GROWERS: Introduction

Farm to School is a growing trend. Providing local food as part of a school meal gives producers and ranchers the opportunity to provide foods grown right here in South Dakota to children. It's also an economic boost for the grower.

While interest in incorporating local food grows, uncertainty about how to sell your goods to area schools remains an obstacle for producers and ranchers. This packet contains general information about federal regulations surrounding school menus and rules about how schools purchase food. Additionally, you'll find best practices on how to find and establish effective partnerships with school buyers (likely the head cook or the food service director).

Benefits of Farm to School: A Win for Everyone

Farm to School activities provide benefits to students, parents, schools, communities, and food producers. Here are some benefits of a Farm to School program:

- Expands market and revenue opportunities for small farmers, ranchers, and local food producers.
- Increases children's consumption of local food, especially fruits and vegetables.
- Provides opportunities to teach students about agriculture, food, gardens, and nutrition.
- Increases understanding of where food comes from.
- Greatly reduces the number of days and miles it takes for fruits and vegetables to be delivered to meal programs for consumption.

GROWERS: Menu Planning

Understanding Meal Planning for Growers: Building a Healthy Meal

Most schools, and some childcares, in South Dakota participate in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) school lunch, breakfast, and other nutrition programs. Local food can easily be incorporated into any USDA meal program menu. Meals are built around protein, grains, vegetables, fruits, and milk. These are commonly referred to as "meal components," and the serving sizes of each meal component are federally regulated.

Every meal component can be met using a local food. Local foods may include meat, poultry, eggs, grains for use in baking, fruits, vegetables, and dairy. In South Dakota, we often see beef, bison, eggs, watermelon, sweet corn, tomatoes, and various other vegetables as a logical starting point. A school may begin their Farm to School program by purchasing a few pounds of cherry tomatoes or locally grown watermelon. There are opportunities for producers of all sizes to participate.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that you must have enough of any one local food product to feed the entire school. Schools may not be able to prepare large quantities of local foods every day. Many schools have a fruit and veggie bar that is a perfect place to offer local foods, as children are able to pick and choose what they want, so the quantities prepared by kitchen staff are manageable. Serving local food product to select grades and rotating opportunities is perfectly acceptable.



GROWERS: Food Safety

To ensure that food served to children is safe, be sure to follow proper on-farm and post-harvest procedures when working with your products. Work with your buyer and your local Extension Office to ensure that your planting and harvesting procedures are aligned with best practices. It is also important to disclose your use of compost, pesticides, and soil enrichment materials. Be sure to communicate your cooling, washing, packaging, and storage methods as well. Have the information ready on a document, and share that with the food service director as part of the purchasing process.

Food Safety Plan-- Schools may ask you for a food safety plan. This isn't something you have to have, but the more information you can provide to program operators to help them understand what you do to keep product safe, throughout the growing and harvesting period, is helpful. A good food safety plan will include your standard operating procedures relating to planting, harvesting, pesticide use and disposal, packaging and storage practices, and delivery methods.

In South Dakota, Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) are not required at the state or federal level. That may differ among schools. If you have participated in any trainings that include some type of food safety, it is always good to let food service directors know that.

Site Visit— Invite the food service director out to tour your farm. This will help them better understand what you are doing and answer questions about your farm operation in general. The site visit sometimes can take the place of a food safety plan, since many things that would be part of the plan can be visually shown to the food service director during the tour.

Packing and Storing-- Product should be placed in a clean area where it can be packed in food-safe storage bags or containers and held at proper temperatures.

Traceability-- Product should be labeled with the farm name and product name, along with the date the item was harvested and packed.

Delivery— Deliver your product in clean vehicles. Temperatures should be monitored to minimize time spent in temperatures over 41 degrees. It may be necessary to pack ice packs or something around the boxes holding the product to keep the proper temperature.

Refer to the Frequently Asked Questions portion of this packet for more information about food safety.

South Dakota rules for purchased or donated local foods

Must follow procurement rules, food service code, and USDA food safety and inspection services.

Approved items:

- Fresh, whole, and unprocessed foods (ex: apples, watermelons, tomatoes, peppers)
- Processed foods that are graded or manufactured under inspection in a USDA or state-inspected facility
- Meats slaughtered and processed under inspection in a USDA or state-inspected facility
- Unpasteurized eggs with Egg Handler/Grader License and Egg Dealer License

Not approved items:

- Raw milk and milk products
- Food processed and packed in a private home or an unlicensed food service establishment
- Meat labelled "not for sale"

GROWERS: How Schools Purchase Food

Schools typically purchase the majority of their food from large, commercial distributors. Public institutions or organizations must follow the most restrictive of local, state, or federal procurement rules. Small to medium size schools in South Dakota often use informal purchasing methods, while larger school districts use more formal purchasing methods. No matter which purchasing method is used, schools must give the cost of an item the highest consideration when making a purchasing decision, and the bidder must be responsive and responsible.

Informal Procurement Methods (for annual food purchases under $349,999):

- Schools request a minimum of two, preferably three, quotes on food items.
  - ◊ This can be done over the phone or by email.
- Specifications are written for the product requested.
- The distributor offering the lowest price wins the bid.
- The school may stipulate a line-by-line award or an all or nothing award.

Formal Procurement Methods (for annual food purchases over $350,000):

Bids must be advertised for a minimum of two consecutive weeks. There are two types of formal bid documents available for use: invitation for bid and request for bid.

Invitation for Bid

- Decision on which item to purchase is based solely on price.
  - ◊ School can stipulate award line by line, or
  - ◊ School can stipulate all or nothing award.
- Bids must arrive at a specific time and place as designated by the school.
  - ◊ If bid does not arrive by specific time and place, it is not considered for award.

Request for Bid

- Evaluation of bids and ultimate decision of who is awarded the contract is decided through a point system evaluation process.
  - ◊ Cost is weighted as the highest determining factor.
- Other criteria are considered.
- Bids must arrive at a specific time and place as designated by the school.
  - ◊ If a bid does not arrive by specific time and place, it is not considered for award.

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Micro Purchase Procurement Method

Another way to purchase food is the micro purchase method. This falls under the Informal Procurement Method. It is often the procurement method used to purchase locally grown food.

Micro Purchase Method

- Single transaction may not be more than $15,000.
- Non-competitive (solicitation not required)
    - ◊ Quotes are not gathered.
- Prices must be reasonable.

Here's how schools use the micro purchase process:

- To determine what a reasonable price is, schools investigate what the price of items are from a food distributor, the price where groceries can be purchased, or the price at a Farmers Market. This process provides an idea of what a reasonable price for the product might be.
- The food service director makes a purchase of local food, spending no more than $15,000 per transaction.
- Purchases are rotated equitably among suppliers as possible.
- The buyer will request an invoice from the producer/rancher. This documents the purchase of food and equitable distribution of purchases.

Receiving Payment

The documentation producers/ranchers need to provide depends upon where and how the local food product is purchased. An invoice is the preferred method. However, in some cases, (like at a Farmers Market), a receipt is sufficient. In some instances, a purchasing card is available to complete the purchase. More likely, the payment request will need to be approved by the school board. This can take as long as four to six weeks.

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GROWERS: Making the Connection

School nutrition directors typically coordinate food purchases and menu plans for the schools within their districts. Since they have a pulse on the district's food needs, purchasing schedules, and menus, they can help you determine whether your products are a good fit, and they can give you a sense of how best to get involved. You can typically find contact information for school nutrition departments by visiting the districts' websites.

You will be most effective in marketing your products if you learn as mush as possible about the schools you hope to work with. Do they serve breakfast and lunch, or just lunch? How many students do they serve each day? Do they serve meals in the summer? How do they currently source food? Which distributors do they currently work with? Consider eating a meal at the school or checking out the school's monthly menus online to get a sense of what types of items are served. Information about schools, what local items they purchase, and which products they'd like to buy in the future is also available via their responses to the USDA Farm to School Census.

Understanding the kitchens and preparation environments of your prospective school customers is also key, specifically in the areas of staff skills, equipment available, time to prepare food, and storage space. Some schools have large walk-in freezers, and some have minimal cold or freezer storage space. Some schools are equipped with highly trained staff and state-of-the-art equipment to process fresh food, while others don't have much more than convection ovens to heat and serve pre-prepared meals. By working with the school nutrition director, you will learn about the school's capacity to handle local products.



GROWERS: FAQs for Producers

Thinking of entering the Farm to School arena? Below are answers to some of producers' most commonly asked questions:

Question: Do producers/ranchers have to be Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certified?

Answer: Although the State of South Dakota does not require producers to be GAP certified, schools may require it. Be sure to ask.

Question: Does a producer/rancher need a written Food Safety Plan?

Answer: Producers and ranchers should be ready to answer questions about how they minimize on-farm and post-harvest risks. Having a written plan is helpful, but it is not required by the State of South Dakota.

Question: Is it a good idea to invite the food service director to your farm?

Answer: Absolutely! Not only does it provide a chance to better understand each other's needs, it is a great opportunity for you to show off your operation. Seeing the operation in person builds confidence and trust, and helps the food service director get a better idea of the possibilities for the education side of Farm to School.

Question: Are there certain packing and storing requirements?

Answer: Products should be packaged in food safe containers and packaged under safe, sanitary conditions. Products should be stored in appropriate temperature-controlled units.

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Question: What if I am asked about traceability?

Answer: It's a good idea to document where the food was grown, when it was harvested, and when it was packaged.

Question: How do I deliver my product to schools?

Answer: Just like you would to any other operation. The products must be properly packaged, temperature controlled, and the delivery vehicle must be clean. The food service operator may request certain types of boxes or containers that best fit into their coolers, but all of that can be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

Question: Where can I learn more about the rules and requirements related to food safety, procurement, and program operation?

Answer: The USDA has resources available with information from planting to storage. Here is a list of resources for producers to consider:

The Food Safety Modernization Act and the Produce Safety Rule
fns.usda.gov/f2s/food-safety-modernization-act-and-produce-safety-rule

Food Safety Frequently Asked Questions
fns.usda.gov/f2s/food-safety-frequently-asked-questions

An Overview of Good Agricultural Practices
fns.usda.gov/f2s/overview-good-agricultural-practices

Selling Local Food to Schools: A Resource for Producers
fns.usda.gov/f2s/selling-local-food-schools

Bringing Tribal Foods and Traditions into Cafeterias, Classrooms, and Gardens
fns.usda.gov/f2s/tribal-foods

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