

SCHOOLS: Introduction



Farm to School is a growing trend. Providing local food as part of a reimbursable meal gives food service operators the opportunity to expose children to foods grown right here in South Dakota!

While interest in incorporating local food grows, uncertainty about how to start a Farm to School program remains an obstacle for some. This packet provides general information about the basics of building a Farm to School program.

What is Farm to School?

South Dakota Farm to School is about providing our state's youth with fresh, locally grown or raised foods. This is done by shifting food purchasing processes and expanding education and gardening opportunities in our communities via feeding programs in schools, childcare facilities, and summer feeding programs. Farm to School not only benefits children, it also strengthens local economies and enhances the connection between schools and the communities they serve.

Farm to School implementation differs by location but always includes one or more of the following:

- Procurement: Local foods are purchased, promoted, and served in a meal, as a snack or taste-test, or as part of the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program.
- School gardens: Students engage in hands-on learning through gardening.
- Education: Students participate in education activities related to agriculture, food, health, or nutrition.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has a toolkit designed for use by schools, day cares, and other entities interested in establishing a program. Visit their website at fns.usda.gov/f2s/planning-toolkit to learn more.

SCHOOLS: Building a Farm to School Team



Building a strong and sustainable Farm to School program cannot be one person's responsibility. While child nutrition program operators are key players, it's best to gather a team of people to secure input and buy-in from the beginning.

When building a Farm to School team, four to six people is a good starting point. The people or organizations involved will depend on the nature of the meal program. People inside and outside of the organization can contribute. Administration, faculty, and nutrition staff are good places to start. Additionally, community members, 4-H clubs, main street businesses, master gardeners, local media, and producers and ranchers can make valuable contributions to the team.

A Farm to School team's first step is to help create the vision of what the program should look like. Many communities have different ideas about programming. Farm to School may encompass serving local food, growing gardens, and educating children about food, which provides a broad range of activities and opportunities. One of the best things about Farm to School is that each program can be uniquely tailored to the community it serves.



SCHOOLS: Menu Planning



Local food can easily be incorporated into any U.S. Department of Agriculture meal program menu. Every meal pattern component can be met using a local food. Often a question arises about what “local” means. Some buyers consider local as grown or raised in their immediate community or a particular mile-wide radius around that community. Local can also be defined as anywhere in the entire state. Others define local using a regional radius and include nearby states. There is also no requirement that local must be defined. That is completely up to the buyer.

Local foods include meat, poultry, eggs, grains for use in homemade baking, fruits, vegetables, and dairy. In South Dakota, we often see beef, bison, eggs, watermelon, sweet corn, and various other vegetables as a logical starting point. A Farm to School program can begin with a few pounds of cherry tomatoes or serving locally grown watermelon. It’s just that easy!

Using the menu and the seasonality chart found in this packet, identify foods that may be traded out for a local food item. The seasonality chart assists menu writers to know what time of year fruits and vegetables are available in South Dakota. This might not be the only time of the year these foods are available, but it is definitely when they are the most nutrient dense and flavorful. Some growers have the capacity to store their crops, extending the availability of the product. Communicate with growers to find out what options may be available in your area.

Don’t make the mistake of thinking that you must have enough of a local food product to feed everyone at one meal setting. That may not be feasible. Serving select groups of children and rotating opportunities is perfectly acceptable.



SCHOOLS: Purchasing Process



One of the first steps of purchasing local foods is determining how much of your budget you have available to spend on local food. Identifying this amount will help you understand the price point you need to get when purchasing locally. Purchasing food that is straight off the farm may be comparable in price to non-local. If not, you may need to get creative. Perhaps the school or community would be willing to help with costs.

Communicating with others by sharing your vision about serving local foods creates excitement in the community and may help stretch your local food budget. Food donations are an option, but they can't be counted on as a long-term sustainable plan.

Purchasing Requirements

Public institutions and entities participating in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) child nutrition programs must follow the most restrictive of local, state, or federal procurement rules.

The micro purchase method is the most common method used to purchase local food in South Dakota. Other procurement methods may be used, and you can find more information under the Procurement section on the Child and Adult Nutrition website at doe.sd.gov/cans.

Here's how to use the micro purchase process:

- Do your homework before making a purchase by investigating what the price of items are from a food distributor, the price you see where groceries can be purchased, or what is being charged at a Farmers Market. This gives the buyer an idea of what a reasonable price for the product might be. It is not necessary to gather quotes.
- Keep purchases under \$15,000 per transaction.
- Rotate purchases equitably among qualified suppliers, as possible. (If there is only one qualified supplier, document why that is the case. Include reasons such as a labor, mileage, or lack of suppliers).
- Ensure that you are purchasing from a vendor that you or your school or childcare agency has vetted.
- Get an invoice from the producer/rancher you purchase from. This documents your purchase of food and equitable distribution of purchases, as possible.

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Start Small

Schools should not start out purchasing a large amount of local products right away. Staffing, available equipment, and the number of children eating meals may restrict how much product can be handled at one time. As your relationships with vendors grow, and both buyer and grower get a better understanding of the needs of the school and the capabilities of the producer, the amount of food sourced from the local grower may also increase.

Note to Buyers

You don't always have to purchase local food. Let your community know that you're interested in Farm to School and that you might be able to accept donated food from their gardens. Local gardeners may consider "planting an extra row" of a crop, and then donate the bounty to the school when it's ready to be harvested. Since this is also an educational program, be sure to ask your producers if they are interested in being a part of the educational aspect of Farm to School by hosting a field trip or by visiting a classroom to talk about their process.

Food Safety

Whether food comes from a large, out-of-area vendor or a local producer, all food purchased for school food service programs must conform to the food safety protocols established by the USDA. Visit fns.usda.gov/fs/foodsafeschools to review guidelines.

Communicate with producers about the requirements they must fulfill to sell products to school food service programs. Ask them to provide information about their growing and harvesting procedures, as well as their food storage and transportation methods.

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SCHOOLS: Marketing



Don't keep what you're doing a secret! Make sure that parents and community members know when healthy, local food is being served to their children. Your messaging should emphasize the benefits that a Farm to School program provides to students, schools, child-care facilities, communities, and food producers:

- Expands market and revenue opportunities for small farmers, ranchers, and local food producers.
- Increases children's consumption of local food, which provides more nutritious products and less waste in meal programs.
- Provides educational opportunities related to agriculture, food, gardens, and nutrition.
- Increases understanding of where food comes from.
- Greatly reduces the number of days and miles it takes for food products to be delivered to meal programs for consumption.

Social media is a great way to let others know what Farm to School looks like in your school. Not sure of what to share? Here are some examples:

(School name) supports South Dakota farmers! Today we sampled (insert dish name) in (our salad bar, or as a side dish, or as a main entrée) during (breakfast or lunch or both).

Local food in school meals is good for students, producers, and the community. On (day of the week), (School name) will be serving local (name of produce) in our school meal from (name of producer). It's a win/win/win!

This year (or list time frame of your choice), (school name) served (number) local food items, from (number) different producers. We love our kids, we love our producers, and we love serving local food!

