



INCORPORATING LOCAL FOODS IN SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAMS

You are in a unique position as a school nutrition operator to connect your school district with local foods that are minimally processed. Implementing strategies to incorporate local foods into your menu and recognizing how to leverage programs from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (USDA, FNS) can help you grow your local foods menu. Using more fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats from local farmers and producers can also support your efforts to reduce the sodium content of school meals.

FINDING LOCAL FOODS FOR SCHOOL MENUS

Procurement options for local foods vary based on your school district's proximity to where the food is grown or raised, the growing season, and the availability of food processors and distributors. There are different strategies you can use to incorporate local foods into your school breakfast and lunch menus.

First, you need to complete two key steps:

1 Define what “local” means to your school or school district. “Local” may be defined as a certain mile radius from your school or school district. It may also be defined as your county (or include surrounding counties) or your state (or include surrounding states). Consider that the definition may differ depending on the food product or may change throughout the year due to seasonal availability.

2 Find out what local products are available to you and when they are in season. Consider using the following resources:

- [Land-Grant University – Extension](#)

- In each state, a network of local agricultural agents and educators, including experts on local food systems, provide publications, programs, and services to the public through their land-grant university – extension service. Find your land-grant university – extension service using the link above.

- **State or Region-Specific Seasonality Charts**

- Many state departments of agriculture or nonprofit organizations produce visual representations of what foods are available locally and seasonally in a state or specific region.

SNAP-Ed offers a [Seasonal Produce Guide](#) to get you started. Seasonal produce specific to your area will vary by weather and growing conditions, so be sure to check out your state or region-specific seasonality chart.

- [USDA Census of Agriculture](#)

- USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) surveys all U.S. farmers every five years. Detailed information about agricultural production in each state and county is available online.

- [USDA Farm to School Census](#)

- The Farm to School Census reports which school districts purchase local foods and what they purchase.

Did your school district participate in the 2019 Farm to School Census?

STRATEGIES TO GROW YOUR LOCAL FOODS MENU

Once “local” is defined and you identify local products that are available to you, it is time to grow your local foods menu! Cultivating your menu and recipes with locally-procured fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats can help replace higher sodium menu items and recipes. Consider the following strategies to incorporate local foods into your school menu:

- 1 Identify local foods that are already on the menu**
 - Let your distributor know your definition of “local”; ask which foods are procured locally.

Milk is often procured from local dairies.
- 2 Look for local foods to replace what you already offer on the menu**
 - Aim to procure agricultural commodities that are grown in your state or region.
 - Consider using foods grown or harvested by your school district, such as from an edible school garden.
 - Be sure to check with your state and local health departments on whether school-grown foods can be incorporated for consumption on a school menu.

If you are a Michigan school district, are your apples from a local orchard?
- 3 Adjust menus and recipes to incorporate local foods**
 - Fresh fruits and vegetables are a logical starting point. They are naturally lower in sodium and can be served with little to no preparation beyond washing (and cutting).
 - A salad bar is a friendly way to offer various local fruits and vegetables.
 - Expand your local foods beyond fruits and vegetables! Consider ways to incorporate locally produced meat, poultry, eggs, cheese, grains, beans, or seafood while being mindful of the sodium content. Ensure your local foods contain relatively the same or lower amounts of sodium.

Check out the [Salad Bars to Schools](#) initiative to get a salad bar in your school.
- 4 Develop new menus and recipes to highlight local foods and ingredients**
 - Consider promoting one local food product or ingredient every month through a “Harvest of the Month” program.

Check out [Montana’s “Harvest of the Month” program](#) for inspiration!

GROW YOUR LOCAL FOODS MENU ACTION PLAN

As you consider incorporating local foods into your school menu, it can be helpful to set a goal and develop an action plan. Use the template below as a guide for your own local foods goal and plan for the next school year. Please note the provided example includes only some of the milestones you would need to reach to achieve the stated goal.

Goal (measurable and specific): By the _____ school year, substitute three (3) menu items or ingredients within recipes with lower-sodium locally-sourced products.

Milestone What will you do to achieve the expected outcome?	Person Responsible	Target Date	Date Completed
1. Determine what “local” means to your school district.			
2. Find out what local products are available to you and when they are in season.			
3. Identify three menu items and/or ingredients within recipes that can be substituted with lower-sodium local products.			
4. Adjust three menu items and/or recipes to incorporate lower-sodium local products.			

LEVERAGING USDA PROGRAMS TO PROCURE LOCAL FOODS

Take advantage of programs such as **USDA Foods in Schools (USDA Foods)** and the **USDA Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (USDA DoD Fresh)** to procure local foods. In addition, consider applying for a **USDA Farm to School Grant**, which provides a fantastic opportunity to initiate and expand farm to school efforts!

USDA Foods

Review the annual, retrospective [USDA Foods State-of-Origin Report](#), which lists the products USDA purchased from each state the previous year. Identify the top products purchased from your state and adjacent states to help you plan your food orders.

Ask your State agency to designate “in-state processors” to be used for processing USDA Foods. Although the ingredients may not be local, the end product is. Also consider using your entitlement dollars to procure foods that cannot be purchased locally, leaving more cash reimbursement dollars available to buy local foods. View ICN’s [Utilizing USDA Foods and USDA DoD Fresh Programs](#) worksheet to learn more about lower sodium USDA Foods and how to participate in the program.

USDA DoD Fresh

When participating in the USDA DoD Fresh Program, you can look for products designated as “local” in your [FFAVORS catalog](#). Most USDA DoD Fresh vendors define “local” as produce sourced from within the state or in adjacent states.

CASE QUANTITY	ITEM CODE	DESCRIPTION	CASE CONTENTS	CASE PRICE	FUND SOURCE
	14P01	Apple Any Type USF/XF 100-113 1/40 LB CS	40 LB	\$35.35	_ State _Snack _Fed
	18B41	Cauliflower Multi-Color 6-8 CT 8 LB CS	*LOCAL	8 LB \$19.38	_ State _Snack _Fed

Contact your USDA DoD Fresh vendor to determine which local products they expect to carry throughout the year. You can also request that your vendor consider purchasing specific types of products that are produced locally.

Farm to School Grant Program

USDA, FNS [Office of Community Food Systems](#) awards annual, competitive grants (up to \$100,000) that support farm to school activities. They are designed to assist eligible entities in implementing farm to school programs that improve access to local foods in schools.

Currently, schools and school districts that participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) are eligible to apply to one of two available tracks (Turnkey, Implementation) to initiate or expand farm to school efforts. The Turnkey grant would require you to select and complete a specific project and associated activities outlined by FNS. An Implementation grant provides an opportunity for you to propose projects that support broader, original ideas that align with the USDA Farm to School Grant Program goals and objectives. USDA releases a request for applications (RFA) in the fall and announces awards in the early summer. Visit the USDA [Farm to School Grant Program’s](#) website for more information.

For more details on how to implement the steps and strategies needed to grow your local foods program, check out USDA’s [Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Programs guide*](#) and other [Procuring Local Foods](#) resources.

*The Institute of Child Nutrition also offers a [Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Programs training](#) based on the above-mentioned USDA guide.

LOCAL FOODS SUCCESS STORY

Shannon FitzGerald, MS, RDN, LD

Five years ago, I attended a statewide, farm-to-community conference. Inspired by what I heard in a break-out session, I was energized and determined to bring local produce to our students. I noticed another participant, Brooke, who appeared equally motivated. We exchanged numbers to discuss our mutual interests.

Brooke turned out to be an apple and peach farmer with an orchard only 40 miles from our school district. Fruit is a great starter product for any farm-to-school program. However, logistics needed to be laid out. We diligently worked through all the details of product ordering (product specs, quantity, timing), delivery (one or multiple locations), and marketing. Both sides needed to be willing and flexible to develop processes that were mutually beneficial. Brooke also visited our schools and provided apple samplings and taste tests. We included the local health department in our planning sessions to address any food safety concerns. Our farm-to-school program was born!

After providing produce to Avon Lake City Schools and neighboring school districts, Brooke, along with the health department, submitted a grant application, and was awarded a USDA Farm to School Grant to help meet equipment needs, build an ordering platform, and produce new marketing materials.

Avon Lake City Schools didn't stop their farm-to-school efforts with apples and peaches. We had an interest in other local product offerings. Brooke spoke with other local farmers that were interested in serving schools. The farmers were then invited to the regional food buying co-op. With all the partners at the table (school districts, farmers, and the buying co-op representative), we set product specs so that the farmers could submit bid pricing. Our district and many others now receive tomatoes, hydroponic lettuce, peppers, watermelon ... and sometimes even surprises, like multi-colored carrots!

Looking back, I'm amazed at all we have accomplished. We achieved our goals through constant networking, connecting the dots, sharing ideas, and partnering with like-minded people and organizations.

Avon Lake City Schools District Profile

Location:

Avon Lake, Ohio

Enrollment:

3,800+; 4 elementary schools,
2 middle schools, 1 high school

Website:

[Avon Lake City Schools](https://www.avonlakeschools.org/)



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