

Solving the Local Food Puzzle

Diverse Methods to Guide Local Product into Schools

Purchasing local produce for school meals or snacks is a great way to connect students with healthy foods, support local farmers, and expand a child’s diet by regularly exposing kids to new fruits and vegetables. Logistically, however, it can be a bit unclear as to where to start or how to expand with local food purchases.

This chapter provides examples of the different paths local food procurement can take, based on school interest and capacity. The following community case studies highlight four local food purchasing and sourcing strategies:

- ① Direct purchase from farmers: Marathon County – Page 8
- ② Ordering through an aggregator: Wood County – Page 10
- ③ Using products from school gardens, orchards or livestock projects: La Crosse County – Page 12
- ④ Building flexibility into the bidding process: Dane County – Page 13

① Marathon County: Ramping Up to Source Direct from the Farm

Enthusiasm Awaiting a Spark

Every school or school district begins the search for local food in a different way. For several small school districts in western Marathon County, the first step was to order local products through their prime vendor. While this method successfully brought local products into the cafeteria, food service directors found that they had very little control over the selection or quantity of local items. Food service departments wanted to forge a more direct connection with area farmers and have more autonomy over the purchasing process. However, directors were uncertain about how to scale things up.

School nutrition interest in direct sourcing was echoed by regional growers. Producers hoped to secure a new institutional market in schools, but were unsure what to expect from the process. Both nutrition services and producers wanted to join forces with the other, but each group was concerned about the feasibility of doing so and neither knew how to contact the other.

Transforming Thought into Action

Enter Ashley Kienitz and Amanda Ostrowski, Public Health Educators at the Marathon County Health Department. They had heard about this shared interest between food service directors and farmers, so facilitated a joint meeting to foster connections and initiate forward momentum.

Kienitz and Ostrowski were able to step back and take notes almost immediately, as food service directors and farmers enthusiastically stepped to the forefront of the initiative. The first meeting identified concerns and barriers to address in order to create a smooth grower-to-school sales process. The meeting also marked the first successful sales agreements between the parties, and the selection of an official working group title – the Western Marathon County School Food Group.

“They (farmers and food service directors) take pride in coming together and being part of something like this. It’s not as scary as doing it on their own.”

- Ashley Kienitz (Farm to School Coordinator and Public Health Educator, Marathon County Health Department)

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Marathon County: Ramping Up to Source Direct from the Farm (continued)

Eliminating Barriers through Learning Opportunities

Subsequent meeting between the farmers and food service directors addressed the primary concerns that had been outlined at the previous meeting: food safety and following USDA National School Lunch Program procurement practices. Kienitz arranged for county sanitarians to talk with school food service staff about the details of the food safety audits they complete in schools. She also asked University of Wisconsin-Extension agents to present on the food safety services they could provide to both producers and schools. Finally, Kienitz invited Randy Jones, Procurement Specialist for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, to speak with the group. The combination of the above presentations on buying regulations and food safety principles instilled a tremendous amount of trust and excitement in both food service directors and growers. All parties felt they could grow a successful collaboration.

Frankie Soto, the food service director for Abbotsford School District, then took the reins to host and lead an additional meeting. He addressed nutrition service concerns about working with whole fruit and vegetable products. Before getting involved with farm to school, Soto typically purchased and processed

whole fruits and vegetables in his school kitchen because the products were fresher and of higher quality. He soon realized that it was a logical next step to procure these products locally, and has been working with local product for nearly four years now. To demonstrate the ease of working with whole products, Soto held a “Cooking Local” demonstration at the meeting. He focused the presentation on processing and preparing raw, whole vegetables in easy ways that would find approval on the student side of the lunch line.



Abbotsford Food Service Director, Frankie Soto, leading a cooking demonstration for Wood County food service staff (Photo: Marathon County Farm to School)

Fruitfully Sourcing Local Food

The Western Marathon County School Food Group continues to meet on a regular basis. They address new local food purchasing questions and help form additional connections between producers and schools. Nutrition service directors enjoy the opportunity to network and share tips and resources with each other. The directors have started pooling their purchasing power to secure a higher volume of local produce at a lower cost. Farmers benefit from the additional sales opportunities provided by the districts.

Now that these strong farmer-school relationships have formed, growers can quickly find a market for large quantities of produce that needs to be sold quickly due to storage limitations or jeopardizing weather events. This is a great situation for schools because of the lower sales cost and because they are able to use cosmetically-imperfect products, as food is processed almost immediately in schools. Farmers also benefit from the sale or use of a product that otherwise may not have had a market.

Through three basic steps:

listening, responding, and organizing,

the Western Marathon County Farm to School team facilitated a friendly, trusting and resilient purchasing relationship between producers and food service directors.

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② Wood County: A Story of Aggregation and Adaptation

Assessing and Re-Assessing Procurement Needs

Sue Anderson, the Wood County Farm to School Coordinator, found herself with a different challenge than that of the farm to school team in Marathon County (preceding story). Anderson was searching for an aggregator, in addition to direct grower purchases, to supply area schools with a sufficient volume of locally sourced produce. She had found that purchasing local products from producers who sold at retail prices, such as at farmers' markets, was too costly for Wood County school food service departments.

In addition, these farmers typically did not have enough volume to serve the needs of all six school districts in the county. In order to serve locally-sourced lunches on a regular basis, Wood County school districts needed to connect with wholesale local produce that sells at a lower price point and can fit manageably within school food service budgets.

Finding a Solution and Making it Work

Parrfection Produce, a local food aggregator and processor that serves most of southern Wisconsin with locally-grown produce, has gradually filled this need for Wood County. School food service eased into their relationship with Parrfection by trial purchasing both whole products (apples, potatoes) and fresh cut products such as sweet potato sticks, carrot coins and squash cubes. These items were well-received by food service staff and students, thereby increasing school demand for wholesale pre-processed local fruits and vegetables.

Smaller districts in the county found that the price was right, the product was easy to prepare, and that kids loved the fresh vegetables. The larger school districts in the county, like Wisconsin Rapids, found it challenging to align Parrfection's scheduled deliveries with their own internal delivery system. For example, it was not feasible for the aggregator to deliver to a single drop site in the district, have the school internally transfer produce to school district trucks, and deliver the products to all eleven schools in the district by the end of morning kitchen prep.



Wood County food service staff taking a break from a collaborative meeting
(Photo: Wood County Farm to School)



A sampling of the local products that the Wisconsin Rapids School District initially purchased from Wisconsin aggregator, Parrfection Produce. Left to right: winter squash cubes, whole apples, and sweet potato sticks
(Photos are not actual Parrfection produce: fedandfit.com, www.downtownmcminnville.com, onsugar.com)

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Wood County: A Story of Aggregation and Adaptation (continued)

Finding a Solution and Making it Work (continued)

Not wanting to give up on the partnership, Parrfection Produce and Wisconsin Rapids School District negotiated a delivery schedule to meet the needs of both parties. Parrfection agreed to deliver early in the morning to two sites instead of one, and the schools worked to adjust their internal delivery system to get the fresh product to all eleven schools in time for morning kitchen preparations.

This agreement has allowed the Wisconsin Rapids schools to ramp up their purchases from Parrfection. Although procurement bids were not initially used, as trial product volume was low, the district now orders higher volumes through the bidding process, and Parrfection is often the best match for them.

Continuous Goal-Setting

All of the Wood County schools hope to purchase more produce from the aggregator in future years. Food service directors appreciate receiving high quality food through a streamlined method that keeps local purchases on a single bill. Though there are still some logistical challenges to address, Wood County schools are moving towards a sustainable method to fulfill the majority of their local produce needs. You can too, by building creative and flexible partnerships.

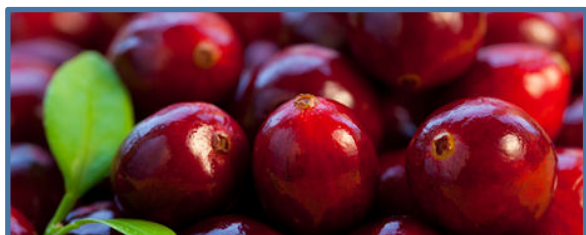
A Mixed Methods Approach

Some products, however, are still purchased direct from the farmers in Wood County. Local schools are an attractive market for growers looking to quickly sell large volumes of items, such as apples. Likewise, cranberries and potatoes are abundantly produced in the area, and a number of farmers offer competitive prices to schools.

As the story in Wood County attests, local procurement tends not to follow a single route. Instead, it involves finding the right solution for each school setting and community.



Lunch line at Auburndale Elementary School featuring fresh cut carrot sticks (Photo: Wood County Farm to School)



Cranberries, which are produced in abundance in central Wisconsin, are typically purchased directly from the farmer by Wood County schools (Photo: Farm Progress)

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③ La Crosse County: The Coop to Cafeteria Chicken Garden

Yes, you read correctly... chicken garden! In an innovative partnership between a Future Farmers of America (FFA) class and the school nutrition team, over 650 student-raised meat birds will soon be roasted and served on the school lunch line in every school in the Holmen School District.

This innovative protein procurement project is the brainchild of district agriculture teacher Roger King and Holmen Nutrition Services Supervisor Mike Gasper. After working together for several years on successful garden and hydroponics classroom-to-cafeteria initiatives, the two decided it was time to expand their history of collaboration into the territory of sustainably-raised meat for the district. The benefits of the project are three-fold: 1. FFA students learn first-hand about every step of the process of raising meat birds, 2. Students throughout the entire district enjoy school meals of local, humanely-raised roasted chicken, 3. School food service accesses a wholesome product at an affordable cost.

It is a win-win-win situation – here is a peek at how these farm to school champions are making it work:

- 1) Nutrition Services uses “Three Bids and a Buy” to find the most responsive and responsible vendor of baby chicks. This follows the guidelines for informal bidding, which applies to purchases under \$150,000.
- 2) Nutrition Services provides the chicks to the FFA class and supplies funds for the chicken coops.
- 3) Each FFA student raises 50 short-cycle meat birds on their home farm. Chicken feed is grown by students and no antibiotics or other chemicals are used.
- 4) After 35-40 days, the birds reach market weight and Nutrition Services purchases the full-grown chickens from the FFA. No bidding process is required because the birds were raised as part of a school initiative.
- 5) Nutrition Services arranges for the chickens to be transported live to the nearest USDA-inspected poultry processing plant.
- 6) The School District of Holmen becomes a processing member of Fifth Season Cooperative. Fifth Season carries the insurance that Reinhart Foods, the prime vendor for the district, requires to transport chickens from the processor back to the school.
- 7) Chicken is baked on the bone and served district-wide to all 3,600 students on a single day in January.



Special Note:

Nutrition Services conducted a test cooking day with different breeds of chickens to determine portion sizes and menu options.

The chicken garden nearly full-circle, from chicks to market weight, and onto the processing facility (Photo: School District of Holmen)

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④ Dane County: Systematizing Procurement through a Summer Pilot Program

Many school districts provide meals to children when school is in-between sessions. In Wisconsin, the summer food service programs coincide with the height of the growing season, making them an excellent focus for farm to school procurement. In a promising attempt to provide more local produce to students over the summer, Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) and REAP Food Group, a non-profit partner assisting MMSD with farm to school, piloted a unique produce procurement method. Instead of performing one procurement bid for all summer produce, MMSD designed a weekly bidding structure to allow for the unpredictability of the growing season.

MMSD started this process by first selecting which produce items they wanted to incorporate into the summer meal program, based primarily on the local seasonal availability of each item. The idea was to plan ahead, such that the school menu reflected what was ready to be harvested in the fields.

Based on grower responses, MMSD wrote the available locally-grown products into their menu. For example, radishes and snap peas were menued in June, while green beans, summer squash and kohlrabi were featured in July and August. Although this arrangement involved some advance planning, it helped the school nutrition department make local procurement a routinized and systematic process throughout the summer.

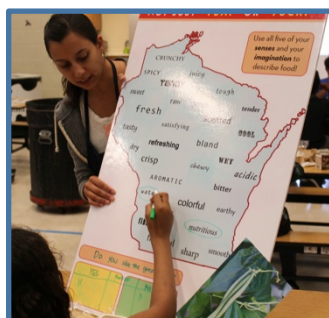
REAP worked directly with the growers to source, aggregate, process and pack the local summer produce. REAP also coordinated a team of volunteers and AmeriCorps members to lead educational activities in the cafeterias that focused on the local vegetables in the lunch.



Tipi Produce starters, a portion of which fed MMSD students this past summer (Photo: Tipi Produce)



Local green beans in the summer lunches (Photo: REAP Food Group)



A REAP volunteer educates students about the local veggies in their lunch (Photo: REAP Food Group)

Catering your menu to what is seasonally available is a great way to know the source of your food, but it also requires a thorough consideration of price, ease of ordering, distribution capacity, processing ability and seasonality when bidding for individual products. This process can be particularly time-consuming for larger school districts that may rely on a prime vendor or produce distributor for most purchases.

However, when larger produce distributors are unable to accommodate a district's wish to purchase local, innovative solutions are necessary. This pilot program both provided students with peak season produce, and allowed the district to trial new procedures with lighter volumes than those experienced during the school year.

The lessons learned throughout the summer should greatly inform the task of incorporating local procurement into the regular school year, when MMSD serves nearly 20,000 meals a day. Together, REAP and MMSD hope to usher in a purchasing strategy that makes local food purchases the easy and logical choice.

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RESOURCES

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction: Procurement

State-mandated guidelines for both formal and informal procurement. Includes a number of documents and links to walk you through the methods.

- Formal Procurement
http://fns.dpi.wi.gov/fns_prformal
- Informal Procurement Method
http://fns.dpi.wi.gov/fns_pr3bids

Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems: Wisconsin Farm to School Toolkit

There are abundant procurement tips and resources in this toolkit that is designed for School Nutrition Programs.

- Toolkit for School Nutrition Programs: Locate and Purchase Local Foods
<http://www.cias.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/4-locate-and-purchase-local-foods.pdf>
- Toolkit for Producers: Connect with Schools
<http://www.cias.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/5-connect-with-schools.pdf>

USDA Local Food Procurement Guides

Another site full of resources on local food procurement, including a guide that contains everything from the basics of procurement to case studies of creative sourcing strategies.

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/farmentoschool/procuring-local-foods>

USDA Farm to School Procurement Webinar Series

Finding, Buying and Serving Local Foods

From January through June of 2014, the USDA Farm to School Program hosted two webinars every month to showcase the variety of ways that school districts can purchase local foods. The entire series can be viewed online:

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/farmentoschool/webinars>