

## Resources for Farmers

Most schools in Ohio participate in the National School Lunch or Breakfast Program, and often up to 70 to 90 percent of students participate. Through this program, schools receive a small reimbursement for each meal that they serve, while the charge of around \$1.50 covers the rest of the cost. Schools also receive low-cost commodities through the USDA Food Distribution program, allowing them to purchase shelf-stable or frozen food products at a low cost.

Advantages of participation:

- A new, reliable, and predictable market.
- The potential to capture a greater percentage of the consumer food dollar
- A school offers a large market by which you can reach a large number of consumers offering the potential for lower administrative costs
- Sales to institutions can bring increased community exposure and may increase participation in other marketing outlets, such as grocery stores, farmers markets, or CSA shares, through increased community exposure.

Strategies:

- **Direct marketing:** Selling directly to the school or school district involves building a strong business relationship with the food service director. It is important to recognize the ways in which a school as a customer is different than other buyers, including other institutions, and be prepared to work toward a relationship of strong communication and cooperation. These relationships can prove to be a strong, sizable and reliable source of business over time.
  - Sample telephone survey ([link](#)) is an example of what food service directors may need to know about your operation
- **Cooperative marketing:** Selling your product cooperatively with other farmers offers the advantage of reducing the administrative costs for any one farmer or school administrator and the opportunity for collaboration on storage, preparation, and packaging that make it easier for schools to buy from you. Check the [Funding chapter \(insert link\)](#) for grant opportunities, and see the website of an Iowa farmer's cooperative for an example <http://www.grownlocally.com/>. The New North Florida Cooperative is another example of organized farmers being able to sell to schools and other institutions where before they could not.
- **Wholesale marketing:** Many vendors and distributors are looking to source more locally. This may be advantageous for farms who do not have the capacity to deliver to schools, or who may not be able to accommodate schools' particular needs. Contact schools to see who their vendors or distributors are and see if they are interested in your product.

## Things to keep in mind

- **Safety is a big deal:** Conventional channels guarantee food that meet specific sanitation requirements or standards of approval, and many schools perceive a considerable risk in looking elsewhere for their food. Be prepared to educate buyers on the safety of your production and handling techniques and your product. Some schools may have liability insurance requirements, or expect certain levels of certification. If these prove to be obstacles, look for ways to collaborate with other farmers share the costs of liability insurance.
- **Seasonality is a challenge:** A lot of schools are not used to eating seasonally. Work with schools to see what you can offer them during the offseason, and consider investing in processing and storage strategies that can help extend your season as well as extended production techniques.
- **Many schools are looking to improve health:** Be prepared to highlight the health benefits of your products, compared to the less fresh and often over-processed conventional alternatives. Schools are required to have a wellness program in place, and your products can fit very well into the program
- **Purchasing guidelines for schools can be complicated:** While some school foods are obtained for a low cost through the USDA commodity program, most schools also purchase foods from private vendors to supplement their supply from the commodity program. Schools receive the equivalent of \$0.16 in USDA commodities for each lunch served, and most purchase fresh fruits, vegetables, and some meat products from private vendors. Farms interested in selling products to schools may first want to inquire what products the school district currently purchases from private vendors to see what opportunities may exist. (from Washington State Department of Agriculture's Farm to Cafeteria Connections)
- **Storage and preparation capacity may be limited:** Facilities available to schools vary widely. They may lack the storage and preparation capacity to work with products not packaged in a standardized way or that require extra preparation time. Schools have very limited budgets and often cite an inability to pay for the extra time that would go into preparing fresh food. The cost of things as simple as washing or chopping can be prohibitive for many schools. Think about how cooperating with other farmers, with local non-profits or community organizations, you might be able to help overcome that challenge.
- **Most food service directors are unaware of local resources available:** Just because you haven't heard from food service directors doesn't mean they would be interested! Make yourself and the opportunities for working together known to them.
- **Educational opportunities abound:** Incorporating farm field trips or farmer classroom visits with dining hall options allows students to make connections between community

life, biological systems, and their own health and also develops an appreciation for the role of farmers in society and the critical importance of soil to life.

- **Remember the advantages to local farms:** You can provide the freshest products possible and products that have a face and a community value behind them. Local farms can also provide specialty products that cannot be obtained through conventional channels, such as those that do not package and ship well. Remind schools of these opportunities and work together to see how to make them work for both of you.

Read more:

- How to sell to institutions <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM1853A.pdf>
- **Local Food Connections: From Farms to Schools.**  
by Iowa State University Extension Local Food Connections: From Farms to Schools  
\*Allison – I was not sure where this page fits into the website table of contents as I did not see a farmer section. Just let me know where it will go or if we need a new sidebar.