strengthen the local economy.

To learn more about the benefits of Farm to school, go to Research Shows Farm to School Works, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/f2s/ResearchShows.pdf>.

## How does my school purchase local foods for the school nutrition program?

While sourcing local foods can seem like a confusing and time-consuming process, there are five basic ways to incorporate fresh and local produce into schools. Schools can use one or a combination of all five approaches to meet the needs of the school. The five ways to incorporate fresh produce into schools include the following:

1. USDA DoD Fresh
2. Direct purchase through farmers
3. Cooperative purchasing
4. School gardens
5. Local distributors that sell locally

Any of the above methods can be used, as long as a description is included in the school districts' procurement plan. Descriptions of each method and the corresponding procurement plan clause are provided below.

### 1. USDA DoD Fresh

USDA DoD Fresh is a partnership between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Defense. Schools that participate in federally funded Child Nutrition Programs can purchase a variety of fresh, high-quality produce using part of their USDA Foods entitlement dollars. This method allows schools to manage and utilize money effectively.

#### How do I use DoD Fresh?

1. The USDA Regional DoD Fresh office coordinates with local farmers to offer fresh produce as part of the USDA Foods Program.
2. In January and February of every year, schools complete the USDA Foods Survey to allocate entitlement dollars for the next school year. A line item on the survey is designated for DoD Fresh. Enter the dollar amount you would like to spend on fresh produce. It is recommended to designate at least 10 percent of the school's total allocation. For smaller schools with less options to purchase fresh

fruits and vegetables, it is recommended to allocate more than 10 percent. Allocate fewer dollars to canned fruits and vegetables. Submit the survey as usual.

3. USDA DoD Fresh contracts with a local distributor to coordinate the school's weekly ordering and receipt of the produce. This is called the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Order/Receipt System (FFAVORS). Each week, the distributor provides the school with a list of fruits and vegetables available. Items locally grown or produced are marked with an asterisk. Order the amount and variety of fruits and vegetables needed to prepare the menu. Schools can also contact their USDA DoD Fresh produce vendor to learn what local products they plan to carry.
4. The fresh produce is delivered to the school on a weekly basis. Most schools report receiving quality produce at a good price.

Learn more about using DoD Fresh at Using DoD Fresh to Purchase Local Produce: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/f2s/DoDFresh.pdf>.

### Example Procurement Plan Language

The District may purchase local produce through the DoD program using the allotted dollars set aside from the Planned Assistance Level (PAL) funds allocated for commodities on the USDA Foods Survey. The SFA may utilize the DoD Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program vendor without conducting a procurement process, only for items that utilize the Planned Assistance Level funds. Anything purchased over the DoD PAL funds will be procured according to federal procurement regulations.

### 2. Direct Purchase from Farmers

Schools using this method purchase foods directly from local farmers, ranchers and farmer's markets. It provides flexibility to meet the mutual needs of both the school and local producer.



### How do I make direct purchases from farmers?

1. School nutrition personnel responsible for purchasing need to know the local producers and what foods are offered. To help identify local producers, use webpages such as the Oklahoma Farm to School at <https://okfarmtoschool.com/schools/participating-schools/> or Oklahoma Grown webpage at <http://www.okgrown.com/markets>.
2. Decide how much money will be used to purchase from a local farmer – this will determine the procurement methods to use. The USDA “Decision Tree: How Will You Bring Local Foods into the Cafeteria with Your Next Food Purchase?” provides useful information (<https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/f2s/DecisionTree.pdf>).
3. Clearly communicate the school's expectations by having product specifications. The specifications may include requirements for safe growing, harvesting and storage practices. Tips for writing specifications for locally sourced foods are provided below.
4. Schools solicit quotes for produce on a month-to-month basis, depending on what is affordable and available.
5. Delivery details can often be worked out with the farmers. For example, it may be possible for the farmer to deliver straight to the schools or a central warehouse, or schools may choose to pick up the produce from the farm or farmer's market.

### Example Procurement Plan Language

The District may purchase produce from local farmers or farmer's markets, from cooperative local farm procurement/bids, from school gardens and from local distributors selling local products. Pricing for farm to school produce should be obtained in manner consistent with the District procurement plan, using the correct method of procurement- informal methods include:

- Micropurchasing for purchases less than \$3,500 distributed equitably among qualified suppliers.
- Small purchase procedures for purchases more than \$3,500, but less than \$150,000. Verbal phone quotes are allowed and all qualified suppliers are given the same information.
- Formal methods using competitive sealed bids or competitive proposals for purchases equal to or more than \$150,000, using the RFP/IFB option.

The SFA is permitted under USDA regulations to purchase locally grown or locally raised agricultural products and apply a geographic preference when awarding and purchasing locally grown or raised products. Under federal law, school districts will apply a “local” geographic preference to minimally processed foods and determine what is “local” for purpose of the USDA programs such as National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. The school district(s) defines “locally grown products” eligible for this geographic preference at two levels:

1. foods grown within the state of Oklahoma as first preference, and
2. within 400 miles of of your school district as the second preference.

If the SFA's annual procurement of a particular product will be less than the school district's sealed bid threshold, the SFA may use a simplified process in sourcing local produce, provided that the sourcing method meets the school district bid-



ding threshold requirements not to exceed \$150,000.

The SFA will follow the OSDE Compliance guidelines when sourcing locally grown and raised agricultural products.

### 3. Cooperative Purchasing

Cooperative purchasing occurs when school districts come together to purchase local products. Sometimes, these arrangements are informal, while others are more formal and governed through bylaws. The benefits of joining together to procure local foods are: reduced food costs, administrative burdens and accessing markets or producers they may not be able to access alone. A benefit for the local producers is larger purchases establish a significant market.

#### How do I purchase through a local foods cooperative group?

1. First, determine if a purchasing cooperative already exists and if it meets the school district's needs. Collect basic information, such as how they operate, the types of products they offer and their reputation. The Oklahoma School Nutrition Association, neighboring school districts or the state agency may know of existing cooperatives your school can join.
2. If there is not an existing cooperative in the school's area, identify schools that would like to form a local foods cooperative.

- a. Convene a meeting of interested schools and come to consensus on how the cooperative will be governed (i.e., informally or formally) and on the types and quantity of foods to purchase.
  - b. Designate an individual from the cooperative to coordinate activities and communicate with the local producers. This will take some time, so someone from a larger district with a staff is best.
  - c. Identify farmers and local producers who are interested in producing for the cooperative. Learn what they produce and in what quantity. Use product specifications to communicate the cooperative's expectations.
  - d. The individual designated coordinator for the coop will develop and solicit a bid for local produce based on the needs of the cooperative, with specifications, amounts needed for each item, methods of distribution, food safety requirements, packaging and insurance requirements.
3. For more information on purchasing cooperatives, the Institute for Child Nutrition (ICN) has prepared detailed guidelines in Procurement in the 21st Century. (<http://www.nfsmi.org/documentlibraryfiles/PDF/20151009032855.pdf>).

#### Example Procurement Plan Language

The School Food Authority may utilize other school districts' local foods contracts or enter into an informal cooperative (a group of school districts/schools agreeing to cooperatively procure together to take advantage of volume pricing for products or services procured in one contract) as permitted by the contract, solicitation agreement and as agreed to by the supplier. Cooperatives, at a minimum, must follow Federal procurement regulations when procuring goods and services for its members.

### 4. School Gardens

School gardens come in many varieties, including acres of produce, greenhouses, tower gardens and indoor containers. School

gardens are a great way to creatively teach students about nutrition, healthy eating habits, agriculture, STEM and can serve as experiential education opportunities for all disciplines. The USDA does not prohibit schools from using produce grown in school gardens, so produce from school gardens can be used in a variety of ways. While school gardens rarely produce enough food to make up a large portion of the school meals, using the produce can increase school meal acceptance, enhance learning, supplement meals and serve as a nutrition education tool.

### **How do I use foods grown in a school garden?**

1. Schools can use funds from their non-profit food service account to purchase garden needs such as seeds, fertilizer, rakes and watering cans, as long as the garden is used within the context of the program. For example, the produce may be used as a taste test for students or as part of a school meal. Produce from the school garden can be donated back to the school, purchased through an intergovernmental agreement or purchased through micro-purchase methods (purchases less than \$3,500).
2. Food safety is often a concern when considering school gardens. If safe growing, harvesting and storage practices are followed, produce from school gardens carries no greater food safety risk than produce from other sources. Produce from school gardens travels the shortest distance from harvest to plate, so safety can be easily



managed with more direct oversight than produce travelling longer distances.

3. School gardens are often in full bloom and production in the summer months, which can make staffing the gardens a challenge. Options for meeting staffing needs, both in the summer and supplemental garden staff during the school year, utilize volunteers, community groups, teachers, students and parents. Funding sources are available that may cover the cost of staff, in addition to the construction and maintenance of the gardens. Options for school gardens not needing summer maintenance include hydroponic systems and tower gardens. More information on funding school gardens can be found on the USDA Farm to School resource page: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool/farm-school-resources>

### **Example Procurement Plan Language**

The District may purchase produce grown in a school garden by utilizing the micro-purchasing method of procurement (less than \$3,500).

## **5. Local Distributors That Sell Local**

Schools can competitively solicit bids from the local distributors that provide other products and services to the school for its regular food service operations.

### **How do I know my distributor is providing locally grown foods?**

1. Communicate with the food distributors to let them know you are interested in purchasing locally grown produce. Schools often are surprised to learn their distributors are already working with, or in the process of, establishing relationships with local producers. If not, they may be more inclined to seek out opportunities with local farmers if they are aware schools are interested in buying local produce.
2. Use language in your bids that assign more points for local products.

<b>Evaluation Criteria</b>	<b>Total Points</b>
Pricing & responsiveness: i.e., farm to school; fixed case pricing, fixed fee per case pricing, other pricing criteria, duration of firm pricing; escalation calculation methods	51
Suppliers qualifications: i.e. size, capacity, service capabilities, plant/facility, personnel, insurance, other related factors	17
Farm to school-local products & farms: i.e., breadth of products, farms, & supply capabilities*	15
Supplier's references & past performance	7
Supplier's safety, health and sanitation programs, practices, awards, performance, and evaluation site visits	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

\* Points for Preference of Local Produce (15 total out of 100 points) will be determined by the number of Oklahoma grown products that can be provided by the bidder (there are 36 different fruits/vegetables grown in Oklahoma. See Oklahoma Harvest Calendar), the number of farmers who will provide these local products, the Harvest of the Month program submitted by the bidder, and whether the local product is level one from the state, or level 2 within the region of 400 miles from the school district's area.

### Example Procurement Plan Language

The District may purchase locally grown produce through the produce distributor bid, using a competitive proposal. The award of the produce bid will contain evaluation factor points assigned to locally grown produce, as listed below.

Provided a Bidder's proposal is responsive, evaluation and award will be based on the following evaluation criteria. Award of this proposal will be made to the Bidder(s) whose proposal(s) is most advantageous considering price and the other factors, including but not limited to the following factors.

### Local Farm Requirements

- Local farms shall grow food with no detectable pesticide residues on/in final food products. Organic is preferred.

- Local farms shall be able to deliver product to the District's contracted produce supplier within 72 hours of harvest.
- Local farms shall not pre-treat, wash or clean raw or lightly processed foods with toxic detergents or cleansing agents such as bleach, ammonium or others not listed here.
- Local farms must be willing and capable of working with or delivering directly to the District's contracted produce vendor. They must be willing to meet basic variety, grading and packing standards of the contracted produce vendor.
- Local farms shall be able to provide experiential educational opportunities for District students such as farm tours and Farm to Student events.

## Keeping it Legal

Regardless of the approach, a school choosing to purchase local foods must follow all local, state and federal procurement regulations. The amount of funds the school district will spend is a primary factor in determining which procurement method, or methods are used. This is often referred to as the spending threshold. To help make these decisions, the USDA has provided a "Decision Tree: How Will You Bring Local Foods into the Cafeteria with Your Next Food Purchase?" available at <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/f2s/DecisionTree.pdf>. Once the procurement method has been identified, it should be included in the school district's Child Nutrition procurement plan. Example language is provided above under each approach.

## Tips for Writing Specifications

Product specifications are a general description of the local foods a school district is looking to purchase. Using specifications when purchasing locally is as important as when purchases are made from a large distributor because they clearly communicate the school's

expectations. Example items to include in the specification for local foods include:

- Freshness (e.g. “delivered with 48 hours of harvest”);
- Harvest techniques;
- Production practices;
- State of origin labelling; and/or
- Ability to provide farm visits or visit classrooms.

## **Bringing it Together: What does local purchasing look like in practice?**

A school district has decided that Farm to School and local foods would benefit the school nutrition program. Language was added to the Child Nutrition procurement plan, allowing for the use of federal funds. The district defined locally grown as within the state or adjacent states.

The school district, or local purchasing cooperative, was aware that several producers grow tomatoes and the following specification was written.

- Available at least 10 months out of the year
- Greenhouse-grown, hydroponically grown or grown outside
- Grade No. 1 quality
- Fully ripe
- Red color stage
- Ten-day shelf life
- Pesticide free and organic
- GAP and Good Handling Practices certified, preferred



- Transported to a school warehouse or to 18 individual schools
- Must be delivered two days before service
- Must be able to provide an estimated quantity of 36 cases per week

Based on the amount of tomatoes used in previous school years, the director determined the spending threshold for purchasing locally grown tomatoes falls below the small-purchase procurement threshold (less than \$150,000). Using a list of tomato growers in the area, the director contacted producers to determine interest, and the written specifications were emailed to at least three producers for quotes. Once the quotes were received, the school district made, then documented a decision on the producer who best met the school district's needs. The delivery details were worked out and a contract was signed for purchasing tomatoes throughout the school year at a set price. Throughout the school year, the director monitored and evaluated the quality of product and service.

For other products, such as lettuce greens, the school district decided to use DoD Fresh. In March, when completing the DoD Fresh Survey, the director allocated 10 percent of the entitlement food dollars to DoD Fresh for the following school year. Once the school year began, the director placed weekly orders for the needed amount of greens from the DoD Fresh vendor using the FFAVORS order system. This approach did not require the director to write specifications or solicit quotes.

The director marketed the availability of Farm to School local produce to students and parents by featuring them on the school menu. Classroom activities were coordinated by having the tomato farmer visit the cafeteria and engage with students near the salad bar.

## **Conclusion**

While implementing Farm to school initiatives may seem overwhelming, there are benefits to students, the school and the commu-



nity. Schools may use a variety of approaches in purchasing local foods that can be combined to best meet the needs of the school and producer. In making decisions, there are many resources available to help. To get started, check out websites listed throughout this fact sheet and below.

- Community Food Systems: Resources <https://www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool/farm-school-resources>
- Community Food Systems: Fact Sheets <https://www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool/fact-sheets>
- Oklahoma Farm to School <http://okfarmtoschool.com/>

## Sources

USDA-Decision Tree: How Will You Bring Local Foods into the Cafeteria with Your Next Food Purchase? (August 2017) Accessed April 8, 2009. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/f2s/DecisionTree.pdf>.

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