

# Frequently Asked Questions

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## 1) What is farm to school?

Wisconsin Farm to School encourages healthy lifestyles in children and supports local economies. In Wisconsin, farm to school programs connect schools with locally and regionally grown and produced products. Comprehensive farm to school activities include local procurement for the school cafeteria, school gardens, nutrition and agriculture education and activities that engage students such as cooking demonstrations, taste tests and field trips.

## 2) Why should I offer Wisconsin-grown foods in my cafeteria?

Whether you buy Wisconsin grown food directly from a local farmer or through a food distributor, you're helping to support Wisconsin farmers. Since the food doesn't have to travel very far, you might find that locally grown also means a greater variety of fresher foods. If you work directly with a farmer, you might be able to ask for exactly what you want instead of being tied to standard specifications. Offering locally grown foods in your cafeteria also gives you a chance to use food as a teaching tool and help students understand where their food comes from.

## 3) Is it okay for me to purchase locally?

Yes. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and the USDA encourage schools to incorporate local purchasing and promotion into their meal and snack programs. This can be done in a number of ways depending on your budget, staffing and availability of local foods. Remember, small steps count and starting small is usually a good idea. Additional guidance can be found in the Wisconsin Farm to School Toolkit for School Nutrition Programs as well as through the Wisconsin DPI Farm to School Webpage (<http://dpi.wi.gov/fns/f2s.html>).

## 4) What items are available for me to purchase?

A wide range of vegetables, fruit, cheese, yogurt, eggs and meat could all *potentially* be available from local producers. Whether there are farmers, farmer coops or distributors able to meet your specific needs will depend on where you are located. While some produce is not available during much of the school year, some fruits and vegetables are available through the fall as well as stored through the winter (for instance: apples, sweet potatoes, carrots, potatoes and beets). Dairy and meat items are available year round. See the "Get started" section of this toolkit for a produce calendar. The "Locate and purchase local foods" section provides guidance for finding farmers in your area.

## 5) Do local suppliers carry liability insurance?

Most farms and orchards do carry liability insurance. Sometimes these policies cover only accidents on their property or at a farmers' market, but many of these policies will also cover a business in the case of a food-borne illness from food they sell. This question is included in the producer questionnaire in the toolkit and is good to clarify with producers you purchase from.



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## 6) Are local foods safe?

Many school nutrition directors trust local producers, since they know them personally and are aware of their farm practices. Some school nutrition directors feel locally sourced food is as safe as, or even safer than, foods coming from far away, as they are typically handled less before getting to their schools. Regardless of where your food is coming from, you want to be assured food safety is being maximized. There are three main ways to do this:

- 1) A school nutrition director can tour the farm/orchard/facility and assess food safety protocols first hand.
- 2) A school nutrition director can ask suppliers to fill out a survey that includes information on production practices related to food safety (a producer survey is in the toolkit).
- 3) Some farms choose to pay to have a Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) audit performed by a third party. These audits are currently geared toward larger-scale farms and can be quite expensive for small- and medium-sized farms to complete. Currently there is no third party certification requirement for farms selling to institutions. Some distributors are beginning to require it of all their suppliers.

\*More information about on-farm food safety can be found at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture website: <http://datcp.wi.gov/OnFarmFoodSafety/index.aspx>.

Farms that are certified organic already have some elements of a food safety plan in place, as they have strict guidelines on the use of animal manure and compost, are required to perform annual water tests and have an extensive paper trail documenting all inputs onto the farm. In addition, certified organic farms are prohibited from using most pesticides and herbicides that may contaminate food.

Another important consideration with food safety is being able to trace back any food found to be contaminated. This is much easier to do when you know which farm your food came from. Directors should make sure suppliers can deliver product in boxes labeled with the farm name as well as the contents and the packing date.

## 7) Can I buy Wisconsin-grown product from my distributors?

Yes. Many distributors have carried some Wisconsin-grown product for years. Richland Hills sliced apples are distributed out of Richland Center, Wisconsin, and during the months of September and October most of their apples come from Wisconsin orchards. As more customers request foods produced in Wisconsin, distributors are responding with more options, so it's important you tell your distributors you are interested in supporting Wisconsin producers. In order to promote your local purchasing, it's also useful to request 'grower-identified' product that identifies the specific farm it comes from, rather than simply a broad 'Wisconsin-grown' label.

## 8) Can I afford this?

Some foods purchased from local suppliers will cost more, others will cost less. Some local foods may cost more per pound but have equivalent value, because you get more useable portions per pound. If you find a local item your students like, you may be able to offset any additional cost through increased participation. The answer is yes, but you have to be mindful of both your budget and your broader goals as you determine how to integrate local product into your program.

