

WSDA Farm-to-School Program

A 2012 Policy Brief for the 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.

Since the passage of the National School Lunch Act in 1946, key legislation has played an essential role in providing our Nation's children with access to healthier meals. Farm-to-School is one such initiative that is targeted at providing children with nutritious diet; at the same time it improves the local economy by encouraging farmers to sell their fresh produce to schools. More than 30 million children nationwide eat school food five days a week, 180 days a year. When schools can improve the health of children, develop new marketing opportunities for farmers, and support the local economy, everyone benefits.

2011 WSDA Farm-to-School Survey Results

In its ongoing efforts to assess the interest, capacity and needs of the area's agricultural providers and school systems, and provide advice, informational resources and technical assistance to its partners, the WSDA Farm-to-School team fielded an online survey in April 2011. 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 follow below.

Interest in Buying Local is High

Locally produced crops are very popular in Washington State schools. Survey respondents report that 4 of the 10 most commonly purchased fruits and vegetables are grown in Washington State, offering significant economic opportunities for local farms. Other findings include:

- ✓ The majority of schools serve Washington grown foods in schools meals
- ✓ More than half of respondents currently purchase foods directly from Washington agricultural producers
- ✓ Two-thirds of school districts (that do not yet do so) are willing to purchase locally grown produce
- ✓ Respondent schools cite a variety of benefits of local purchasing, including supporting the local economy, enhanced community relations, and ability to offer fresher and healthier produce for school meals.



Capacity Exists (but may be limited)

Preparation of whole produce requires additional capacity over and above what many schools are currently equipped with. Many districts are accustomed to receiving pre-washed or pre-cut produce, and to wash, cut, process and cook whole vegetables may require additional staff, equipment and resources. However, based on the survey, the picture in Washington schools is promising.

- ✓ The majority of respondent districts operate central kitchens with the capacity to process fresh fruits and vegetables
- ✓ Salad bars are also available in the majority of districts, offering avenues for serving a wide variety of Washington grown produce

Schools Are Creative & Resourceful

While resources may be limited, many school districts are embracing Farm-to-School and finding unique ways to promote locally produced food to students, educators and local school communities. About half of survey respondents report that they do one or more of the following:

- ✓ Spotlight locally grown food when it is served in schools
- ✓ Provide education about Washington State food and agriculture
- ✓ Cultivate school gardens
- ✓ Visit farms and farmer's markets
- ✓ Invite parents and other community members to get involved
- ✓ Participation in Taste Washington day



Additional Resources Are Still Needed

While Farm-to-School is spreading rapidly in Washington, and participants are seeing exciting successes, more can be done to connect local growers to schools, enable schools to more readily purchase and prepare local produce, and deliver important nutrition information to our state's school children. Some of the areas identified for further training, capacity and resources include:

- ✓ Additional training for school food service teams on the purchase and preparation of locally produced products
- ✓ Connections between farms and schools; directories of providers, streamlined purchasing, etc.
- ✓ Increased capacity of schools to store, prepare and serve local produce
- ✓ Nutritional education materials for schools
- ✓ Avenues for participants to share best practices, tools and needs

Understandably, the WSDA cannot address all of these issues alone; it will require continued partnership and collaboration statewide between educational organizations and schools, producers, community members, and policy makers. 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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