



SELLING LOCAL FOOD TO SCHOOLS: A RESOURCE FOR PRODUCERS



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ACROSS THE COUNTRY, an increasing number of schools and districts have begun to source more foods locally and to provide complementary educational activities to students that emphasize food, farming, and nutrition. If you are a local food producer, this means that there are more opportunities than ever to nourish the children who live in your own community. As a farmer, rancher, fisherman, food processor, baker, or other food producer, you can play a role in providing local products to schools to serve during breakfast, lunch, snack times, and supper, *and* in educating students about food and agriculture.

Selling to Schools: Four Pathways

School food service operations often work with extremely tight budgets, but school districts can offer a reliable source of revenue and a market for large volumes of product. Schools buy local products through a variety of different channels. Some receive direct deliveries from farmers or pick up orders at the farmers market. Others purchase local products through distributors or acquire them through DoD Fresh vendors. Some purchase local foods that have already been turned into ready-to-eat meals by food processors, while others seek raw products that they can serve fresh or use for scratch cooking. Here are four pathways you can explore to partner with districts near you:

1) Selling directly to schools

Districts receive cash reimbursements from the federal government for every meal served. They use these funds to administer and purchase food for meals served through the federal child nutrition programs. In accordance with federal

regulations, schools are required to follow competitive procurement guidelines. That means that schools cannot purchase directly from a farm or vendor without getting multiple price quotes, regardless of the dollar or volume amount to be purchased. Schools can also use a host of specifications to target local products such as farm size, freshness and native varieties.

2) Selling to distributors that work with schools

Just as described above, schools must follow federal procurement regulations, but are able to include a geographic preference for unprocessed agricultural products when purchasing distribution services. Districts often competitively procure distributors and ask them to provide local products when available, putting the responsibility on the distributor to find and purchase local items. In this scenario, the child nutrition director or state agency may connect you with their distributor, who can choose to purchase directly from you.

3) Working with the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (DoD Fresh)

DoD Fresh is a program that helps schools buy fresh produce. The program is operated by the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) at the Department of Defense, which contracts with produce suppliers (mostly small businesses) to distribute fresh products to schools. Producers wishing to sell fresh fruits and vegetables to schools through the DoD Fresh program are encouraged to work directly with the DoD vendor in their state.



4) Becoming a USDA Foods vendor

USDA's Agriculture Marketing Service (AMS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) purchase about 15% of the food that is served through the National School Lunch Program. USDA buys products through a competitive bidding and award process, and businesses (including farmers, fishers, ranchers, growers, and processors) must become approved vendors in order to submit a bid. The Agricultural Marketing Service purchases fruits, vegetables, livestock, poultry and egg products to support USDA's nutrition programs. The Farm Service Agency purchases grains, dairy, peanut and oil products for USDA Foods.

Making the Connection

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

You will be most effective in marketing your products if you know as much as possible about the schools you hope to work with. Do they serve breakfast, lunch and dinner, or just lunch? How many students, and therefore meals, do they serve? Which distributors do they currently work with? Consider eating a meal at the school to get a sense of what types of items are served. Information about schools, what local items they are buying now and which ones they'd like to buy in the future is also available via the USDA Farm to School Census at www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool/census.

Understanding the kitchen and preparation environment of the schools you want to sell to is also key. Not all schools have the same meal preparation capacity, whether it is staff skills, equipment, time, or space. Some schools have large walk-in freezers and the ability to store bulk items for long periods of time, and some simply do not. Some schools are equipped with highly trained staff and state-of-the-art equipment to process, while others have minimally trained staff with not much more than convection ovens to heat and serve pre-prepared meals. By working with the director, you will learn about the products the district typically purchases, food safety and packing requirements and the school's procurement schedule.

Educating Students

In addition to selling products to schools, producers can play an important role in exposing children to agriculture, and in teaching them about food and nutrition. Providing food to school cafeterias lends itself to a variety of educational opportunities, such as farm tours and classroom and cafeteria visits. The relationship can be mutually beneficial, where the school is opening a new market for you, and you are providing local food to kids, while also teaching them about the food system.

Learn More

For more general information on DoD Fresh and a list of all DoD Fresh vendors, visit <http://go.usa.gov/BWNe>.

To learn how to become a USDA Foods vendor, check out the Agricultural Marketing Service website at <http://1.usa.gov/18W3nzH>.

For an overview of vendor responsibilities and product requirements, visit the Farm Service Agency Domestic Procurement website at <http://go.usa.gov/BWnz>.



For more information, and to sign up to receive USDA's bi-weekly Farm to School E-letter, please visit www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool. Questions? Email us at farmtoschool@fns.usda.gov.

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