

The USDA Farm to School Planning Toolkit



Questions and Resources for Designing a Robust Farm to School Program

United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service

Introduction

The *Farm to School Planning Toolkit* guides you through questions to consider and helpful resources to reference when starting or growing a farm to school program. It is designed for use by schools, school districts, and community partners. The toolkit is filled with tips and examples, insights from others, and lists of resources for further research. Each school district is unique, so browse the topics to find the resources most relevant to you and your implementation team!

The planning topics include:

<u>Building Your Team.....</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>Food Safety.....</u>	<u>27</u>
<u>Establishing a Vision & Goals.....</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>Promoting Your Program.....</u>	<u>33</u>
<u>Defining Local & Finding Local</u>		<u>School Gardening.....</u>	<u>37</u>
<u>Foods.....</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>Education & Curriculum Integration.....</u>	<u>42</u>
<u>Buying Local Foods.....</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>Evaluating Your Efforts.....</u>	<u>45</u>
<u>Menu Planning</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>Sustaining Your Program.....</u>	<u>48</u>

Happy farm to school planning!

“Once our program was in place, we were able to respond to other interested districts to encourage their exploration into adopting like practices in their schools. We have gladly shared our farm to school curriculum and implementation and communication plans with others.”

Cheney Public Schools, WA

“It is amazing to see what tremendous changes we have been able to make in such a short amount of time. The old way of doing things/serving food is changing and everyone is taking notice! The farm to school program is always the topic of conversation at our health and wellness meetings and I have had so many families tell me how they have tried the recipes we have provided for them and that they now have a garden at home because their child wanted to start growing their own food like they do at school.

Lemon Grove Academy, CA





Building Your Farm to School Team

Building a farm to school team is a critical first step in the planning process and essential to the long-term success of your program. It's an opportunity to create allies, bring in knowledge and expertise beyond what exists within your core group, and recruit some boots on the ground for planning and implementing your farm to school program, and fundraising to sustain it. Thinking through the questions below, you will be encouraged to define the roles of, and learn more about, your committed team members and advisors; determine what other types of members will make your team stronger; establish a structure for your team and the meetings you hold; come up with a preliminary meeting schedule; and explore existing resources that will help you form an effective group.

Team-Building Questions to Consider

Background

When was your farm to school team established and by whom? What activities has the group participated in to date?

Already Committed Members

What are the names, titles, and roles of people who have already committed to being part of your farm to school team?

TIP! *You might also note other relevant roles that committee members play in the school, the community, or in their personal lives, as well as any helpful skills they might have. Does this member serve on any other committees? Is he or she the parent of a former student (in addition to being, say, the school nurse)? Does he or she love gardening or have fundraising experience?*

“Our biggest contributors and best sounding boards were the students we had on our planning committee. I believe we need to be inclusive of the people who these programs are designed to affect.

West New York Schools, NJ

Advisers

Outside of the team, what people or groups will you look to for guidance and assistance? What are the names, titles, and roles of people who have agreed to advise your committee on specific matters on an as-needed basis?

TIP! *Your advisory committee needn't necessarily be formal, but formalizing advisory roles might make the people who you're hoping to get some specific advice or help from more invested in your program.*

Needed Members & Advisers

What specific people or categories of people would you like to have on your farm to school team or advisory committee but have not yet received a commitment from? Who will be responsible for recruiting these new members? What are your expectations for these members? What role(s) will they play?

TIP! *Some possible recruits for your team include:*

- school food service representatives,
- teachers,
- students,
- school administrators (especially the school principal or vice principal),
- school board members,
- parents and grandparents,
- food producers (including farmers, ranchers, and fishermen)
- school nurses,
- guidance counselors,
- staff members of non-profit organizations,
- Master Gardeners,
- researchers,
- school maintenance staff members,
- local chefs,
- state agency farm to school coordinator,
- National Farm to School Network state lead,
- health care professionals,
- extension agents,
- PTA/PTO representatives,
- members of the local media,
- the school or district communications director,
- the school or district curriculum director, and
- other schools or districts that have farm to school programs

Details & Logistics

Structure

How is your team structured? Are you a subcommittee of a wellness committee or a food policy committee? Do you have sub-committees? Is there a team lead? Is there a cap on the number of members? Are members appointed, invited, elected, or nominated? Is there a leadership committee? Are all members of the team permanent, or do some serve for a specific period of time (e.g. the school year)?

“Our coordinator spent a great deal of time during the planning year not only building but constantly maintaining and strengthening relationships with our collaborative partners, often on a one-to-one basis, through meetings, emails, marketing and media updates, and personal visits and conversations. These efforts paid off by making all stakeholders feel they had a personal interest in and commitment to the program.”

Chico Unified School District, CA

Name

What will you call your farm to school team?

For example: Some popular names include Farm to School Coordinating Committee, Farm to School Organizing Committee, School Nutrition Action Committee (SNAC), and Farm to School Steering Committee. Choose a name that reflects the team's scope. If the team will address issues broader than the term "farm to school" encompasses, its name should reflect that.

Responsibilities & Power

What are the functions and responsibilities of the farm to school team? Does the team, or do members of the team, have decision-making power? If not, by what means can the team's ideas and recommendations be realized?

For example: The types of activities a farm to school team might be responsible for include strategic planning, implementation, community outreach, regular reporting to specific people or entities, and fundraising.

Relationship building

Do the various team members, [especially foodservice staff, administrators, and teachers] work together often? If not, what activities will build relationships, understanding, and trust between members?

Meetings

Who is the team accountable to? How often does the team meet? Where are meetings held? Are meetings open to the public? Will meetings be facilitated by a member of the team, or an external partner?

Team Building Resources

Following is a list of resources you may find helpful for assembling and growing your farm to school team and leading farm to school planning meetings.

[Farm to School: Assemble a Team](#)

University of Minnesota Extension

Tips for foodservice directors on building a farm to school team, including a video and many examples.

[Vermont Farm to School: A Guide for Farm to School Community Action Planning](#)

Vermont Food Education Every Day (VT FEED)

Detailed information on forming a farm to school team, facilitating farm to school meetings, and developing a community action plan.

[Getting Started](#)

National Farm to School Network

A list of simple steps and resources for getting a farm to school program started.

[Food Hub's Knowledge Base, "Getting Started"](#)

Ecotrust

This library of farm to school guidance is updated regularly and includes user ratings.



Establishing a Vision and Goals

The questions and resources below are meant to help you think about establishing a vision and goals for your farm to school program.. The prompts will encourage you to think about your long-term hopes for your farm to school program; establish goals and objectives for the near-term; survey the federal, state, and local program and policy environment; and explore existing resources that will help set you out along a thoughtful path towards reaching your goals and eventually realizing your long-term vision.

Visioning and Goal-Setting Questions to Consider

Background and Current Status

What led to your decision to establish a farm to school program? What activities have you participated in to date that have readied you to move into the implementation stage? What benefits do you think a farm to school program can bring to your students, school, district, or community?

“Start small. Although having high expectations and ambitions is not a bad thing, it becomes frustrating at times to feel we were “failing” in some areas when we did not see progress come as quickly as we wanted. A recommendation for any entity starting farm-to-school efforts is to scale back your goals initially, attain some small successes and then build up from these smaller “wins”.

Ezra Baker Elementary School, MA

Long-term Vision

What is your long-term vision for a thriving farm to school program?

TIP! Define “long-term” however you like! Your most ambitious farm to school goals might be achieved in 5 years or 25 years.

Near-term Goals & Objectives

What are your near-term (1- to 2-year) goals and objectives for your farm to school program?

“Establishing common core ideas of what we wanted to do was crucial for keeping the farm to school program moving forward in a uniform fashion.

Sparta Area School District, WI

School Environment & Student Population

How big is your school or district? What types of students do you serve? What cultures do your students come from, and how might this be relevant to your farm to school program? Are you in an urban or a rural setting? Do many of your students garden or farm outside of school? Is there a garden on your school grounds, or space for one? How and how well do your students eat outside of school? If a high school, is your campus open or closed?

Program Context

What existing programs and initiatives are relevant to your farm to school program?

Child nutrition programs

Which federal Child Nutrition Programs does your school operate? Are there any planned changes to these programs? What percent of your students are eligible for free and reduced price meals?

TIP! *The federal Child Nutrition Programs include the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, the Afterschool Snack Program, Seamless Summer, the Summer Food Service Program, and the Special Milk Program. To find out if you might be eligible for a program you are not currently operating, [click here](#).*

State and Local Initiatives

What State, local, and district-wide programs and initiatives might be relevant to your farm to school program?

TIP! *Initiatives might include everything from a state-level effort to reduce childhood obesity, to a county-wide “buy local” campaign, to a district-wide initiative to put a garden in every school.*

Policy Context

What general policies and regulations at the federal, state-, local- and district levels are relevant to your farm to school goals?

TIP! *This list should include policies that bolster and guide your efforts, and those that create barriers.*

How does your farm to school effort fit in with your school’s wellness plan?

TIP! *Are farm to school principles and goals already written into the plan? Would you like for them to be? (If so, include that as a goal above.)*

Visioning and Goal-Setting Resources

[Farm to School Toolkit](#)

Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition

Resources for starting a farm to school program for school food professionals, producers, and distributors. Don’t miss the [Toolkit Resource Guide](#).

[Vermont Farm to School: A Guide for Farm to School Community Action Planning](#)

Vermont Food Education Every Day (VT FEED)

Detailed information on forming a farm to school team, facilitating farm to school meetings, and developing a community action plan.

[Farm to School Assessment Tool](#)

Minnesota Department of Health

A checklist for schools to evaluate their current farm to school efforts.

[State Farm to School Legislative Survey: 2002-2013](#)

National Farm to School Network

A state-by-state listing of farm to school-related state laws.

[Local Wellness Policy Resources](#)

USDA's Team Nutrition

Information to help schools make and maintain a healthy nutrition environment.

[Tips for Writing Goals and Objectives](#)

Tulane University

Tips for how to write broad goals and specific, measurable objectives.



Defining Local and Finding Local Foods

Serving local foods through school meal programs is often a central component of farm to school initiatives. But before schools and districts start purchasing local foods or determine which local foods they are already purchasing, they must determine what foods are grown, harvested, raised, caught, and processed in the region and when those foods are available. Knowing these things about the surrounding agricultural landscape can help schools and districts take the critical step of defining “local.” The questions below are meant to help you survey your local agriculture and help you develop a definition of local that works for you.

Local Sourcing Questions to Consider

Definition of “Local” or “Regional”

Has your school or district defined “local” or “regional”? If so, what is your definition and how was it established?

TIP! *You can define “local” or “regional” however you like: within a certain number of miles from your school, within the state, or within the county. You might also choose to define the terms differently for different types of products. Involving food service staff, local growers, food distributors, and others in helping you define local will ensure that the definition suits your needs.*

For example: A school could decide that because there are so many fruit and vegetable producers within their county, “local” fruits and vegetables must come from within county lines. However, if the county has only one dairy, then “local” milk, cheese, and yogurt might come from anywhere in the state.

Local or regional agricultural products

What types of foods are produced within the area(s) you’ve defined as “local” or “regional”?

TIP! *To find out what grows locally, try looking for seasonality charts online, talking to farmers at a farmers’ market, or calling your local agricultural extension office. And don’t forget to include dairy, meat, poultry, fish, and grains in your survey.*

Sources of local foods

Existing Suppliers, Contracts, and Procurement System

How do you currently procure foods, both local and non-local? What food-related contracts do you currently hold? What local food items are currently available through your contracted suppliers? Do

you use any guidelines or templates to create invitations for bids, requests for proposals, and informal procurement solicitations?

TIP! *Many schools experience success working with their existing suppliers and procurement framework to procure local foods. Before deciding to develop new relationships, contracts, and system, take stock of the opportunities available through your current procurement system.*

Suppliers

From whom do you intend to source local foods? Will you buy through your produce distributor, a broad line supplier, the DoD Fresh Program, a farmers' cooperative, a food hub, directly from individual farmers, or by some other means?

If you plan to source directly from producers or to identify producers with whom your produce distributor will establish contracts, how will you find (or have you found) these businesses and individuals?

TIP! *In order to answer these questions, you'll likely have to explore many options. Maybe your produce distributor would be happy to offer more local foods if they just knew who to buy them from, or perhaps there's a farmers' cooperative nearby that's been interested in pooling their products for institutional purchasers. You won't know until start looking. There may be local organizations including state and local governmental agencies that can help you!*

Local Sourcing Resources

Resources for Determining what Grows Locally

[The Farm to School Census](#)

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

The Census surveyed over 13,000 school districts about their farm to school efforts. Schools can use this data to find out what districts nearby are sourcing locally.

[Cooperative Extension](#)

USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture

Cooperative Extension agents staff offices in each state and are experts in many agricultural topics, including local food systems. Most counties have an Extension office and these agents can help connect you with producers in your region.

[Food Hubs: Building Stronger Infrastructure for Small and Mid-Size Producers](#)

USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS)

This page on the AMS website contains a host of great resources about food hubs—

businesses or organizations that actively manage the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers.

[Farm Service Agency \(FSA\) State Offices](#)

This web page offers contact information for all of USDA's state FSA offices, which hold contact information for local producers and often host outreach meetings for growers.

[USDA National Farmers Market Directory](#)

USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service

A searchable database of all registered farmers' markets in the country. Over 8,000 markets are included.

Resources for Assessing Production and Seasonality

[Census of Agriculture](#)

USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)

NASS surveys all U.S. farmers every five years and produces county profiles that detail agricultural production in every county. Think about using this data to find out what is produced in your area.

[The Farm to School Census](#)

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service

The Census surveyed over 13,000 school districts about their farm to school efforts. Think about using the data to find out what districts nearby are sourcing locally.

[Cooperative Extension](#)

USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture

Cooperative Extension agents staff offices in each state and are experts in many agricultural topics, including local food systems. Most counties have an Extension office and these agents can help connect you with producers in your region.

Online Tools for Finding Local Foods

[Market Maker](#)

A national partnership of land grant institutions and State Departments of Agriculture dedicated to the development of a comprehensive interactive database of food industry marketing and business data. Schools can use state-based Market Maker sites to search for local producers and products.

[Food Hub](#)

An online marketplace and directory that makes it easy and efficient for professional food buyers and sellers to research, connect, and do business. Food Hub currently serves

growers and buyers in the states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Alaska and California.

Farm Logix

A one-stop-shop for multi-farm sourcing, connecting local farms with schools and other institutions.

Many State Departments of Agriculture host searchable databases of farms within the state and the products they produce. For an example, visit the [Go Texan](#) website.



Buying Local Foods

Once a school district has defined local and determined some sources of local foods, it's time to start purchasing them! When local foods are being procured using federal meal program funds, those purchases must be done in accordance with regulations. The questions and resources below are meant to help you establish a plan for procuring, or procuring more, local foods in accordance with the rules. You will be encouraged to think through possible mechanisms for purchasing local foods; address distribution and delivery challenges; and survey your capacity to store and process local products.

Local Procurement Questions to Consider

Background and Progress to Date

How much local food do you currently serve? What types of local food have you been purchasing, and from whom? Through which Child Nutrition Programs do you serve local foods?

***Tip!** Count your local foods purchases in terms of total dollars spent and percentage of dollars spent. If you don't know where the food you've been purchasing comes from, you should think about how you'll you start collecting that data since it's important to have a baseline figure. If you want to explore farm to school data collection in more depth, see the [evaluation questions and resources](#).*

To date, what local procurement-related activities have you participated in?

Local Procurement Goals

What are your near-term (1 to 2-year) goals for local foods procurement? What types of local foods do you hope to serve and how often do you hope to serve them? Do you plan to serve local foods through all of the Child Nutrition Programs you operate, or just some of them?

***TIP!** To the extent possible, your goals should include specific target amounts and products.*

For example: A school that operates the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) in an area with a long growing season might have a goal to source 40 percent of all FFVP foods locally. A farm in a cattle-ranching region might have a goal to start sourcing 25 percent of the beef served through the National School Lunch Program locally.

Procurement

Procurement Rules

What federal, state, and local procurement rules must you follow? What is the lowest small purchase (AKA simplified acquisition) threshold that you are subject to?

Mechanisms for Local Sourcing

TIP! *It's unlikely you'll use all of the below mechanisms to source local foods.*

Incidentally/Accidentally

Are there any foods likely to come from within the area you've defined as "local" whether or not you make a conscious effort to procure them locally? If so, which items?

TIP! *Because fluid milk is costly to ship, most dairy products in the United States are still sold relatively close to where they are produced; check to see where yours comes from! Connecting directly with existing local suppliers can open possibilities for farm field trips and classroom visits.*

For example: For a school in Florida, citrus fruits are likely to come from a local source (or at least from within the state) during harvest season. Orange juice is likely to come from a local source anytime of the year.

By using related specifications

Are there any specifications you might be able to use in your IFBs or RFPs that would prefer local foods indirectly?

TIP! *Including a specification that foods be fresh (harvested within a day or two of delivery) is one way to increase the likelihood that a local vendor will win the contract. Another way is to choose to purchase a type of seafood that's only caught in waters off the coast of your state (or a freshwater fish that's only available in local lakes and rivers), or a variety that's only grown by farmers in your region. Offering unique varieties often makes for great learning opportunities as well!*

By approaching only local vendors

Note: If you're making a purchase that falls under your small purchase threshold, you can choose 3 (or more) local farms or vendors to get quotes from.

Do any of your current procurements fall beneath the small purchase threshold? Are there items that might make sense to procure under a separate solicitation? Are there enough local sources to bid on such products?

TIP! Just remember, you can't intentionally split purchases in order to fall below the federal small purchase threshold. However, there are a lot of legitimate reasons to split bids. It's typical for an SFA to split purchases based on inherent differences in foods such as shelf life, delivery methods, seasonality, and other characteristics; if your farm to school program includes a "Harvest of the Month" or "Seasonal Menu" that you want to use a separate bid for in order to get the best product at the best price, that's fine too.

By including local sourcing in your solicitation for a distributor or food service management company

When you issue new solicitations to procure contracts with distributors or food service management companies, will you include your preference that the distributor source local products?

Through DoD Fresh

Do you currently use the DoD Fresh Program? Does the prime vendor for your region offer local products?

TIP! If your DoD Fresh prime vendor does not currently offer any local products, you can contact your DoD Fresh representative and make your desire for local products known. If you know of any local farmers or producer groups that would like to sell to DoD Fresh, offer to make an introduction!

We are able to purchase a lot of local produce from our neighboring growers through our current produce distributors as well as through the DOD Fresh Program. This ensures food safety and traceability for us as well as consistency in product.

Weld County School District Re8, CO

By applying a geographic preference

TIP! If you're not familiar with the term "geographic preference," be sure to read the related resources listed in the resources section for this topic.

Will you need to apply a geographic preference to bids in order to procure local foods from the sources you've identified? If you plan to use the geographic preference option, how much preference are you comfortable awarding to local producers? Will the amount of preference you award differ depending upon the type of product you are purchasing? Will you apply the preference as a dollar amount, a percentage, or in another way?

TIP! Remember that the stronger the preference you give to local products, the more those products might cost you. Think carefully about how much preference you can afford to award.

If you use standard solicitation templates, will they need to be changed to incorporate geographic preference?

Through food donations

Will you receive any donations of local food? If so, how and from whom?

For example: Some schools operate “gleaning” programs wherein they harvest produce from farmers’ fields that wouldn’t otherwise be harvested and sold.

Delivery, Processing & Storage

How will the local foods you purchase be delivered to your kitchen(s)?

Will you send the local foods you purchase to a processor, or will you process them yourself? Will your existing infrastructure and staffing capacity accommodate your processing needs?

Will your storage needs change when you increase your local purchases? If so, how do you plan to accommodate these storage needs?

Key Players & Training needs

Who will be involved in implementing your near-term local procurement goals? What training will be needed in order for staff to confidently and successfully carry out your local foods procurement plan?

For example: Staff might need training in receiving foods, cleaning and preparing foods that might not look like what they are used to, and scratch cooking (including knife skills).

Local Procurement Resources

Guidance and Regulations

[Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Programs Guide](#)

USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

This guide showcases the many ways schools can purchase locally in accordance with regulations. The document also provides information on what local means and where to find local foods.

[Finding, Buying, and Serving Local Foods Webinar Series](#)

FNS

This series of twelve archived webinar recordings (each about an hour long) showcases the variety of ways school districts can purchase local foods. Each webinar focuses on a specific topic, and most highlight districts across the country that are buying local foods in accordance with regulations.

[Program-specific procurement regulations](#)

FNS

Links to regulations governing each major Child Nutrition Program from Title 7 of the Code of Federal Regulations.

[Final Rule: Geographic Preference Option](#)

FNS

The final rule, published in the Federal Register, includes a summary, background, and final regulatory language, by program, for the geographic preference option.

[Procurement Geographic Preference Q&As Part I](#)

FNS's Child Nutrition Division

A memo published in February 2011 addressing questions regarding application of the geographic preference option.

[Procurement Geographic Preference Q&As Part II](#)

FNS's Child Nutrition Division

A memo published in October 2012 addressing additional questions regarding application of the geographic preference option and other mechanisms for local procurement.

[State Agency Guidance on Procurement](#)

FNS, in partnership with the National Food Service Management Institute

An online procurement training geared towards state agencies that focuses on federal procurement requirements.

[Procurement in the 21st Century](#)

National Food Service Management Institute

This comprehensive guide presents general concepts about procuring goods, products, and services for school nutrition programs.

[Geographic Preference: What it is and how to use it](#)

USDA Farm to School Program

This fact sheet shows three examples of how a school food authority might incorporate geographic preference into a solicitation.

[Geographic Preference Primer](#)

School Food FOCUS

This primer summarizes state and federal law and provides guidance on implementing a geographic preference policy.

[Using DoD Fresh to Purchase Local Produce](#)

USDA Farm to School Program

This fact sheet addresses the advantages, and mechanics, of using USDA Foods entitlement dollars to order local foods through the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program.

[A School's Guide to Purchasing Washington-Grown Food](#), from the *Washington State*

Department of Agriculture

This straightforward, clearly worded, resource-filled guide provides information on using the geographic preference option to source local foods in Washington State; however, much of the content is broadly applicable.

[School Food Learning Lab in Saint Paul, Minnesota: A Case Study of Procurement Change in Action](#)

School Food Focus

Provides a detailed account of how one Minnesota school district developed and pursued their goals for procurement change, including increasing their local foods purchases.

[Frozen Local: Strategies for Freezing Locally Grown Produce for the K-12 Marketplace](#)

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

Presents research and insights on avenues for freezing local foods on a small to medium scale.

For and About Producers

[Getting Started – Farmer Self-Assessment](#)

Michigan State University

A self assessment worksheet for farmers to determine their interest in and readiness for selling their products to schools.

[Selling to Schools & Institutions](#)

Food Hub's Knowledge Base

Resources for farmers on how to get started selling foods to schools.

[How to Start the Conversation: A Food Service Director & Farmer Conversation Guide](#)

California Farm to School Taskforce

A detailed list of questions for food service staff to ask farmers as they begin the conversation about procuring the farmer's products.

[Toolkit for Institutional Purchasers Sourcing Local Food From Distributors](#)

Farm to Institution New England (FINE)

This guide assists dining services managers in communicating with current or potential distributors about meeting demands for local products and tracking local and sustainable purchases. While geared towards institutions in New England, the toolkit has something for everyone interested in buying local.



Menu Planning

The questions and resources below are meant to help you move towards developing menus that feature more locally produced foods. As you work through the prompts, you will be encouraged to think through the stages of the menu planning process, from taste testing to budgeting and forecasting to serving local foods and assessing the results.

Menu Planning Questions to Consider

The Five Step Menu Planning Cycle



Background and Progress to Date

To date, what steps have you taken to assess your budget to determine how much you might be able to spend on local items, begin incorporating local foods into existing menus, and even develop or use new recipes that feature local foods? Have you taste-tested any local foods or new recipes?

Budgeting & Forecasting

How will the procurement of local items affect your budget? Are the local foods you intend to purchase more or less expensive than what you currently buy? Will they take more or less staff time or training to prepare? What is your budget for holding taste tests?

Will you build taste-tests in as a regular part of your budget?

Once you have a sense of what students will eat, what your budget will allow, and what menu items you'll serve, how will you determine exactly what quantities of which products to procure? What is your current food forecasting process and how will you incorporate local foods into that process?

TIP! *The budgeting and forecasting processes will play an important role in determining what type of procurement you conduct. For example, your budget for a local item or several local items will help you determine whether it falls above, or below, your small procurement threshold.*

“We analyzed a typical month’s breakfast and lunch menu to find all the products used. We then rated the produce items by frequency of use and separated the produce by season and ability to produce locally.”

Fond Du Lac Ojibwe School, MN

Menu and Recipe Development

What type of menus do you currently use? Does your menu change throughout the year or repeat on a cycle?

How will your menus change now that you'll be incorporating more local foods into school meals?

Are there items already served through your meal programs that you can simply substitute with local items?

Which items are they, and at what time of the year are

they available? Do local farmers grow enough of the product to provide all that you need, or just a portion?

Will you develop or use recipes that you've never used before in order to incorporate more local ingredients into the meals and snacks you serve?

“Introduce the cafeteria staff to the students. Students see these people every day, but it is vital to recognize and celebrate them as important leaders in our community.”

Fayette County Schools, KY

Service & Promotion

How will you promote taste tests and local menu items to students, teachers, and others? How will you promote local items and menus to students, teachers, and parents? Will you change the look of your menu? Will you change anything about how foods are served, or how the cafeteria is organized and decorated?

TIP! *Many aspects of the service (such as the time and length of the lunch period or the size and arrangement of the cafeteria) are likely outside of your immediate influence. Here, you might want to focus on things that are within your control, such as the presentation of the food, signage, posters and art on the cafeteria walls, and the practices of the service staff. But don't forget to include some of your big-picture, long-term wishes for meal service.*

Assessment & Adjustment

Will you analyze student receptivity, either before or after incorporating local foods into your menu? If so, how? Will you look at what foods students put on their trays and/or what foods they actually consumed? Will you ask students what foods they like most?

TIP! *Plate waste studies are a great way to determine which foods students are (and are not) eating, but they require time a lot of time and labor. Try partnering with a local university or organizing volunteers to record and analyze plate waste data in your district.*

Will you offer taste tests of products or recipes before you even menu the foods? If so, will you use taste testing to introduce kids to the smell, taste, look, and texture of foods they may never have tried, or to determine which foods children like most?

Will food service staff prepare foods for taste testing? If so, how will they fit the food preparation into their busy daily schedules? Will you involve students or volunteers in food preparation?

TIP! Remember the mantra, “If they make it, they will eat it.” Children are more likely to try foods they had a hand in growing and preparing, and both activities are great learning opportunities.

Where and when will you conduct taste tests? Who will conduct them? Will you record students’ reactions to new foods? If so, how will you collect that information and how will you use it?

For example: Taste tests can be conducted in the cafeteria, classroom, hallways, afterschool programs, gardens, and elsewhere. You might try conducting taste tests in several locations and at several different times of the day to determine when and where students are most receptive.

Five Ways to Integrate Local Foods



Photo Credit: Leanne Dubois, Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

1

Discover what is local on the current menu

Conduct a menu audit and find out what products the school is already purchasing locally.

2

Substitute ingredients

Explore what products are available locally and substitute a non-local item with a local one. For example, a school in Pennsylvania might think about replacing bananas with apples in the fall.

3

Serve local products on the salad bar

Salad bars offer the perfect opportunity to serve local fruits and vegetables. The offerings can easily be modified as seasons change and most ingredients need minimal preparation.

4

Start a "harvest of the month" program

Consider highlighting one local ingredient every month or each season. Schools may serve the item just once, or may prepare the food in several different ways throughout the month to highlight how it can be used.

5

Develop new recipes

Perhaps the school discovered that there is a local flour mill and it has the capacity to bake fresh rolls once per week.

Menu Planning Resources

Menu Planning Help

[The Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs](#)

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)

A guide (updated to reflect the new meal patterns) meant to help SFAs determine how much food to purchase and how to prepare it.

[First Choice: A Purchasing Systems Manual for School Food Service](#)

National Food Service Management Institute

Includes a section on menu systems and planning.

[Menu Planning Resources](#)

FNS's Healthy Meals Resource System

A compilation of menu planning tools, fact sheets, guides, and more.

[Fish to Schools Resource Guide](#)

Sitka Conservation Society

The Sitka Conservation Society developed a “how-to” guide to serving fish in schools. Using Sitka as a case study, it outlines procurement and processing strategies, legalities, tips, and recipes.

[Pecks to Pounds](#)

Maryland Department of Agriculture

Translates the typical farm measurements (pecks, bushels, crates, etc.) to pounds. This chart is useful for both farmers and school food service staff to communicate effectively with each other and enables school food service staff to convert farm measurements into serving sizes.

[Recommended Kitchen Equipment for From-Scratch Cooking](#)

Wisconsin Farm to School Program

A list of equipment you might need to start incorporating scratch recipes until menus.

Inspiring Menus

[Current Menus](#)

Minneapolis Public Schools

These beautiful menus and information-rich promotional pages show that local foods can be incorporated into delicious menus throughout the year, even as far north as Minneapolis.

[Lunch Menus](#)

Gunnison Watershed School District

These informational menus prominently feature Harvest of the Month items, highlight dishes that are made from scratch, and highlight which menu items are produced within the state of Colorado.

[Sample Cycle Menus](#)

Great Trays™ partnership in Minnesota – Part of the Great Trays™ Toolkit

These sample cycle menus adhere to the new meal guidelines and show which foods can be procured locally in Minnesota.

Recipes

[Healthy Cycle Menus Booklet](#)

Idaho State Department of Education

Guidance on creating exceptional cycle menus that adhere to nutrition standards, including sample menus.

[What's Cooking? USDA Mixing Bowl](#)

FNS

Wonderful recipes, resources, and fact sheets for household and large-quantity cooking.

[Kidchen Expedition](#)

Oklahoma Farm to School Program

Full of time and cost efficient, healthful, and local recipes that use Oklahoma-grown produce; recipes are relevant wherever similar foods are grown!

[Menus that Move](#)

Ohio Department of Education

Seasonal menus that meet USDA's new meal requirements.

[The Lunchbox](#)

Food Family Farming Foundation

Recipes, tips, and tools, and tutorials on incorporation healthful foods into school meals.

[Great Trays™ Toolkit for School Foodservice](#)

Great Trays™ partnership in Minnesota

A host of menu planning resources including worksheets, sample menus, and recipes.

[Fresh from the Farm: The Massachusetts Farm to School Cookbook](#)

Massachusetts Farm to School Project

Countless recipes that use fruits and vegetables that grow locally in New England, complete with nutritional analyses.

Taste Testing Resources

[A Guide to Taste Testing Local Food in Schools](#)

Vermont Food Education Every Day (VT FEED)

A comprehensive guide to implementing a taste testing program in your school, including a sample timeline, case studies from taste tests in the cafeteria, classroom, and through afterschool programs.

[Farm to School Taste Tests in School Cafeterias](#)

Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

A quick-start taste-testing guide for chefs, parents, and cafeteria and school staff.

[Tasting Lesson – Fruits and Vegetables](#)

University of Minnesota Extension Program

A sample lesson to that can be offered along with a taste test.

[Free Tasting Lessons](#)

Cooking with Kids, Inc.

Free and fun bilingual produce tasting lessons.

[Bright Ideas for Taste Test Success](#)

Georgia Organics

This fantastic video walks viewers through several tips for making taste tests fun and successful!



Food Safety

Maintaining food safety is essential to every school meal program. Food coming from local farms and school gardens can be as safe, or even safer, than foods coming through conventional channels. Nevertheless, school gardening and local purchasing may present some new food safety questions and require new protocols. The questions below are meant to help you establish a plan to maintain the safety of all foods served in your school or district as your farm to school program expands. As you think through the prompts, you will be encouraged to explore health policies at the state and local levels that might affect your operations; think about how to ensure food safety in your school garden and kitchen; and determine how you can be certain that food coming from local producers of all kinds is raised and handled in a way that gives you confidence that it's safe to serve.

Food Safety Questions to Consider

Background and Progress to Date

What steps have you already taken to ensure that, as your farm to school program grows, you are managing food safety risks for all of the foods you serve to students? What sorts of food safety materials and trainings have you offered to food service staff, teachers, maintenance staff, or others? Have your students received any training or instruction regarding food safety?

State and Local Health Requirements

What food safety laws exist at the state and local levels that might affect your farm to school program?

TIP! *Local health and state food regulatory agencies should be able to inform you of what requirements apply for school districts purchasing directly from farms, operating school gardens, and cooking from scratch.*

Food Safety In the Kitchen

Do you anticipate any changes in food preparation and service resulting from your farm to school program that will require you to develop new policies or standard operating procedures?

For example: When operating farm to school programs, schools and districts often cook more meals from scratch or begin serving raw fruits and vegetables on a salad bar when they didn't before. Other programs freeze or dry local foods or later use.

Do you anticipate any changes in food preparation and service resulting from your farm to school program that will require you to purchase small or large equipment? Do you have enough

refrigerated storage to accommodate an increased volume of fresh produce? Do you have the capacity to transport fresh produce?

For example: Some schools do not have some of the basic equipment needed to prepare fresh produce such as good knives, cutting boards, designated produce brushes, colanders, and salad spinners.

Training

Do food service staff members feel comfortable with their current level of knowledge regarding food safety? If not, what types of training or experience will increase their confidence in this area? Do you anticipate a need for training others regarding food safety?

For example: Many farm to school programs involve stakeholders outside of the school foodservice program who may need food safety training, including teachers, volunteers, other staff, or students, who might prepare or serve food in school gardens, classrooms, or other settings.

Food Safety In the School Garden

What food safety measures will you take into account when designing and maintaining your garden? Will you be following Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) and Good Handling Practices (GHP)?

TIP! *USDA does not require that school gardens be GAP-certified. However, following the science-based principles outlined in GAPs can help you manage food safety in your school garden.*

Are you locating your garden away from potential sources of contamination? What building materials will you use to construct the garden? Do you need to have the soil or water source tested? Are there existing rules about the use of chemicals on the school grounds? If not, will you create rules to ensure that students are not exposed to chemicals, including pesticides?

TIP! *USDA highly recommends conducting a soil test before a garden is planted. If your soil is contaminated, there are alternatives to planting straight into the ground, such as installing raised beds and filling them with uncontaminated soil. To test soils, you can either send samples for analysis, or buy a soil testing kit. To learn more, contact your local Cooperative Extension office.*

Will students be involved in harvesting produce in your school garden? Where will harvested foods be washed and/or prepared? Where will students eat the foods that are produced in your school garden(s) (e.g. on-site at the garden, in a classroom, or in the cafeteria)? What types of containers will be used for harvest? Will a potable water source be available for washing and preparing the garden produce?

TIP! *Local and state agencies may have policies related to allowing produce from school gardens to be used in Child Nutrition Programs.*

Do you have any other concerns about food safety related to your school garden? If so, how do you plan to address them?

Training

Do food service staff, teachers, and others who interact with the school garden feel comfortable with their current level of knowledge regarding food safety in the garden? If not, what types of training or experience will increase their confidence in this area?

Food Safety on the Farm and During Transport

How will you ensure that suppliers for the local food you source for your farm to school program are practicing food safety steps from the field to your door?

TIP! *There are three basic methods for ensuring that local producers you work with (or are thinking of working with) have good food safety practices: 1) require producers to acquire a formal food safety certification (such as USDA's GAP/GAP certification); 2) ask producers to conduct self-audits; and 3) visit the production or packing site yourself to observe and discuss food safety practices. You can also use a combination of these methods!*

Are there any specifications related to food safety that you might consider including in solicitations for local foods? What specifications or protocol do your distributors (or your food service management company) use related to on-site food safety for producers?

For example: You can include specifications in your contracts related to the time between harvest and delivery, temperature of food during transport, cleanliness or delivery vehicles, and condition upon delivery.

Training

Do food service staff members feel comfortable with their current level of knowledge regarding on-farm (or ranch, or boat) food safety during production and transport? If not, what types of training or experience will increase confidence in this area?

Liability

Does your district or state, or do any of the retailers or other entities you work with, require that producers hold liability insurance? If so, what type of liability insurance is required? If no liability insurance requirements exist, will you establish some? Are your requirements sufficient to cover your needs and realistic for potential suppliers?

TIP! *There are several types of liability insurance (including General, Business, Product, and Recall) that a producer may hold, so be specific when you inquire.*

Traceability

In the event that food served through your school nutrition program is recalled, what is your system for tracing the produce one step back to your supplier and one step forward to when and to whom it was served? Are you able to trace all of the ingredients in your menu items back to your purchasing records? Do you keep products separated through storage and service? What are your other traceability concerns, and how will you address them?

For example: Many distributors conduct periodic mock recalls to test their internal tracking systems. Mock recalls can even use customers to test their internal traceability programs. Have you ever conducted a mock recall in your school or district? If not, how might you work with your suppliers to plan a mock recall or develop one on your own?

Food Safety Resources

General

[Farm to School Food Safety FAQs](#)

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service

Answers to common questions about food safety rules, working with local farmers, and handling fresh produce.

[Produce Safety Resources](#)

USDA and the National Food Service Management Institute

Includes videos, fact sheets, presentations, and talking points on produce safety topics for school foodservice professionals ranging from schools gardens, to food preparation and handling, to produce quality.

[Food Safety Resources](#)

University of Minnesota

An array of resources that includes information about food safety and salad bars, canned products, and locally produced eggs. Be aware that some of the information presented is specific to Minnesota's state laws.

[Food Safety Publications and Resources](#)

Virginia Cooperative Extension

A host of resources covering topics ranging from food storage guidelines to enhancing the safety of locally grown produce during harvest, transport, and at the market.

[Farm to School Food Safety Project](#)

Colorado Farm to School

A review of the statutory and regulatory structure of farm to school-related agricultural policies, with a focus on the interconnectedness of federal mandates on state regulatory structures and local county health regulations related to food safety. This guide is specific to Colorado, but much of the information is relevant to farm to school practitioners in other states.

[Tips, Tools, and Guidelines for Food Distribution and Food Safety](#)

Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food & Forestry

Provides helpful food safety information on everything from developing a food safety plan, to handling fresh produce, to safely serving produce from the school garden.

[Best Practices for Handling Fresh Produce in Schools](#)

USDA and the National Food Service Management Institute

Recommendations for reducing the risks of food borne illness and minimizing the chances for fruits and vegetables to become contaminated.

On-Farm Food Safety

[USDA Good Agricultural Practices Audit Programs](#)

USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service

Information about USDA's independent voluntary agricultural practice audit program.

[The On-Farm Food Safety Project](#)

FamilyFarmed.org

A host of food safety resources including tools, customizable forms, and templates to help farmers get organized about on-farm food safety. (Some areas of the site require registration to access).

[Good Agricultural Practices and Food Safety](#)

Washington Department of Agriculture's Farm to School Program

A compilation of food safety resources, including a Request for Proposals that incorporates food safety specifications.

[A Checklist for Purchasing Local Produce](#)

Iowa State University Extension and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture

A checklist of questions for school food purchasers to ask local farmers before they buy their products.

[Checklist for Producers Selling Produce to Local K-12 Schools](#)

Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition

A checklist meant to facilitate communication about farming practices and food safety between farmers and school food service directors.

[Verifying On-Farm Food Safety Fact Sheet](#)

USDA and the National Food Service Management

Provides tips to help the school foodservice professionals plan and conduct farm visits to discuss food safety practices.

[Insurance Coverage Options for Fresh Produce Growers](#)

North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension

A summary of the insurance coverage options available for growers of fresh fruits and vegetables.

School Garden Safety

[Growing Safer Gardens](#)

North Carolina State University

School garden recommendations based on Good Agricultural Principles.

[Food Safety Tips for School Gardens](#)

National Food Service Management Institute

School gardening tips regarding site selection, materials, and water use; chemical, fertilizer, compost, and manure use; growing and harvesting; and serving school garden produce through school meal programs.

[Sources and Impacts of Contaminants in Soil](#)

Cornell Waste Management Institute

Introduces common sources of soil contaminants relevant for school gardens.

[Garden to Cafeteria Program Protocol](#)

Denver Public Schools Food and Nutrition Services

An example one district's protocols for school gardening, many of which address food safety.

[Denver School Garden Coalition Operating Manual](#)

Denver School Garden Coalition

An in-depth manual for school gardening in Denver that includes sections addressing food safety.



Promoting Your Program

Key to getting buy-in and financial and in-kind support for your farm to school program is clearly communicating your goals, achievements, and needs. The questions and resources below are meant to help you develop a plan for marketing your farm to school efforts. You will be encouraged to explore your various audiences (including students, parents, teachers, administrators, community members, food producers, and the media) and think about what messages you want to convey to them and how best to go about it.

Promotion and Outreach Questions to Consider

Background and Progress to Date

To date, what steps have you taken to promote your farm to school goals or activities to students, teachers, administrators, parents, food producers, the media, and your community?

“Our advice to other schools: Focus on the positive aspects of the project and celebrate successes, big and small. Continue to share new developments with the community and take suggestions consistently. That often provides a time to explain why the project works the way it does—along with the limitations and areas where parents and community members can get involved.”

Oxford Public Schools, MS

Outreach

How will you let the following groups of constituents know about, and how will you get them excited about and engaged in, your work to offer more local menu items, educational opportunities, or other farm to school activities at school?

Students

What are the primary messages that you want to send to students about your farm to school efforts? Are there existing student clubs (like a gardening or culinary club) through which you could recruit students to serve as ambassadors for your efforts? Will you use different methods and messages to reach students of different age groups?

For example: Using social media might be a great way to engage high schoolers, whereas different methods of communicating might make more sense for reaching younger students.

Parents

What are the primary messages that you want to send to parents about your farm to school efforts? What are the school’s usual channels for communicating with parents? Does the school send an electronic or paper newsletter? Is there a school blog? Can you reach parents through a back-to-

school night or other school event? What will your message to parents be? Are you asking something of them (like to volunteer in the garden or reinforce the nutritional messages you are sending at home)?

For example: Some schools invite parents for a local lunch or dinner during National Farm to School Month, or at another time when local produce is abundant.

Teachers

What are the primary messages that you want to send to teachers and other school staff about your farm to school efforts? How do you intend to engage teachers in, and keep them apprised of, your efforts?

TIP! Presumably, you've recruited at least one teacher to be part of your farm to school team. That person is probably your best resource for figuring out how to engage teachers without overwhelming their already full schedules.

For example: In schools where faculty have rarely eaten cafeteria food in the past, food service staff invite teachers and other school employees for a complimentary meal that includes new local offerings.

School administrators and board

What are the primary messages that you want to send to school administrators and school board members about your farm to school efforts? What types of support do you need from them?

For example: Invite school board members to farm to school events such as harvest day at the garden or the launch of a farm to school salad bar; send them a basket of products from the garden as snacks for a board meeting; or work with them to incorporate farm to school into wellness policies.

Food producers

What are the primary messages that you want to send to local food producers about your farm to school efforts? Do you have any ideas about how to reach local producers?

TIP! Try talking with your local Agricultural Extension agent about the best way to reach local producers to let them know what you're up to. You might also consider going to the farmers market and passing out fliers letting food producers know about your program and any upcoming opportunities to bid for contracts.

School food service staff

What are the primary messages that you want to send to school food service staff about your farm to school efforts? How will you get their buy-in and generate excitement about the program?

For example: Some schools involve the entire food service team in coming up with ideas about how to get students excited about new foods from cafeteria signage to classroom visits to messages delivered verbally during food service periods. Engaging food service staff every step of the way will ensure that they are invested in, and proud of, the program.

Media & Community

What are the primary messages that you want to send to the media and the broader community about your farm to school efforts? Does your school regularly issue press releases or communicate with local media outlets? If so, how can you use existing press release templates, media contacts, and internal resources to promote your farm to school activities?

For example: Some districts write a monthly piece for local newspaper about school lunch.

Marketing Resources & Inspiration

Resources

[National Farm to School Month Resources](#)

National Farm to School Network (NFSN)

Every year, schools across the county celebrate National Farm to School Month in October. The NFSN makes it easy with a host of resources from fun logos to press release templates to daily themes.

[Promoting Your Farm to School Items](#)

University of Minnesota Extension Program

A video geared towards food service directors that addresses promoting farm to school menu items. See also their [tips for promoting food](#).

[Interview with Communications Consultant Andy Goodman](#)

Center for Ecoliteracy

Andy Goodman provides advice on communicating about school lunch initiatives, holding effective focus groups, and choosing the right messages and mediums for communicating with different groups.

Examples of Great Farm to School Promotional Materials and Websites

[Farmer Trading Cards](#)

Massachusetts Farm to School Project

Reminiscent of baseball cards, these farmer trading cards provide the stats on the local producers who provide food for school meal programs.

[Local Food is Good Food Poster](#)

Massachusetts Farm to School Project

A fun, colorful poster that features local food and local farmers.

[Harvest of the Month Materials](#)

Portland Public Schools

Educational and beautifully designed activity sheets and other Harvest of the Month resources.

[Menus, Calendars, and Recipes](#)

Minneapolis Public Schools

These beautiful, information-rich resources are a great example of how beautiful design and clever marketing can make healthful, local foods seem even more appealing!

[Meet Your Producers](#)

Kent School District in Washington State

A great district-level farm to school website that includes an interactive map that allows students and parents to learn more about where their school food comes from.

[Elementary School Lunch Menu \(for parents\)](#)

Berkeley Unified School District

Beautiful monthly menus that include a letter home to parents, the district's wellness policy, recipes, and more.



School Gardening

The questions and resources below are meant to help you explore the myriad considerations that arise when planning a school garden program. As you work through the prompts, you will be encouraged to think about how you want the gardens to be used; what types and how much food you hope to produce; where to locate the gardens; how to design the gardens; what tools and materials you'll need; how much funding and staff support the garden program will require; and what you'll do with the harvest.

School Gardening Questions to Consider

Note: These questions and resources focus on the logistics of establishing and maintaining a gardening program. See the [education and curriculum topic](#) for more on how to fully integrate gardens into academic programs. See the [food safety topic](#) for more on how to keep your garden environment, and harvest, safe.

Background and Progress to Date

What steps have already been taken to plan, create, or expand a garden program at your school or in your district? How many of your district's schools currently have gardens, and how many would like to have a garden?

Getting Buy-In

Are administrators, parents, food service and maintenance staff, teachers, and students invested in the idea of a new or expanded school gardening program? If not, how will you get their buy-in and the practical support you need from them?

For example: You might consider asking a neighboring district with a thriving garden program to offer a tour of their gardens and discuss the benefits.

“Through the collaboration of a few teachers, school nurse, and cafeteria staff, Paul Fly Elementary was able to build a thriving educational and edible garden. The students studied soil in science class and learned about composting. They were able to have the hands-on experience of turning over soil in the early spring and examining soil through magnifying glasses. Students tested the soil and components to determine if fertilizer needed to be added to encourage plant growth. They planted, watered, and weeded the garden. The students harvested arugula, radishes, cilantro, and basil. The cafeteria staff was able to make arugula salad garnished with fresh cut radishes for the students at lunch time”

Norristown Area School District, PA

Planning & Design

TIP! *At the beginning, it may seem like there's an endless list of considerations that must be thought through before you even break ground on your first garden. Remember, though, that*

you can start small and grow your program year by year; this approach may even allow you to develop gardens that best suit the needs of your schools.

Goals and end uses

How many gardens would your program ideally support, and how large would they be? What is your timeline for installing these gardens?

TIP! *If you haven't already, consider conducting an audit to determine which schools in your districts have gardens, which schools want them, when they want them, and how they'd like to use them.*

What are your goals for your school gardening program? How will the gardens be used and by whom? How many students will learn or work in the gardens, and what are their grade levels? What topics do you want to teach in the garden, and what experiences do you want students to have? How much food are you hoping your gardens will produce?

TIP! *End-use questions are essential to consider when deciding where to site and how to design gardens; everything else will flow out of the educational, food-production, and other goals you establish for your program.*

Sizes and sites

Where will you situate any new gardens to ensure that they get adequate light and are close to water sources? Do the soil qualities differ across the school campuses? What other considerations will you take into account when choosing where to plant gardens?

For example: Some schools prioritize visibility to the community when choosing where to plant gardens. If neighbors, parents, and others can see school gardens from the street, they might be more likely to take an interest in them.

Layout, soil, and garden beds

What will your gardens look like? Will different gardens or different parts of one garden cater to different age groups or purposes?

Will you plant seeds or starts directly in the ground, use raised beds, or do some combination of both?

Will you use existing soil or bring soil in from elsewhere? How will you enrich your soil and keep it healthy? Do you plan to use compost, plant cover crops, add fertilizers?

Crops and livestock

How long is the growing season in your area, and what crops grow well in your soils and climate? Will you involve students in your decision about what crops to plant? Are there any special cultural foods or food traditions that you want to represent in your gardens? Do you plan to plant any fruit-bearing trees?

Which non-food crops will you raise?

For example: Many schools grow non-edible plants or flowers to deter pests, attract pollinators, or simply to make the garden colorful!

Will you raise any bees or animals as part of your gardening program?

Greenhouses, hoop houses, and other structures and spaces

Do you plan to incorporate greenhouses, hoop houses, or any other types of structures into your school gardens? If so, for what purpose?

What other considerations are important in the design of your garden? Will you have a special area for compost? How about a shady area for students to sit while they are participating in lessons or receiving garden training?

Supplies

What supplies will you need for seeding, planting, harvesting, and teaching in the gardens? Where will you store these items once you've obtained them?

TIP! *Don't forget to think about what types of instructional tools (like magnifying glasses, clipboards, or butterfly nets) might be needed for your gardening program.*

Funding

How much will it cost to maintain your school gardening program throughout the year (including staff time, tools, water, compost, etc.)? Where will this money or in-kind support come from?

For example: Some schools or districts ask for donations of seeds, tools, and other supplies from local nurseries, lumber yards, and home improvement stores. Others send wish lists home to parents asking for their donations of used tools, or even financial support.

TIP! *Remember, you can use funds from the nonprofit school food service account to purchase supplies, including seeds, fertilizer, tools, etc for your gardens. If you sell produce, the benefits must accrue back to the nonprofit food service account.*

Maintenance, Staffing, & Training

What sort of ongoing maintenance (such as weeding, watering, fertilizing, etc.) will the garden require, both during the school year and the summer? Who will be responsible for these duties? Will you organize regular garden workdays? Solicit the help of volunteers and parents?

What training will teachers, volunteers, students, maintenance staff, and others need to keep the garden healthy, avoid injury, and ensure that the foods it produces are safe?

For example: Everyone working in the garden will probably need basic safety training. Those watering, harvesting or planting crops will probably need more in depth skills-based training.

Using Garden Produce

How much produce do you anticipate harvesting each season, and what do you intend to do with the harvest? Will you serve some of the garden produce through school cafeterias? Will you offer foods for students to sample right there in the garden or back at the classroom? Do you intend to sell any garden produce through, say, a farmers' market or a community supported agriculture program?

School Gardening Resources

Getting Started

[A Step-by-Step School Garden Guide](#)

Grow NYC

A checklist for building community support, creating a shared vision, planning and designing the garden, securing materials and supplies, and keeping the garden growing.

[Getting Started: A Guide for Creating School Gardens as Outdoor Classrooms](#)

Center for Ecoliteracy

A comprehensive, step-by-step guide to starting a school garden, from selecting and preparing a site, to raising funds, to involving a diverse set of stakeholders.

[School Garden Checklist](#)

Let's Move

A list of important considerations for starting a garden including site and plant selection, soil health, and design.

[School Garden Q&As: Memo SP 32-2009](#)

FNS

This memo clarifies, among other things, that funds from the nonprofit school food service account can be used to purchase seeds and other supplies for starting and maintaining school gardens.

Webinars, Videos, and Toolkits

[Webinar: Design Ideas for a Fun, Successful Instructional School Garden](#)

LifeLab and the National Farm to School Network

LifeLab Director John Fisher discusses the importance of good garden design and demonstrates many garden design concepts with more than 100 photographs.

[Growing a Better School Lunch](#)

Community Blueprint

An inspiring video documenting one of Minnesota's largest school garden projects, which spans 3.5 acres. About 300 high school students tend a garden that provides fresh food to the school cafeteria, grow food for and operate a community supported agriculture program, and learn valuable lessons.

[Resources for Creating and Sustaining School Gardens](#)

California School Garden Network

Free handouts, videos, and other resources, including great information on planning, designing, prepping, seeding, and maintaining a garden.

Organizations

[School Gardening Resources](#)

KidsGardening

A project of the National Gardening Association

Articles, lesson and activity ideas, classroom projects, and how-to-guides.

[The Edible Schoolyard Project](#)

An organization dedicated to building and sharing edible education curricula supporting an online network and resource center, and offering professional development opportunities.

[The USDA People's Garden Initiative](#)

A collaborative effort of more than 700 local and national organizations all working together to establish community and school gardens across the country.



Education & Curriculum Integration

The questions and resources below are meant to help you develop a plan for your farm to school educational efforts. As you work through the prompts, you will be encouraged to think about what kinds of food, agriculture, and nutrition-related educational activities you will engage students in.

Education & Curriculum Integration Questions to Consider

Background and Progress to Date

What steps have you already taken to educate students about food, agriculture, and nutrition through hands-on activities, field trips, demonstrations, and classroom education?

TIP! *Everything from inspecting insects in a school garden, to growing beans in cups on a classroom windowsill, to holding an annual harvest festival with educational booths, to farming Tilapia in science class is a farm to school educational activity.*

Classroom Activities

What are your future plans for offering food, agriculture, and nutrition-focused lessons to students in the classroom? Which grade levels will receive these lessons? Will they meet any of the required curriculum standards; if so, for which subjects?

TIP! *Some subjects (such as Science, Humanities, and Health) may lend themselves to the integration of farm to school concepts more easily than others. Those coordinating farm to school efforts can work with teachers and district curriculum coordinators to determine how and where to begin weaving farm to school lessons into the standards-based curriculum.*

Garden Activities

Note: For more on school gardens, see [the school garden questions and resources](#).

What are your future plans for offering garden-based activities and lessons? Will activities in the garden tie into lessons offered in the classroom? Who will lead garden-based activities?

TIP! *Garden-based lessons can meet curriculum standards, too!*

Culinary Activities

Will you offer students any opportunities to learn about preparing and cooking healthful food? Where will these lessons take place? Will lessons be demonstration-based, hands-on, or both? Will school food service staff be involved? Will culinary lessons be tied to what's being served in the cafeteria or harvested in the garden?

Field Trips

Will you bring students on field trips to local farms, farmers' markets, food processing facilities, or other places that represent important links in your local food system? Will these trips be tied to any classroom or garden activities, or to the food being served through school meal programs?

After School and Summer Activities

Will you offer students any farm to school related education activities during after school or summer programs?

Curriculum and Education Resources

Lesson Plans

[Ag in the Classroom Curriculum Matrix](#)

National Organization for Agriculture in the Classroom

An extensive list of agriculture-related lesson plans and other resources organized by grade level.

[Resources and Tools Database](#)

Edible Schoolyard Project

Educational resources for the garden classroom, kitchen classroom, academic classroom, and cafeteria, organized by type, grade level, and season!

[Farm to School Lesson Plans](#)

Growing Minds

Farm to school activities that incorporate both National and North Carolina State curriculum standards.

[Dig In!](#)

USDA's Team Nutrition

Ten inquiry-based lessons that engage 5th and 6th graders in growing, harvesting, tasting, and learning about fruits and vegetables.

[The Great Garden Detective Adventure](#)

USDA's Team Nutrition

This eleven-lesson curriculum for 3rd and 4th grades includes bulletin board materials, veggie dice, fruit and vegetable flash cards, and ten issues of Garden Detective News for parents/caregivers.

[Farm to School Knowledge Base: For Educators](#)

FoodHub

A list of farm to school educational resources organized by grade level.

[Sustainable Agriculture Resources and Programs for K-12 Youth](#)

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education

A guide to sustainable agriculture-oriented educational programs and curricula that includes direct links as well as program contact information.

Field Trips

[Making the Farm Connection: A Guide to Field Trips for Farmers](#)

Community Alliance with Family Farmers

A guide to planning and conducting farm visits for school groups, for farmers.

[A Farm Field Trip Guide](#)

Green Mountain Farm to School

A set of lesson plans for visits to various types of farmers and other agriculture-related destinations; includes tips for farmers and teachers, and sample forms.



Evaluating Your Efforts

Laying the framework to properly evaluate your farm to school efforts is a key part of planning. Evaluation findings can help you learn what works, improve your program, and demonstrate your success to funders, parents, administrators, and others. As you work through the questions and resources below, you will be encouraged to think about how to evaluate the impacts of your program (from student eating behaviors and knowledge, to farmer incomes and agricultural practices, to economic and other effects on the boarder community), keeping in mind your intended outcomes, your capacity to conduct evaluations, and the end uses of your results.

Evaluation Questions to Consider

TIP! *Evaluations can require a significant amount of time and resources. Do the research to determine what types of evaluations are realistic for your program, taking into account your budget, staff resources, partnerships, and evaluation experience and expertise.*

Background and Progress to Date

What steps have you taken to collect baseline statistics, create survey instruments, or otherwise lay the groundwork to evaluate your farm to school program? Is there any existing data (originally collected for other purposes) that may be useful for your evaluation?

TIP! *The metrics you choose to collect and the aspects of your program that you choose to evaluate should be strongly connected to your [program goals and vision](#).*

Student Outcomes

Will you assess the impacts of your farm to school program on student behaviors, knowledge, attitudes, or physical health? What about their social, academic, cognitive, or life skills? If so, what evaluation tools will you use?

For example: To assess student eating behaviors, farm to school researchers have used 24-hour food recalls, plate waste studies, and biometric measures like Body Mass Index. Pre- and post-program/lesson surveys are an easy way to assess knowledge of food, gardening, agriculture, and seasonality.

Teacher & Administrator Outcomes

Will you assess the impacts of your farm to school program on teacher behaviors, knowledge, or attitudes? If so, what evaluation tools will you use?

For example: A district that has installed several school gardens may choose to evaluate the change in teachers' attitudes towards garden-based instruction.

Food Service Outcomes

Will you assess the impacts of your farm to school program on cafeteria offerings, the amount of local foods served through school meal programs, school meal participation and revenue, or food and labor costs? What about food service staff interest, skills, and knowledge? If so, what evaluation tools will you use?

TIP! *Several templates exist for assessing the financial impacts/viability of farm to school programs. See the resources below to find such templates.*

Farmer/Producer Outcomes

Will you assess the impacts of your farm to school program on producer income, attitudes, growing plans and practices, or processing plans? If so, what evaluation tools will you use?

For example: A simple evaluation of farmer impact might look at how much money is paid to local farmers by schools. A more sophisticated analysis might look at how those purchases changed net farmer income or how many jobs were created by the additional income.

Parent/Family Outcomes

Will you assess the impacts of your farm to school program on parent or family behaviors, knowledge, and attitudes? If so, what evaluation tools will you use?

For example: A district might choose to survey parents on whether parent newsletters and farm to school events have changed their purchasing or cooking habits.

Community Outcomes

Will you assess the impacts of your farm to school program on the community at large? If so, what evaluation tools will you use?

For example: You may choose to assess the total impact of increased local food purchases on the local economy. Is there a multiplier effect for dollars spent on local foods?

Using Evaluation Results

How do you plan to use the results of your evaluative efforts? What types of programmatic changes will you make depending on the evaluation outcomes? Will you share outcomes with your school board, parent groups, funders, or the media?

TIP! *Farm to school programs don't always yield the intended outcomes. Districts conducting evaluations should be prepared to accept results and to use them to improve programming, even if that means making unexpected changes.*

Evaluation Resources

[Colorado Farm to School Evaluation Toolkit](#)

Colorado Farm to School

This toolkit is for non-evaluators and provides clear, easy instructions on how to implement an evaluation of farm to school activities. The toolkit contains many resources for selecting outcomes and measurement tools to evaluate student, community, food service, producer, parent, school leadership, and community impacts.

[Bearing Fruit: Farm to School Program Evaluation Resources and Recommendations](#)

Urban and Environmental Policy Institute

This comprehensive resource introduces readers to the types of farm to school evaluations that practitioners can conduct, as well as the tools and resources available for measuring impact.

[Farm to School Evaluation Toolkit](#)

National Farm to School Network and the University of North Carolina

A collection of survey instruments and other evaluation tools aimed at assessing several different farm to school-related outcomes.

[Evaluation of the Davis Farm to School Program](#)

University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program at Davis

A great example of an in-depth evaluation of four farm to school related goals: to 1) increase farm fresh food in school food offerings; 2) reduce solid waste through a comprehensive district recycling program; 3) provide education opportunities to promote a healthy lifestyle and develop the whole child; and 4) engage the community and evaluate programs to provide information to the community.

[Do Farm-to School Programs Make a Difference? Findings and Future Research Needs](#)

Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition, Vol. 3(2/3) 2008

This article by Anupama Joshi, Andrea Misako Azuma, and Gail Feenstra looks at 15 studies to assess the impacts of farm-to-school programs and identifies future research needs.

[Connecting Classrooms, Cafeterias & Communities: Promising Practices of Farm to School Education Summary of Evaluation Findings](#)

PEER Associates and the University of Vermont

A report on a 2010 evaluation project to explore the impact of farm to school programs in Vermont on student fruit and vegetable consumption.

Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit

USDA's Economic Research Service

This report provides a toolkit of standardized measurement tools for assessing various aspects of community food security including community food production resources.



Sustaining Your Program

The sustainability of your farm to school program should be an important consideration throughout your planning process. As your program expands, a solid plan for growing and maintaining financial resources, in-kind donations, and policy support will ensure that your program becomes part of the fabric of your district. The questions and resources below are meant to help you think about how to ensure that your program continues long into the future through institutionalization.

Program Sustainability Questions to Consider

Background and Progress to Date

What steps have you already taken to begin securing the funding, equipment, materials, hands-on support, and policy change you need to sustain your farm to school program? Do you anticipate your needs increasing, decreasing, or staying the same over the coming years?

TIP! *If you haven't already, now is a good time to create a document that projects your anticipated monetary and other needs over the next few years based on the plans you've made.*

Institutional Support

In what ways will your school or district integrate farm to school activities into normal operations? Will farm to school become a permanent part of the curriculum? Will local foods become a permanent part of the school food budget? Will farm to school activities become a part of school/district policy? In general, what plans are in place to ensure that farm to school isn't just a special initiative, but an integral, *institutionalized* part of what happens in your classrooms and cafeterias?

TIP! *When your farm to school program has truly become part of your institution, then even if a key member of the team leaves the district, the project won't dissolve. Think about what it will take to make this the case for your project. Of course, having an implementation plan documenting the progress you've made and your plans for the future is a big part of this!*

Will you seek monetary support from your school or district? If so, where will these funds come from? Will they be permanent or temporary?

Grants

Will you seek grant funding to implement and sustain your farm to school program? Which local, regional, and national funding sources have you already identified? Have you established any annual goals for this funding stream?

TIP! *Farm to school programs have diverse benefits, so cast the net widely when looking for funding. Grant-makers looking to support children’s health, nutrition education, garden projects, local economic development, agricultural enterprises, or even farmland preservation might be interested in funding a farm to school program.*

Donations & Fundraising Events

Will you seek monetary donations from parents, community members, local businesses, or others? What are your plans for securing these funds? Will you hold special events to raise funds for and awareness of your program? Have you established any annual goals for this funding stream?

For example: Instead of traditional school fundraiser wherein kids and families sell candy or wrapping paper to benefit their school or district, some districts have operated farm to school fundraisers that instead offer local food products, like fruit preserves, that make good holiday gifts.

TIP! *Individual parents, or parent-teacher associations, can be great sources of funding, or fundraising ideas and connections.*

Will you seek in-kind donations of equipment, supplies, or services from local businesses, parents, community members, or others? Have you established any annual goals for in-kind donations?

TIP! *If you’re thinking of asking local businesses for in-kind support, be sure to let them know how they’ll benefit. For example, you might issue a press release trumpeting their commitment to your project; invite them to break ground on a new garden; or honor them in a parent newsletter.*

Partnerships

Which partnerships will be essential to sustaining your farm to school program? Will any of your partners be raising funds or carrying out essential functions of the program on your behalf? If so, is their involvement temporary or permanent?

“There are so many opportunities beyond our doorsteps at our schools, I never realized how many community partners and people we could rely on in order to roll this out. From organizations donating materials and seeds to volunteers in the gardens, it has really led to effortless synergies that make the work light and exciting for all of us.”

Rochester City Schools, NY

For example: In some districts, a non-profit partner or other entity plays a lead role in operating and raising funds for a farm to school program, coordinating with the district as appropriate.

Resources

[Grants, Loans, and Support](#)

USDA Know Your Farmer Know Your Food Initiative

This webpage lists over two dozen programs at USDA that can help build local and regional food systems.

[Funding Farm to School](#)

National Farm to School Network

Tips for acquiring funds for your farm to school program through grants, donations, and special events.

[A+ Fundraisers for High Schools: A guide to having a successful fundraiser while keeping your community healthy](#)

New York City Healthy High Schools Initiative

This thorough guide presents lots of ideas for healthy, junk food-free fundraisers such as family dinner events, flea markets, fitness-based fundraisers, plant sales, and more! Resources, pricing and profit information, tips, and steps are provided for each idea.

[Online Grant-Writing Training Courses](#)

Foundation Center

Several free, online training courses and tutorials meant to help users enjoy better success in approaching foundations.

[A Working History of Farm to School Legislation in Oregon](#)

Ecotrust

A great example of how state-level legislation and funding supportive of farm to school has evolved over time in Oregon.