

FARM TO SCHOOL

Adapted from University of Nebraska-Lincoln, ATTRA, Nebraska LR42 Conference Report, F2S Ohio, and Know Your Farmer Know Your Food & other the USDA resources among others

Farm to School programs present tremendous opportunities for local producers.

- ❖ Opening New Markets: By connecting local producers with nearby schools, these programs provide producers with new and reliable markets for their products. They provide further potential for expansion in the local food market by creating opportunities to market produce and other products.
- ❖ Healthier Kids: Farm to School programs supply the community's children with lunches and snacks that are healthier and fresher, not to mention local and sustainable. In Central City — where their middle school has a successful, six-year old program — the students eat 199% more food when it is fresh as opposed to typical wholesale produce. Kids like fresh, local food.
- ❖ Strengthening Local Economies: Farm to School programs strengthen their local economies by keeping money circulating in the community. When a school purchases from a local farm, the whole community benefits because the money stays in the area instead of going to a national wholesaler.
- ❖ Educational Opportunities: Frequently, Farm to School programs include classroom trips to those farms that supply their food. They create a new chance for kids to learn about their community and the value and importance of local agriculture.

All in all, Farm to School programs strengthen communities. They support local family farms. They grow the connection between children and their hometowns. Communities become more closely intertwined, economically and socially.

And it's already happening in Nebraska. A few examples include:

As mentioned before, Central City's Farm to School program has been running successfully, and been recognized for it, for over six years. The food at their schools is better, lasts longer, and has been tremendously popular with the students.

The University of Nebraska at Lincoln has been running their Good, Fresh, Local Sustainable Food Project since 2005. Drawing from over fifty Nebraska producers, suppliers, and manufacturers, the program's twice-monthly all local meals and their inclusion of local items daily have been a hit on campus.

This fall, the Westside School District in Omaha began to include local produce in their meals. Tomatoes came from O'Neill, zucchini from near Fort Calhoun.

Schools in Lincoln, Grand Island, Auburn, Centura and the Norris School District are just a few more of the over 10,000 schools nationwide now participating in Farm to School programs.

This number is only going to grow. There are numerous grants, programs, and institutions that seek to encourage the creation of Farm to School programs. Information on those programs and grants is stated in the attached list of Resources.

ROADMAP

Farm to School programs are about relationships. They take work, trust, and planning, like any other. In the process of creating a Farm to School program, one will want to bring everyone to the table: school food service directors, school officials, state agencies, potential community partners and the producers.

SCHOOLS' CONSTRAINTS

To begin with, one should understand potential difficulties that may exist and could arise. Schools are hampered by many state and federal regulations concerning nutritional standards, procurement policies, and portion sizes. They operate on a tight budget. They may not have staff with the necessary training to prepare fresh foods, nor the equipment to do so, and so initial investment may be sizeable. Current contracts may be a hindrance. Opportunities may also be limited by the only partial overlap between the growing and harvest seasons and the school year.

In beginning discussions, it is important to point out numerous online resources to assist schools in making room for local production in their procurement procedures. As mentioned, some good resources are stated in the attached list.

Producers, or a group of producers, may have to work to convince a school's food service director (most often the person to talk to) that this is a fiscally-feasible and overall beneficial program. And it has shown itself to be just that; it is successfully being done in thousands of places around the country.

Farm to School programs are usually developed gradually. It takes time to develop the logistics and the relationship. Many schools start with just a few items, like Westside in Omaha with tomatoes and zucchini, or with a salad bar. Producers need to show the schools what they can offer, and how it is beneficial to the school and the community. Schools are built on the idea of creating a better future for their students and the community. Farm to School programs further both of those goals.

PRODUCERS

Producers must be able to supply safe, quality food in the quantities that schools need. They must work to make ordering, delivery, and payment efficient. To varying degrees,

they may need to be able to process, package, and transport the food. Most of these details will be worked out in the agreement with the school(s).

- ❖ Quantity: This is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of Farm to School programs. Meeting the quantity demanded by schools can be challenging. Sometimes (as in Central City's case) only one producer is necessary. Other times schools will contract with numerous producers to meet quantity needs. Often, producers will form cooperatives to meet the school's needs and to help handle post-harvest logistics and delivery.
- ❖ Post-Harvest Handling: Make sure that you know the safe post-harvest handling practices for the produce (i.e. storing temperature) and work out the details of cleaning, preparation, and/or packaging with the school. Does it need to be refrigerated? Does the school expect that you clean it? Cut it? What is expected of a producer varies in every case. Cooperatives may handle more of the logistics, or a non-profit or the school. (For safety guidelines, contact the Nebraska Department of Agriculture or your local extension office.)
- ❖ Delivery: This depends on the program. In Central City the food service coordinator picks up the food herself. In some programs, schools pick up food from farmers' markets after ordering in advance. Producers, cooperatives, or local wholesalers may also deliver.
- ❖ Education: Encourage schools to arrange classroom and educational trips to your farm. Point out the educational benefits of a Farm to School program, note that there are dozens of curriculum resources online for such programs, be open to being an engaged part of the children's education and health.

These are things to keep in mind. Details will be hammered out in your agreement with the school(s).

Here are some things to keep in mind for an agreement: (Source: ATTRA)

- The total estimated volume of each item to be delivered.
- The time the item will be ripe and when it will be delivered.
- Amount and price of standing order items.
- Delivery schedule: time of day, frequency, and location.
- Packing requirements: standard box, grade, loose pack, bulk, etc.
- Postharvest handling practices; is the product pre-cooled?
- How you will meet basic health and safety standards administered by the county Agricultural Commissioner.
- Acceptable seasonal substitutes.
- Cost per unit, payment terms, payment process.
- Name and phone number of the contact person.

A Bare Bones Summary of the Central City Farm to School Program

The success of the Central City program merits a brief look, though it may not be applicable in every situation.

1. The Food Service Coordinator, Joyce Rice, checked with the Nebraska Department of Education for guidelines to serve and purchase the produce.
2. After obtaining two bids, she chose Helgoth's Melons and Other Produce (an area producer that operates roadside stands and engages in other forms of direct marketing) because "they had better variety and quantity of products to choose from."
3. She orders once a week and picks up the produce the next day.
4. Students eat vegetables and fruit that are less than 24 hours old.

If one imagines this being driven by a farmer it might look something like this:

1. Helgoth's approached the Food Service Coordinator, Joyce Rice, about beginning a Farm to School Program. They noted the potential benefits and the possible ways to make it work, cognizant of the difficulties it might present for the school
2. Ms. Rice checked with the Nebraska Department of Education for guidelines to serve and purchase the produce.
3. After obtaining two bids, she chose Helgoth's Melons and Other Produce (an area producer that operates roadside stands and engages in other forms of direct marketing) because "they had better variety and quantity of products to choose from."
4. (In a more formal arrangement, a written agreement or contract would be agreed to.)
5. She orders once a week and picks up the produce the next day. (While Ms. Rice picks up the produce here, for a Farm to School Program to work farmers may sometimes have to handle delivery.)
6. Students eat vegetables and fruit that are less than 24 hours old.

For a further summary of Helgoth's and the Farm to School Program, see this Center for Rural Affairs Case Study: <http://www.cfra.org/renewrural/helgoth-melons>

NATIONAL RESOURCES

- ❖ **USDA's Know Your Farmer Know Your Food Program**: This represents the USDA's effort to grow and strengthen local food systems. Their website contains many links, resources, and a guide to USDA grants, loans, and support. Website: <http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/knowyourfarmer?navid=KNOWYOURFARMER>
- ❖ **USDA Farm to School**: The USDA's website is filled with information, resources, grants, and online seminars ("webinars")
 - Grants: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/f2s/Supporting-2.htm>

- Resources: http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/F2S/resource_supplement.htm#FNS
- Webinars: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/F2S/sightsoundsstories.htm>
- ❖ **National Farm to School Network:** Private, national organization working to increase Farm to School Programs. Website include resources on starting, opportunities for funding, and the like: <http://www.farmtoschool.org/>
 - Their lead agency for Nebraska’s region is the National Center for Appropriate Technology whose sustainable agriculture page is here: http://www.ncat.org/sarc_current.php. (Their ATTRA Project is particularly useful: <http://attra.ncat.org/>)
- ❖ **Michigan Farm to School:** Very helpful market guide, including a sample school food service questionnaire for determining if a school will be a good fit for you, a sample invoice, sample vendor questionnaires and evaluation criteria for schools to use, and a sample food availability and pricing form. <http://www.mifarmtoschool.msu.edu/index.php?q=marketing-guide>
- ❖ **Ohio Farm to School:** For a step-by-step guide to starting a Farm to School program (though largely from the school’s perspective) check this resource: http://www.agri.ohio.gov/farmtoschool/docs/F2S_Final_Primer.pdf

NATIONAL GRANTS, LOANS, AND SUPPORT

- ❖ **USDA Rural Development Nebraska:** The USDA Rural Development Nebraska Office provides all of the USDA Rural Development’s resources in Nebraska. This includes technical assistance, training, grants, and other resources. Notable programs:
 - Website: <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/ne/index.htm>
 - Know Your Farmer Know You Food Grants and Programs including:
 - Business and Industry Guaranteed Loan Program
 - Rural Business Enterprise/Opportunity Grants
 - Rural Cooperative Development Grants
 - Value Added Producer Grants
 - Rural Energy for America Program
 - Community Facilities Program
 - Assistance in the creation and improvement of cooperatives
- ❖ **Agriculture Marketing Service:** The Agriculture Marketing Service
 - **AMS Specialty Crop Block Grant Program:** Exists to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops (fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, and nursery crops inc. floriculture). Grant website: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/SCBGP>
 - Nebraska Contact: Casey Foster (Department of Agriculture: Ag Promotion Coordinator – Value Added)

- The Farmers' Market Promotion Program: Annual competitive grant program to promote the domestic consumption of agriculture commodities by expanding direct marketing opportunities. <http://www.ams.usda.gov/FMPP>
- The Federal-State Marketing Improvement Program: A competitive matching grant program available to State government agencies and agricultural experiment stations. (The Nebraska Fresh Produce Model is the result of such a grant.) Supports marketing research and technical assistance projects. <http://www.ams.usda.gov/FSMIP>
- ❖ Farm Service Agency: Operated by the Nebraska Farm Service Agency in the state, two loan programs may be helpful:
 - Farm Loan Programs: Direct and Guaranteed Farm Ownership Loans, and Direct and Guaranteed Operating Loans, with targeted funding for Beginning and Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers
 - Farm Storage Facility Loans
 - NE Programs Site: <http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/stateoffapp?mystate=ne&area=home&subject=prog&topic=landing>
- ❖ National Institute of Food and Agriculture:
 - Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program: Work to bring food stability to low-income populations by bringing together the whole food system to increase self-sufficiency: http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/food/in_focus/hunger_if_competitive.html
- ❖ Child and Adult Care Food Program Wellness Grants: Grants to support projects which increase the health and nutrition of children in child care settings: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/care/Grants.htm>
- ❖ The Agriculture and Food Research Initiative: Provides funding for numerous areas. See their website for details based on the fiscal year: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/care/Grants.htm>
- ❖ Risk Management Agency: RMA provides risk management advice to farmers and ranchers through partnerships with educational and community based organizations: <http://www.rma.usda.gov/aboutrma/agreements/>
 - Community Outreach and Assistance Partnerships
 - Risk Management Education Programs

NEBRASKA RESOURCES AND GRANTS

- ❖ Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program: The Nebraska organization of the USDA's National SARE Program provides travel scholarships, competitive mini-grants, regional training and conferences, as well as web-based education.

- Site: <http://nesare.unl.edu/>
 - Nationally, grants include research and education grants, professional development grants, and producer grants.
- ❖ Nebraska Rural Development Commission: The Nebraska Rural Development Commission's Value Added Agriculture (VAA) and their Build Entrepreneurial Communities Act (BECA) grant programs can be incredibly helpful in supporting local food systems. Site: <http://www.neded.org/content/view/373/552/>
 - ❖ Nebraska Local Foods Network: Run by the University of Nebraska's Rural Initiative, NLFN provides advice and a dozens of other resources for local foods on their website (http://ruralinitiative.nebraska.edu/nebraska_foods/). Combined with the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society, the Rural Initiative received the grant to help found the Farm to School Programs in Auburn, Central City, Centura, and Norris.
 - ❖ Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society: Focusing on sustainable agriculture and food systems, NSAS supports Farm to School programs, helps run the Buy Fresh Buy Local Nebraska Campaign, and runs Farm Beginnings Nebraska, a "farmer-led educational training and support program designed to help people who want to evaluate and plan their farm enterprise." Their website (<http://www.nebsusag.org/index.shtml>) contains many helpful links/resources.
 - ❖ Nebraska Our Best to You: An official logo designed to identify and increase the marketability of Nebraska food products. It helps to promote local producers and restaurants and retailers who use local products. It also provides members with access to promotional materials and their website has other resources as well.
 - Associate Membership: Commodity groups, government agencies, educational institutions, retailers, and wholesalers are eligible: http://www.ourbesttoyou.nebraska.gov/associate_membership.html
 - Producer Membership: It's free for producers and a big benefit so farmers and ranchers should sign up http://www.ourbesttoyou.nebraska.gov/producer_membership.html

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- Nebraska Rural Response Hotline

Farm to School Testimonials

- ❖ Joyce Rice (Food Service Coordinator, Central City Middle School, NE)

“The benefits of buying local produce are: 1) freshness and safety, 2) knowing where and how it is produced, 3) knowing how the produce is handled and stored, 4) they have children in our school system, so their land taxes support our school system and 5) money is spent locally, so retailers and stores benefit.

The quality of the produce is fantastic, the cost is minimal even after factoring in the time, labor and gas. We save over 50% on the cost of the produce using an average of all the produce served. I have documented all of the benefits as I have applied for awards. I would definitely still buy fresh, local produce if it was comparable or a little more than from stores and distributors as the freshness, quality and safety of the produce is better. We also like to support our local producers.

Students were so disappointed this year when I told them there would be no fresh fruit and vegetables due to the early freeze. They never tire of the fresh produce. I kept track for twelve weeks and students ate 199% more fruit and vegetables when they were fresh.”

Source: LR42 Conference Report

- ❖ Pam Edwards (Assistant Director University Dining Services, UNL)

“[The Good, Fresh, Local UNL Sustainable Food Project]'s been incredibly successful. The students have taken to it just throughout the campus. They now...students now know what local foods are about. We started our program kind of just at the very beginning of when local foods were starting to become popular, and so we've been in at the right time. And it's been very interesting to see the positive reinforcement that the students have given us to continue this type of program and, equally, the reinforcement from our farmers and producers, who we've developed tremendous partnerships with throughout the state, and learning how to start this different kind of food service...The bottom line is it has been extremely successful and this state is ready for a program like that to be spread throughout the state to public schools, parochial schools. The time is right”

Source: Nebraska Unicameral Agriculture Committee Meeting on 12/3/09

- ❖ Lia Boucher (Principal, Adams Elementary School, CA)

“My kids are so excited and they absolutely loved eating their fruits and vegetables!! I am so impressed with the level of commitment you and your staff have toward bringing healthy foods to your students...I know that the staff is doing much harder work in order to make this possible, but the kids are worth every bit of it. I am probably your biggest fan right now, so know that what you are doing is making a difference in the lives of children! Thank you.”

Source: Going Local: Paths to Success for Farm to School Programs

❖ Students after a tasting day at school in Wisconsin

"Your tomatoes were delicious! I liked the Green Zebra tomato. I never knew I liked tomatoes that much. Have you ever heard of cherry tomatoes? My neighbor grows them."

- 5th grader

Lincoln Elementary

"Thank you for coming to our school. I liked the grape tomato the best. It tasted sweet. Before you came I didn't like tomatoes but now I do! I never knew tomatoes were yellow and orange. I just thought they were red.

- 3rd grader

Hawthorne Elementary

Source: <http://www.reapfoodgroup.org/Farm-to-School/testimonials.html>

❖ Note from a parent after a farm tour

"I want to thank you for making yesterday's field trip possible. Amelia continued to talk about it for the rest of the day. When she got home she said, "Today was the best day of my life." She also wanted to know if we can go visit the farm again. I told her we can go buy some corn from Jason on Saturday. This seemed a good compromise in her eyes. I guess this is a true measure of success."

Source: Going Local: Paths to Success for Farm to School Programs