



# [ Farm to School Programs ]

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## A Brief History of School Lunch

**S**chool meals have a long history in the United States. Local programs date back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, although it was not until the early 1900s that significant efforts could be found in any number. Between 1895 and 1920, however, schools in a number of large metropolitan areas began to offer lunches to students, often by way of private, social charitable organizations although occasionally through schools themselves. These programs offered all students who did not go home for lunch (as was often the case in schools at that time) nutritious meals, with the price often subsidized by the organization or schools for those children unable to pay. With the spread of compulsory education, schools began to see increased numbers of poor children in their ranks. School meal programs often were introduced in response to concerns about the educational readiness of the thousands of these children who arrived at school hungry.<sup>1</sup>

Up until the Great Depression, however, most school lunch programs were the purview of private groups associated with the schools. In the 1930s, as hunger became more widespread among children, several states adopted school lunch legislation, with a handful making provisions for the feeding of children whose families could not pay for the meals (typically mandated to be offered at the cost of the food alone). At about this time, the federal government began to extend aid to schools and communities to support these activities and, by 1936, the secretary of the Department of Agriculture had been given both the authority and funds to purchase surplus commodities to distribute in a manner that would not disrupt normal commerce. School meal programs were a major outlet for these products. Furthermore, the Works Projects Act employed thousands of idled individuals in preparing, supporting and administering school lunch programs throughout the Depression. By the end of the 1930s and the early part of the 1940s, this kind of federal support provided surplus commodities to nearly 79,000 schools serving meals to more than 5 million students.

The outbreak of the second World War sharply curtailed both the surplus commodities and free labor on which the program had so greatly expanded. By 1944, the number of schools that were participating in the program had been reduced by nearly half, a trend Congress attempted to remedy with temporary legislation and appropriations in 1943, 1944, and 1945.

The National School Lunch Act of 1946 formalized a federal role in school lunches, although the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) had provided schools with food and resources for several years prior to the Act's passage. The program initially served lunch to 7.1 million low-income children a day, growing to 22 million children by 1970, and reaching around 27 million children in the 1980s. [The school breakfast program was created as a two-year pilot program in 1966 and was subsequently expanded, eventually becoming permanent in 1975.] In all, the school lunch program, which is administered at the federal level by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, has supported more than 187 billion lunches since its inception.<sup>2</sup> In 2001, cash reimbursements and commodities for school lunches cost the federal government \$6 billion.

Schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program must offer meals that meet USDA's nutritional guidelines, which include limiting the amount of calories from fat to 30 percent (and only 10 percent saturated fat) and providing at least one-third of the recommended daily allowances (RDA) of protein, Vitamins A and C, iron, calcium and calories.<sup>3</sup> Schools that participate must serve lunches for free or reduced costs to eligible children, and are reimbursed with cash subsidies, receive surplus commodities from the USDA, and free bonus shipments of food for each meal served.

## So What's for Lunch?

Unfortunately, school lunches have not always been particularly healthy, and the school environment is not always entirely supportive of healthy food choices. A survey conducted by the USDA in 1991-1992 indi-

cated that, while meeting a variety of nutritional requirements, school lunches often exceeded recommended daily allowances for fat and saturated fats.<sup>4</sup> In response, the Department introduced the School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children (SMI) which included technical and educational resources for schools and new standards for the nutritional content of school lunches. The years that followed saw a significant drop in the levels of fat and an increase in the amount of carbohydrates in school lunches relative to calorie content. Because the SMI standards apply to all foods selected by students, there has been an across-the-board reduction in the percent of calories from fat and saturated fat in the lunches schools provide, regardless of whether they are part of a school lunch program.

Schools generally have been successful in meeting the mandates for nutritional content, but have been less successful in reducing the amount of calories from fat found in school lunches based on the average nutritional content offered by a school over a week. In the years following the implementation of the SMI, most schools made changes in lunch menus to comply with national dietary guidelines. An unexpected consequence of these menu changes was a perception among school food authorities that students liked the new lunches better than the previous menus by considerable margins.<sup>5</sup> In general, cafeteria managers also tended to report less waste with the new menus as well. In essence, the outcome of making meals healthier for students was to increase student's enjoyment and reduce the amount of food left on their plates.

School lunches often compete with foods that are not regulated by federal guidelines and often offer limited nutritional value.<sup>6</sup> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that in 2000, 98 percent of high schools, 74 percent of middle schools, and 43 percent of elementary schools allowed student purchases of foods and beverages from vending machines, school stores, canteens and snack bars.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, some schools choose to offer competing lunch options that are outside the USDA lunch program that are more appealing to students. Among these are a la carte options, particularly prevalent in upper grades, which allow students to choose only items that appeal to them. A study by the USDA indicates that nine out of 10 schools offer a la carte options for students, principally fruits and vegetables, fruit juices, cookies or other baked goods not low in fat, or pizza, hamburgers and sandwiches.<sup>8</sup> Districts' use of a la carte and vending machines can vary widely. A report from California indicated that a la carte sales represented up to 70 percent of all food sold in schools.<sup>9</sup>

A la carte sales represent a shift in school food revenue, and as such generally are seen as having only limited impact on school budgets. Indeed, because a

la carte offerings may be more attractive to students, they may actually increase food sales. Vending machines, on the other hand, generate revenue for school systems, but these gains are offset by losses to school meal programs. A 2003 survey in Texas indicated that schools raised \$54 million in revenue from vending sales of competing foods, but lost \$60 million in revenue for school lunch programs.<sup>10</sup> Schools participating in the federal school lunch program are prohibited from selling foods of "minimal nutritional value" in food service areas during lunch, but the program places no other restrictions on these items (which include soft drinks, frozen ices, candies and gums, but does not include other snack foods such as high-fat baked goods or chips), which can be sold outside the food service area at any time and in the cafeteria at times other than lunch.<sup>11</sup>

In the past, school lunches were derived from mostly local sources and prepared on site just prior to being served. As with the rest of the food industry, increases in economies of scale in production, preparation and storage and changes in distribution networks signaled a shift to more highly processed foods bought from farms in any number of locations. This was accelerated in part by the dependence on surplus commodities in federally supported school meal programs which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s. As schools sought to economize throughout the 1980s and 1990s, they moved to central kitchens and food service vendors. These, in turn, increased the schools' reliance on highly processed foods, particularly foods that are reheated on the premises.

As the nation's food systems have become more complex, the distances food travels, and the time it takes to go from farm to plate, have increased. Fresh food today typically travels an average of 1,500 to 2,500 miles from producer to consumer, equal to at least the distance from Austin, Texas, to Richmond, Virginia. This distance represents a 25 percent increase from 1980, with transit times stretching out to a week or possibly more.<sup>12</sup> Such extensive transportation reflects a market that can provide fresh fruits and vegetables in dizzying variety and abundance year round. It also requires considerable fuel and energy consumption and tremendous hidden costs related to the extensive transit times and distances. Furthermore, as food systems have become global, large cities and towns are now often quite distant from their food supplies and are thus more vulnerable to transportation disruptions or spikes in cost.

From a program initially intended to fight hunger, the school lunch program has assumed a greater role in managing the nutritional health of young Americans. As the prevalence of overweight American children increased, the need to provide more careful attention

to the content of school lunches became apparent. This was reflected in the changes enacted by Congress in the 1990s to improve the nutritional quality of school lunches. The federal school lunch program affords schools with a considerable amount of flexibility in how they will meet its requirements, including basing their compliance on food items served or analysis of the nutritional content of the menu as a whole. Schools also have flexibility in how they serve student meals, allowing students choices within the menu to reduce waste and increase participation.

School lunches are not the only aspect of student nutrition, however. Schools play a role in educating children about food choices and diet. As the focus in many schools has shifted to emphasize core curricular activities, however, many opportunities for teaching about food and diet have been lost.<sup>13</sup> Teaching about nutrition in the lunchroom and elsewhere in schools is seen as a vital component of teaching children how to develop healthy habits that will carry on through adulthood. Furthermore, as schools have become dependent on revenue from vending machines and other sales to provide for enrichment activities and other items not covered in school budgets, they are hesitant to restrict student access to competing foods.

School nutrition directors often voice concern about the introduction of new foods, particularly fresh fruits and vegetables, into the school lunch program. Specifically, a worry is that students will not eat these foods, thus increasing waste, or will shun school lunches entirely, affecting the financial bottom line of the school lunch program. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, studies of farm to school programs in California indicated that when farm-fresh foods are on the menu, student participation in the school lunch program increased and resulted in less waste than compared to their peers in schools in which these offerings were not available.<sup>14</sup> A further concern is the additional time and money involved in preparing fresh foods compared to pre-processed varieties. Reducing these costs, or compensating systems for the added costs of increasing the amount of fresh food available represent two challenges to improving the quality of school lunches.

## Children and Obesity

Childhood obesity has become a major crisis in American public health. Twelve percent of children are considered overweight\* and another 14.8 percent are

\* In the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile for body mass index by weight and gender.

† Above the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile, but below the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile for body mass index by weight and gender.

at risk of becoming overweight.<sup>†</sup> With obesity comes a number of very significant health concerns, among them diabetes, musculo-skeletal problems, increased blood pressure, and increased likelihood for heart disease. States have many reasons to be concerned about this trend, not the least of which is the long-term cost implications of treating the chronic problems associated with obesity. Overweight or obese children and teens have a higher likelihood of continuing to be overweight or obese adults, increasing their risks for heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, and some types of cancer.<sup>15</sup> Encouraging healthy eating and lifestyles are also a cost-effective step states can take to improve the lives of their citizens.

While obesity among children is related to a number of causes, poor diet is clearly at the top of the list. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, slightly more than one in five children eat the recommended five or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day, and more than two out of three consume too much fat.<sup>16</sup> Because more than 28 million children receive one or two meals a day through nationally subsidized school nutrition programs, the role schools play in developing healthy eating habits by providing one or two meals a day to school children cannot be overstated.<sup>17</sup>

## Small Farm Survival

Obviously, food comes from farms. Whether down the road or across the country, or even further away, the food that students are served in schools (as well as elsewhere) is the result of effort and labor with which very few students are familiar. As the percentage of Americans actively engaged in farming has declined, so has the understanding of farming and farm systems among the American citizenry. This disconnection between food production and consumption worries observers across a broad spectrum of specialties.

Farm and rural advocates have long raised concerns about the decline in small- and medium-sized farms. These operations served as the foundation of the agricultural economy for much of America's history and continue to play a vital role in rural economies. Farms with sales of less than \$250,000 account for nearly 92 percent of all farms in the United States. These small, family farms also manage more than two-thirds of the farmland in the country.

As the farm sector has consolidated, small farms in particular have been squeezed due to their lack of economy of scale and an inability to capture much added value from their products. Because these farms also are less likely to participate in government commodity payments, their farm income is very tightly linked to their farm gate receipts (the revenue farmers make from sales). Increasing this income through

niche marketing, direct marketing, or value-added production are three common avenues for farmers and states to explore.

Among the most promising options for improving farmers' incomes is the forging of alliances with communities through new marketing relationships. For producers of fruits and vegetables, farmers markets, pick-your-own, and community-supported agriculture projects, and especially farm to school programs, provide farmers with higher than market-value income from their produce. These activities also link farmers with local consumers which, in turn, reinforces often hidden food networks, and underscores for everyone involved the importance of each component of a functional food system. Another advantage for small farmers that these approaches provide is the ability to diversify their marketing options, greatly increasing the control they have over how, and to whom, they sell their produce and for how much.

### **The Farm to School Connection**

If, as is often suggested, fresh food is a key component in improving school lunches, then connecting farms to schools represents a logical solution to the child nutrition problem. Farm to school programs promote the use of locally produced foods in school nutrition programs and often include educational activities about local food and farming issues. Farm to school programs also can increase fresh fruit and vegetable options available to students, and have been shown to increase consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables among participating students.

These programs also create new markets for local agriculture producers which can help to foster a healthy local food system. As connections between schools

and farms grow, students develop new awareness about their diet, the impact their food choices have on their health, their local economy and their environment, and the way that food comes from farm to plate.

Farm to school programs vary in size from one school and one farm to regional programs providing produce from numerous farms to schools in several districts. Farm to school programs generally take one of four basic forms. School food service staff can buy food direct from individual farmers, which allows staff to have more input on the items they receive and how they receive them and to develop relationships with the farmers. This method also may reduce costs and keep the price below the level that would mandate a bidding process. The disadvantages of this arrangement are relatively apparent, however, including increased administrative burdens through relationships with multiple small farmers, particularly for food service directors accustomed to ordering from one centralized source, and limitations in the variety and quantities of produce available.

A second model is for farmers in a cooperative or informal network to join together to distribute food to schools. Such a model greatly reduces the amount of effort and complexity in the system for the school staff and often expands the options as well. This also can simplify the transportation and delivery of produce for both farmers and schools. In some parts of the region, however, these cooperatives do not exist or are not oriented toward production for direct sales. Because these networks require coordination among farmers, establishing a new network for school food service can require considerable upfront effort on producers' parts.

### **Department of Defense**

The U.S. military feeds roughly half a million uniformed men and women every day. While those on combat or overseas deployments may not all enjoy the fruits of American agriculture, those stationed in the United States often are housed and fed by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). It is then not surprising that the Department of Defense is one of the largest purchasers of fresh fruits and vegetables in the United States. As such, the DoD has considerable buying power to negotiate favorable rates for all manner of commodities and fresh foods, and has a well-established system for collecting, sorting and distributing these foods to end users.

Since 1994, the Department of Defense has allowed hospitals, schools, and prisons the use of their produce buying services. The Department's Logistics Agency operates two programs, including one—the DoD Farm to School Program—which specifically seeks out local produce. Both programs are likely to purchase items from nearby, whenever possible. Schools can choose from up to 300 produce items, which vary with the season, to be delivered to them at a place and time that they designate.

Schools can use their commodity entitlement funds, section 4 and 11 funds (federal and state meal reimbursements), and local school system funds to purchase these products. The 2002 Farm Bill included authorization for up to \$50 million to expand the program to all states and territories (double the previous authorization). The DoD manages the financial component of the sales (billing districts and paying farmers) and charges a very modest percentage for overhead.

A third option is for schools to purchase food at regional farmers' markets. In general, a buyer from the school system will pre-order food from farmers and arrange to pick it up at a regional market when the farmer delivers other goods. This provides the school with an opportunity to inspect the quality of the produce prior to delivery and allows for a quick survey of other potential vendors. It may not be a feasible option for areas where the growing season does not support farmers' markets year round, and involves considerable labor and time from school staff. It does reinforce farmer-school relationships and provides schools with a good perspective on the options for fresh produce available through a presence at the farmers' market.

A final option is most similar to what most schools currently do: ordering locally grown food from a traditional wholesaler. This maintains the relationship schools already have with distributors but supports local agriculture and encourages the distributor to acquire products from local farms. It is not always possible to be confident that suppliers are purchasing local produce, however, or that they will be diligent in identifying local sources. Furthermore, arrangements such as these do not build farmer-school relationships. The most common approach in this category is the use of the Department of Defense's (DoD) Logistics Agency, which is available for use by a range of institutions [see box].

The programs offer the advantages (to schools and farmers) of management and coordination by an outside agency over a broad area. Most statewide farm to school programs take advantage of the DoD program to purchase produce and conduct accounts payable and receivable functions. Even with the use of this service, however, regional and statewide programs tend to operate best with an individual (or individuals) being responsible for coordinating and promoting the program among schools and farmers and providing feedback and guidance to producers on the products schools need and can use.

Regardless of how these programs are arranged, farm to school programs provide some concrete benefits to schools and students. By working closely with farmers, schools are able to get products that meet their exact specifications without added transport and handling costs, and much fresher too. Importantly, a study conducted by the University of California at Davis found that farm to school programs actually shifted participating students' diets, with students choosing more healthy options when provided with fresh produce at lunch.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, school food service directors note that by increasing the fresh options available, more students participate in school lunches, which benefit the programs overall.<sup>19</sup>

## **Making it Happen: What's in the Toolbox?**

Farm to school programs can be initiated at the local level by farmers, school nutrition directors, principals, parents, and school superintendents among others. Larger regional and state programs often are the outcome of workshops, concerted state efforts, or the growth of a smaller program. Getting a farm to school program started requires a degree of coordination and commitment among producers and school officials, and can benefit greatly from support and encouragement from state government.

A particularly straightforward means to facilitate farm to school programs is state legislation encouraging state and local agencies doing business with the state to purchase local, state-grown fruit, vegetables, and agricultural products whenever possible, and to establish targets for increased amounts of these products purchased by state agencies, institutions and schools. Local purchasing legislation has been used in a number of states in a range of sectors, including agriculture. Absent this, schools may require limited exemptions to state competitive bidding requirements if these pose limitations on the purchase of locally available foods.

Toward this end, state departments of agriculture can assist school systems and other institutions in locating local sources of food, providing technical and marketing assistance to small farms to help them sell to the institutional market, and by providing educational resources for schools on nutrition, gardening, and agriculture. The authority responsible for oversight of state farmers' markets also has a role to play in establishing appropriate marketing systems and connecting buyers and suppliers of local agricultural products. School food service authorities also may require guidance on what exemptions to bidding processes they can take advantage of, particularly those pertaining to minority-owned, women-owned, small, and socially disadvantaged businesses.<sup>20</sup>

The 2002 Farm Bill included language related to the National School Lunch Program that encourages schools to purchase locally produced foods for school meal programs to the extent practicable and appropriate.<sup>21</sup> The Farm Bill also doubled the amount authorized for Community Food Project grants, which have been used to provide startup grants to institutions to defray the initial costs, including storage facilities, equipment and related materials, although appropriations for these projects has significantly lagged.

Local foods can be a part of school lunches in a variety of ways simultaneously. Many schools offer a salad bar for students and staff alongside, or in addition to, a hot meal. Salad bars can include fruits and vegetables from local farms as part or their offerings without

need for extensive menu coordination, with the added benefit of increased student consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables as a result. Local produce also can be included in the main menu of the school lunch. In so doing, school food authorities often remark that the quality of the food served is improved.<sup>22</sup> This approach requires minimal planning outside that associated with identifying and procuring menu items that are locally available. As school food service authorities and farmers work together, the foods that will be locally available at certain times of the year will become useful in guiding menu choices. These programs depend upon local farms having the capacity to produce sufficient quantities and variety of food throughout a growing season.

A final option for including local produce is to create special events and meals entirely around local foods. By having a meal, a week of meals, or a recurring meal (once a week, month, etc.), student and staff awareness of local produce increases, as does their exposure to the seasonal variety of foods in the area. These events can be tied to special educational opportunities, such as farmer visits, 4-H or FFA presentations, or field trips, to reinforce the relationships between local food and communities.

Regardless of the model undertaken, the educational component of farm to school programs should not be ignored. While the program has benefits to students and farmers simply by increasing consumption (and thus sales) of locally produced fruits and vegetables, the opportunities to establish meaningful connections for students (and community members) with their local food system and environment are extremely beneficial as well. These can include posters, signage and other

promotional materials in the cafeteria itself. Classroom activities and lessons associated with farm to school programs can help provide context for lessons about food, nutrition, agriculture and the environment and to help develop a sense of place among students. Students also can participate through gardens in the school yard that reflect the local options being offered in the cafeteria and through field trips to participating farms to view food production firsthand.

## Case Studies from the Region *Alabama*

Alabama provides two lessons on how to introduce fresh, local farm produce to schools. The first comes from Opelika, Alabama. Opelika took serious steps in 1995 to change the food it served to students. At the time, a middle school employed one cook whose primary job was to fry French fries six hours a day, enough to serve a pound per student. The schools served a brownie that contained 47 grams of fat (the U.S. recommended daily allowance for adults and children older than 4 is 65 grams of fat).

But the Opelika School System, under the leadership of Melanie Payne, the system's child nutrition program director, took the USDA up on a new method of planning menus based on the nutritional value of the meals served, a departure from the previous system based on offering certain servings of different food groups which more tightly controls the menu options. She also turned off the fryers.

Opelika's change was not universally nor immediately popular, and it took several years of training and effort to develop menus and meals that were appealing to students and which met nutritional requirements.

### **Summertime, and the kitchen is...busy**

Summertime, when most schools are closed or do not offer full-day classes, means school kitchens close. For years this also has meant that children served by federally subsidized breakfast and lunch programs may not get those meals. Recent efforts to ensure that low-income children continue to receive balanced meals if they are in institutional settings (such as day camps and summer programs) have extended the reach of nutrition programs based in schools, with many students served through the same central kitchens that prepare their meals during the school year. Furthermore, many school systems, with their large institutional kitchens and experienced staff, routinely cater lunches for park and camp programs in order to make the best use of their facilities and to increase revenue for the nutrition program as a whole.

The importance of these programs is becoming increasingly clear. The Florida Legislature passed legislation during its 2005 session mandating school districts to develop plans to sponsor a summer nutrition program site within at least five miles of at least one elementary school at which half or more of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals and within at least 10 miles of every such school.

For farm to school programs, the summer also is a time of remarkable bounty. While the South enjoys a generally long growing season, many foods children find appealing are only locally available in the summer months when schools are out of session. Summer meal programs represent a tremendous opportunity to capitalize on the abundant supply of seasonal produce and to put appealing options in front of children when the food items are at their peak of freshness. From berries and melons to corn and tomatoes, students in summer meal programs can be provided a rich variety of foods that most children naturally find very appealing.

Cooks in the system receive ongoing training from professional chefs on how to cook flavorful, lower, fat meals, with the result being a broad range of options for the students to enjoy.

A major component of Payne’s success in Opelika has been the inclusion of fresh food, with the goal of having something fresh on the menu every day. To this end, the system has established relationships with local farm co-ops for fresh, pre-packaged seasonal vegetables, including collard greens, green beans and sweet potatoes.

Three years ago, the state of Alabama initiated a farm to school program following a presentation at a Southeast Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association meeting. The program has grown from eight farmers in its first year to 26 this year, providing schools across the state with apples, sweet potatoes, cantaloupes, satsumas, and watermelons, among other crops. The program’s successful first year, which shipped \$381,844 worth of produce, was followed by two difficult seasons owing to hurricane and disease damage to several key crops, reducing the amount of produce available for sale.

The state uses the DoD as the coordinating agency, although grading (which is conducted by Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries personnel), pickup and delivery is coordinated by the state. School systems forward their produce needs to the state Department of Education, which compiles a list for the Department of Agriculture, which then works with the DoD.

Because schools have very specific produce needs, state department of agriculture staff have spent a considerable amount of time providing extension support on the grades, varieties and specifications for produce intended for schools. While this represents a complication in establishing the program, farmers have found selling to schools sufficiently beneficial to begin growing crops specifically for this market, most particularly satsumas and, soon, kiwis.

State Department of Agriculture staff and representatives from schools both report very positive feedback from the program. Student consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables has increased, and farmers have a stable and dependable market for their produce.

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**Florida**

The New North Florida Marketing Cooperative has been selling produce to schools since the late 1990s. The Cooperative was formed among a group of black farmers in the area as a means of increasing their income. The Cooperative initially donated 3,000 pounds of greens to the schools to gain the interest of the schools. While originally serving 13 schools in Gadsen County, the Cooperative has grown to provide produce to 15 school districts in Florida, Georgia and Alabama, serving food to 300,000 students.

The Cooperative initially focused on providing greens to schools in the area and has expanded over time to a variety of fresh produce, although they continue to focus on producing three to four main items for year-round sales. Among the products the Cooperative has sold to schools are collard greens, leafy greens, field peas, muscadine grapes, turnip greens, strawberries, blackberries, and watermelon. The greens are washed, cut and packaged before delivery, making the products more attractive to the schools and increasing the value for the cooperative. The Cooperative endeavors to sell to schools year round, working with schools to ensure the product arrives in a form that can be readily included on the menu.

The Cooperative, and specifically its members, is responsible for delivering produce two to three times a week to schools, with some products also distributed via produce vendors. All shipments carry the Cooperative’s label along with nutritional information. Deliveries are made, whenever possible, in the Cooperative’s refrigerated trailer which bears the association’s logo.

The Cooperative received a \$4,000 grant from the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service and a \$3,000 loan from the West Florida Resource Conservation and Development Council which were used for infrastructure and equipment purchases. Grant funding and commercial loans also provided the capital needed to purchase a refrigerated truck, cold storage facility, and a packing shed with a cutting machine and sinks for cleaning greens. Prior to the purchase of these items, the lack of storage facilities obligated members to harvesting and processing the produce in one day. The members, through their direct sales, raised the bulk of the capital and all of the operating expenses. The Cooperative members and participants supply most of the labor involved, with additional day labor hired during peak periods.

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## Kentucky

Unfortunately, Kentucky's farm to school program has lapsed in recent years. Borrowing heavily from the North Carolina model, a few school districts had been purchasing produce through the DoD in the late 1990s. Then, in May 2000, the USDA, the state Departments of Agriculture and Education, and the University of Kentucky conducted a workshop in Georgetown, Kentucky, on farm to school marketing. The 180 participants represented a broad range of individuals, from state and federal commodity procurement officials to representatives of local farm and school groups. The workshop was intended to provide a forum for local small farmers and school food service buyers and introduce participants to the existing farm to school programs and assistance available for starting up. It had as an outcome a farm to school pilot program in two regions of the state. By 2003, the program had expanded to the entire state, with schools encouraged to request local produce through the DoD if prices are comparable to out-of state produce.

The state program dependence on the DoD for purchasing provides for no additional cost to the state or school systems, although it does limit the contact schools have with individual farmers. Schools place orders in May, and contracted produce distributors ship to seven centralized sites for delivery to individual schools. Additional orders for supplemental food are posted for bids monthly, with first preference given to cost and second to Kentucky origin. In general, Kentucky products, when in season, are price competitive. Farm gate prices for the state program are negotiated by the state Department of Agriculture and the DoD, with a 5.6 percent surcharge applied to this price and passed on to the schools as the cost of the program.

No additional funding has been required for the program, as farm to school activities have been included in the jobs of all those involved. The program has the potential to expand into educational activities as well, with some districts already connecting school to farm activities with nutrition and health education. Additional components, including agriculture education, are being considered. While the program is no longer administered on a statewide basis, local districts may operate discrete programs, and the state parks system operates a local purchasing program for the canteens and restaurants operated by Kentucky State Parks.

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## North Carolina

The farm to school program in North Carolina originally started in 1997 with a pilot program selling two varieties of apples from western North Carolina through the DoD. The partnership between the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs' Markets and Food Distribution Division and the DoD was eventually expanded to the entire state, roughly half of North Carolina's 120 school districts participate in the program. The program involves approximately 30 North Carolina farmers.

To facilitate the adoption of the program, the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation to provide 50 schools with \$1,000 grants to make purchases from state farmers. The USDA also helped the program get started by holding a town hall meeting in 1998 that pulled together many of the potential partners in food service projects. This workshop featured information about using the DoD's purchasing system to conduct a farm to school program.

The state Department of Agriculture asks school systems about their produce needs which are then transmitted to the DoD, which in turn works with the department to locate in-state farmers who produce these items. Food Distribution Division staff administer the delivery system, picking up produce from farmers and shipping it to school systems' central storage facilities or individual schools. The DoD establishes prices with producers and schools, bills schools and pays farmers. Having moved well beyond apples, the program now offers a wide range of produce from North Carolina farmers, including watermelon, cantaloupe, apples, cabbage, broccoli, sweet potatoes, potatoes, and strawberries. In the 2004 school year, the program purchased 38,981 cases of fresh produce worth \$521,639 from North Carolina growers. Because storage facilities and transportation costs are assumed by the state, the program is very financially competitive for local districts. For most schools, the integration of fresh produce items into the menu is within the range of their current kitchen infrastructure.

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## Oklahoma

The Oklahoma farm to school pilot program grew out of the Oklahoma Food Policy Council, an advisory group to the state Department of Agriculture that works on issues broadly related to the food system in the state. In 2002, the Council surveyed institutional food service providers, including public schools, to determine their interest in purchasing local food. The Council found strong willingness to do so if price and quality were competitive, with respondents indicating interest in a wide variety of products that can be grown in Oklahoma.

The pilot project began in 2004 with four districts—two large suburban and two in small towns—receiving seedless watermelons from one farmer. The districts placed their orders with the state Department of Human Services' Commodity Distribution and School Nutrition Unit (which administers the federal school lunch program in the state). Locating farmers to provide the requested items was the joint responsibility of the state Department of Agriculture and the DoD. Purchasing was managed through the DoD, which is responsible for billing districts and paying farmers in the program. The watermelons were shipped from the farmer to the districts through a privately contracted produce delivery company.

After a successful first year, the program expanded to an additional two school districts, including the Tulsa schools, essentially doubling the number of lunchrooms to over 130. The program is still limited to watermelons, in part due to limitations of the short growing season and a lack of hydro-chilling facilities that would facilitate the sale of produce fresh to institutions. The program also sponsored a workshop in 2005 to pull together the various stakeholders in school nutrition to discuss barriers to purchasing local produce

and to gauge interest and capacity for farm to school partnerships.

The Stillwater school district is investigating options that would take advantage of the thriving farmers' market that the town supports. The Stillwater farmers' market provides a wide variety of produce beginning in April and running through October, overlapping with five months of the school year. Other districts also are investigating direct purchase models with either individual farmers or cooperatives.

As the program has developed in Oklahoma, it has become evident that a major limiting factor has become the lack of an individual with responsibility to manage and facilitate the farm to school relationship. Up to this point, the program has been facilitated by a number of individuals providing time when they are able. As the program looks to expand, and particularly if direct purchasing opportunities are pursued, the increased need to have an individual responsible for coordinating and promoting the program is expected to become increasingly important.

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## Resources

In addition to the abovementioned programs, there are a number of useful resources for policymakers interested in exploring or developing farm to school programs. *The National Farm to School Program* is a collaboration of the Center for Food and Justice, a division of the Urban and Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College, and the Community Food Security Coalition. The Program offers extensive background material and research, and serves as a clearinghouse for best practices and shared experiences. The Program also convenes training sessions and workshops on a national level.

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The *Food and Nutrition Information Center* (FNIC) at the National Agriculture Library is a very valuable resource for a wide range of information on food systems and nutrition. The FNIC has as its mission the collection and dissemination of information about food and human nutrition. The Center has 15 nutrition professionals on staff who review and identify information. The FNIC Website provides a clearinghouse with more than 2,000 links to up-to-date and reliable information on a range of human nutrition subjects, including food and community matters.

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[schoolmeals.nal.usda.gov/index.html](http://schoolmeals.nal.usda.gov/index.html)

The *Cornell University Farm to School Program* also serves as a clearinghouse and resource, primarily for schools and policymakers in New York state, although much of their research is applicable elsewhere. The Cornell Program offers strategies for initiating programs, as well as practical information about conducting and expanding programs. The Program offers an overview of policies around the country, interesting research and publications on farm to school, and profiles of local programs.

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Finally, the USDA offers a step-by-step guide on creating and conducting farm to school programs. The guide, *Small Farms/School Meals Initiative*, the result of a series of town hall meetings held in North Carolina and Virginia in 1998, offers guidance on a host of activities to help groups plan, conduct, and promote similar meetings with the end goal of establishing a farm to school project. The manual, available from the USDA at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Lunch/Downloadable/small.pdf>, provides an easy-to-follow method for local programs in particular, although the model has been used successfully at the state level as well.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For a thorough and engaging history of school lunch programs, see Gordon W. Gunderson's *The National School Lunch Program: Background and Development*, first published in 1971 and now available through the USDA Web site [www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Lunch/AboutLunch/ProgramHistory.htm#Gordon](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Lunch/AboutLunch/ProgramHistory.htm#Gordon).
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Analysis, Nutrition and Evaluation, *School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study-II Summary of Findings*, January 2001.
- <sup>5</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Analysis, Nutrition and Evaluation, *School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study II: Final Report*, April 2001.
- <sup>6</sup> United States Government Accountability Office, *School Lunch Program: Efforts Needed to Improve Nutrition and Encourage Healthy Eating*, May 2003.
- <sup>7</sup> Food and Nutrition Service, et al, *Making It Happen*.
- <sup>8</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Analysis, Nutrition and Evaluation, *School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study-II Summary of Findings*.
- <sup>9</sup> Public Health Institute. *California high school fast food survey: findings and recommendations*, 2000.
- <sup>10</sup> Texas Department of Agriculture, School District Vending Contract Survey, 2003.
- <sup>11</sup> Stanley Garret, Director of Child Nutrition Services, United States Department of Agriculture, *National School Lunch Program/ School Breakfast Program: Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value*, memo to Regional Directors of Special Nutrition Programs, January 16, 2001.
- <sup>12</sup> The Oklahoma Food Policy Council, *The Oklahoma Farm-to-School Report*, Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, 2003.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> California Food and Justice Coalition, Healthy Farms, Healthy Students: Farm to School in California, Frequently Asked Questions.
- <sup>15</sup> Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; and U.S. Department of Education, *Making It Happen! School Nutrition Success Stories*, January 2005.
- <sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1991-2003*.
- <sup>17</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, *Nutrition Program Facts – National School Lunch Program*, September 2005.
- <sup>18</sup> Lyra Halprin, "UC researchers find farm-to-school programs shift students' diet," University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources News, from the Internet site [www.news.ucanr.org/storyshow.cfm?story=637&printerver=yes](http://www.news.ucanr.org/storyshow.cfm?story=637&printerver=yes), accessed on September 15, 2005.
- <sup>19</sup> Debra Tropp and Surajudeen Olowolayemo, *How Local Farmers and School Food Service Buyers Are Building Alliances*, United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service, December 2000.
- <sup>20</sup> *Farm to School: An Introduction for Food Service Professionals, Food Educators, Parents and Community Leaders*, National Farm to School Program. The Pennsylvania State University, 2003.
- <sup>21</sup> The language can be found in Section 4303 of the 2002 Farm Bill: "The Secretary shall encourage institutions participating in the school lunch program under this Act and the school breakfast program established by section 4 of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 to purchase, in addition to other food purchases, locally produced foods for school meal programs, to the maximum extent practicable and appropriate..."
- <sup>22</sup> Kelli Sanger and Leslie Zenz, *Farm to Cafeteria Connections*, Washington State Department of Agriculture, Small Farm and Direct Marketing Program, 2003.

# Farm to School Programs

## What is Farm to School

**F**arm to school programs promote the use of locally produced foods in school nutrition programs. Schools also may include educational activities about local food and farming issues with a farm to school program. Farm to school programs can increase fresh fruit and vegetable options available to students; create new markets for local agriculture producers; and help to foster a healthy local food system. As connections between schools and farms grow, students develop a new awareness about their diet, the impact their food choices have on their health, their local economy and their environment, and the way that food comes from farm to plate.

Farm to school programs vary in size from one school and one farm to regional programs providing produce from numerous farms to schools in several districts. Programs can be coordinated across the state or be localized, reinforcing connections with farmers from the immediate area. Programs can provide a wide range of fresh food or specialize in one or a handful of items. Regardless of the size and nature of the program, the end result is an increase in the amount of fresh food available in the school and interconnectedness between communities and local farm economies.

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