

WSDA Farm-to-School Program

A 2012 Policy Brief for the WSDA



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. 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

The WSDA Farm-to-School team fielded an online survey in April 2011 among Washington State School Food Service Directors in order 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.

Building a Knowledge Base

Many respondents wanted to know more about what farm products are available in their region, how they can incorporate them into seasonal recipes and menu plans, and how they can make local farm products work into their district's budgets. Training assistance in these areas could help expand the Farm-to-School program and build potential markets for Washington farmers. Many districts would also benefit from training in:

- ✓ Food safety requirements for vendors of both whole and processed farm products.
- ✓ Good agriculture practices (GAP).
- ✓ Food preparation and safety.
- ✓ Basic nutrition for foodservice workers and teaching staff.

Growing School & Community Connections

Connecting school programs to food service can increase student awareness of farm-to-school programs and help build desire for increased participation. Respondents expressed interest in connecting food service to culinary arts and horticultural programs, cooking classes, school gardens and sustainability programs. Help is needed to bridge these gaps. More ways to help:

- ✓ Implement collaborative activities that are currently under-represented yet have a strong interest. For example, nutrition education, inviting farmers to schools and hosting harvest or farmer's market events.
- ✓ Expand training beyond the school cafeteria by helping teachers offer nutrition education to students and school staff host nutrition events.
- ✓ Facilitate programs like "Taste Washington Day," school gardens and school-to-farm field trips.

The vast majority of respondents who have purchased local foods for their districts report that the experience was a positive one...and that they plan to buy local again!



Breaking Down Barriers

The top real-or-perceived barriers to participating in a Farm-to-School program are consistent availability of local products, seasonality limitations and budget constraints. At the same time, many respondents perceived that buying local farm products is good for the local economy and a way to ensure high-quality produce. They were also interested in working with farmers during the off-season to plan for future seasons of crops for the schools. To bust barriers:

- ✓ Recruit farms that can supply top-demanded produce picks.
- ✓ Link schools to farms based on demand-and-supply through farm directories, networks and other “matchmaking” tools.
- ✓ Mitigate seasonality and other availability constraints by encouraging purchases from multiple farms or by facilitation formation of farmer co-ops.
- ✓ Evaluate procurement practices quarterly to identify success stories and areas for further improvement.



Expanding on Existing Capacity

Most respondents serve Washington-grown foods in school meals even if they don't also purchase foods directly from Washington producers. Because the majority of respondents operate a central kitchen with the capacity to process fresh fruits and vegetables and can work with whole produce on a regular or occasional basis, this expands the market for local farmers regardless of whether they themselves have the capacity to sell minimally processed produce. Other opportunities for expansion:

- ✓ Match the 1/3 of districts that prefer produce that has already undergone some minimal processing with farmers who can accommodate.
- ✓ Help farmers develop capacity to offer popular minimally processed produce items like shredded lettuce, salad greens and apple slices.
- ✓ Provide training for school foodservice employees on how to efficiently work with whole fruits and vegetables.

Marketing the Farm-to-School Message

Many districts are participating in Farm-to-School, and seeing the benefits of it, but there's plenty of room for more schools and more farms to get on board. Schools—and farmers—would benefit from marketing materials and programs that can help spread the good word about Farm-to-School, including:

- ✓ Newsletters, e-newsletters and other informational materials that promote Farm-to-School and highlight products available from Washington farms at different times of the year—and what to do with them.
- ✓ Fun, visual cafeteria displays spotlighting Washington-grown products.
- ✓ Tools for assessing the impact of serving and promoting Washington-grown foods on student participation in school meal programs.

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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