

WSDA Farm-to-School Program

A 2012 Policy Brief for the Farming Community



Connecting Farmers, Schools & Health

Washington State's Farm-to-School Program is dedicated to fostering relationships between schools and agricultural producers in our state. The program aims to support expanding economic opportunities for farmers while educating students about the connections between food, farming, health, and the environment. Administered by WSDA, in coordination with the WSDA Small Farms & Direct Marketing Program, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, WSU Small Farms Team and other partners around the state, the program provides information, inspiration, assistance, and policy solutions for those working to supply healthy Washington-grown food and related education to youth in our state.

The WSDA Farm-to-School team fielded an online survey in April 2011 to assess the interest, capacity and needs of the area's agricultural providers and school systems. The survey, conducted among Washington State School Food Service Directors, sought to identify trends in local Farm-to-School programs, identify capacity gaps and technical needs, and learn about program successes and challenges. The survey data will be used to:

- ✓ Identify Core Areas of Program Focus
- ✓ Develop New Offerings & Resources
- ✓ Spotlight Regional Success Stories as Educational Tools

Highlights of findings from the study, including recommendations for the farming community, follow:

1. What Are Schools Willing to Purchase?

Our survey told us that the most commonly purchased fruits and vegetables in the schools are apples, shredded lettuce and broccoli. **Four of the top ten** fruits and vegetables listed by school directors as their top picks are part of top ten most commonly grown crops here in Washington:

- ✓ Apples
- ✓ Pears
- ✓ Potatoes
- ✓ Grapes

This presents an opportunity for growth and delivery of Washington-grown produce in our state schools, as there is demand for Washington-grown products. Survey results showed that 2/3 of survey respondents are willing to purchase locally. Only 28% have not purchased from WA farms. The top crops they are willing to purchase locally include

apples, pears, grapes, blueberries, strawberries, lettuce, broccoli, carrots, salad mix, corn and cauliflower. We are therefore recruiting farms that source these top crops for our schools – partner with us!

2. Schools Have Capacity for Your Produce

Schools are ready, willing and able to get dirty in their kitchens. Via our survey, respondents indicated that they have the capacity to work with whole produce in their kitchens on a regular or on an occasional basis. As participation in Free and Reduced Price Lunch by students increases in a school district, this capacity for production rises in tandem. In addition, 2/3 of respondents indicated their ability to purchase produce directly from a farmer on short notice – good news for those that are able to sell produce at a moment's notice.



3. Seasonality and Availability

More than 75% of survey respondents stated they were interested in working with farmers to ensure their school could obtain the foods that they need. They also cited their need for increased knowledge around produce seasonality and availability. Initiating and continuing to hold conversations with schools regarding seasonality and availability will keep those schools coming back to you as a source – if they can rely on your deliverables, and you deliver beautiful strawberries each June, you've gained a loyal customer in your local school.

- ✓ Plan ahead and discuss the growing season with your local schools to determine their produce needs
- ✓ Keep communication lines open and inform schools if produce growing dates may be delayed
- ✓ Provide schools with materials regarding seasonality of fruits and vegetables



4. Our Kitchen is Your Kitchen

Many schools have kitchen facilities available for use by farmers and producers – school kitchens need not only be for production of school breakfasts and lunches. Twenty-five respondents to the 2011 survey were willing to rent out district kitchen space to others after school hours. This presents an invaluable opportunity for small producers of jams, pickles, sauces, etc. that may not have access to commercial-grade kitchens. Are you one of these small producers? If so:

- ✓ Reach out to your local schools to see if they are willing to share space
- ✓ Arrange dates and times for use of your local school's kitchen
- ✓ Watch your business grow!



5. Schools Want to Befriend Farmers

Half of survey respondents indicated an interest in learning more about Washington farms, in addition to learning about produce seasonality.

Engaging with your local school to plan field trips for students to your farm will likely result in sales of your produce in the long run. Other educational exchanges follow:

- ✓ Lead a classroom on a tour of a local farmers' market
- ✓ Visit a classroom; provide a lesson on the produce grown on your farm
- ✓ Teach children about organic and sustainable farming practices
- ✓ Conduct a lesson for the children on food safety

There are several opportunities outlined above for taking your partnership with schools to the next level as part of a successful Farm-to-School program. A thriving Farm-to-School program can help build healthy habits that last a lifetime, expand opportunities for local growers, and create an environment for all kinds of good things to grow!

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