



Considerations for Producers Seeking Market Access to Schools

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Over the past decade, the Farm to School movement has led to schools in Virginia increasing purchases of locally produced foods. While there are many opportunities for producers wanting to tap into this market, it is critical to be aware and understand school purchasing needs, requirements, and constraints. The following checklist will help you as you consider accessing this market and providing students with more locally-sourced foods.



Communication: Develop and Foster Good Working Relationships

Talk to the school nutrition director to find out how to navigate pathways to selling to their school division:

- 1) Who is the point of contact? When is the best time to plan a meeting?
 - Visit county or city school district website (look for school nutrition director or coordinator)
- 2) If the school nutrition director is interested in buying your produce, arrange a time to meet and introduce your local foods.
 - Consider doing a presentation about your farm and produce
 - Bring your produce for taste testing and how it can be used
 - Host a farm tour
- 3) Does the school system run their own school nutrition program, or do they outsource to a food service company?
- 4) What is the school system's micropurchase threshold?
 - Micropurchases can be made for special events such as "Virginia Harvest of the Month" without competition as long as they are spread equitably among qualified vendors
- 5) What is the school division's small purchase threshold?
 - Small purchases are part of an informal bid process

- School divisions must provide specifications for products desired and can incorporate values such as sustainable practices, short harvest-to-delivery window, or soil and water conservation into their specifications.
- Divisions can also use what is called “Geographic Preference” to add value to a local bid, providing a competitive edge for local products in the bid evaluation process.



Source: Ashley Edwards

Additional Questions to Ask the School Nutrition Director

What meals are served? How many meals are served daily/annually?

A first place to start is to determine all the meals served and any special programs available in the school system, including the following:

- Breakfast
- Lunch
- Dinner/After school meal
- Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP)
- Backpack program
- Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)
- Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP)

What foods are needed for various menus?

Besides foods needed for different meals served, schools also have special monthly and seasonal events where they are looking to source certain food items. Be sure to consider the next set of questions:

- 1) When and how often is each food item needed (frequency)?
 - Season of year
 - Month
 - Week/Days
- 2) How much total volume of each type of produce is needed?
- 3) Are there specific types of produce that can fit a special event/niche?
 - Virginia Harvest of the Month
 - ✓ January: sweet potato
 - ✓ February: butternut squash
 - ✓ March: kale
 - ✓ April: lettuce
 - ✓ May: strawberries
 - ✓ June: cucumbers
 - ✓ July: zucchini
 - ✓ August: tomatoes
 - ✓ September: sweet bell peppers
 - ✓ October: apples
 - ✓ November: cabbage
 - ✓ December: spinach
 - Thanksgiving meal (pumpkins for pie)
 - Salad bar (cherry tomatoes, lettuce)



Source: Amber Vallotton

- Virginia Farm to School Week (1st week October)
- Virginia Ag Literacy Week (3rd week March)
- National Nutrition Month (March)
- National Garden Month (April)
- National Fresh Fruit and Vegetables Month (June)
- National Grilling Month, National Picnic Month (July)
- National Peach Month (August)
- Better Breakfast Month (September)
- National Pear Month, Root Vegetable Month (December)

What Food Safety Requirements must you meet for each food item?

Understanding the school district’s food safety policy is important so you can satisfy their requirements. While GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) certification is neither a federal or state requirement, some school divisions may require it in Virginia, and you need to know the potential food safety risks at production, harvest, and post-harvest handling stages. You should be able to verify how you are addressing risks, and be aware of any regulatory guidelines for Time/Temperature Control for Safety (TCS) handling.



Source: Ashley Edwards

- 1) Have you identified on-farm food safety risks related to the following sources?
 - Worker health & hygiene, training
 - Animal-based soil amendments
 - Animals (wildlife, domestic animals)
 - Production and post-harvest water
 - Tools, equipment, vehicles, and buildings
 - Packing lines, cleaning, sanitation
- 2) Have you implemented practices to reduce risks?
 - Written food safety policies and/or procedures along with documentation
- 3) Are you following any regulatory guidelines for your product inspections?
 - Virginia Department of Health
 - Virginia Department Agriculture and Consumer Services
 - United States Department of Agriculture
 - Other



Source: Amber Vallotton

- 4) How does the school verify your food safety practices?
 - Verbal or written agreement
 - Visits your farm
 - Reviews your food safety policies/plan
 - Obtains a copy of your GAP certification record
 - Reviews your business license
- 5) Does the school require or recommend you to have liability insurance or do you need an

insurance bond? If so, how much liability insurance coverage do you have to carry?

- 6) What handling requirements must be met?
 - Does produce need to be washed, sorted, or packed in a certain way?
 - Are there specific storage and transportation requirements?
 - Is the school willing to work with you in terms of reusable containers?
 - For non-produce items, are there Time/Temperature Control for Safety (TCS) requirements, and/or packaging needs to avoid cross contamination?



Source: Amber Vallotton

What are the school's delivery needs?

Delivery of food products and their distribution within a school district can be a major challenge for both producers and school systems. It is important to consider the following:

- 1) Where are the drop off sites?
 - Is there one central drop-off location, or are there numerous drop-off sites?
- 2) When do schools need food items delivered?
 - Days of the week
 - Time during the day
- 3) How do schools need the food items delivered?
 - Single packaging
 - Bulk pack

- 4) Do you have the capacity to meet the delivery demands?
 - Transport vehicle that is regularly cleaned/sanitized, and has proper temperature control
 - Availability to meet school's schedule
 - Time allotment



Source: Local Food Hub

What budget does the school system have to work with?

- 1) Is the school able and willing to pay the fair market value of your produce items?
- 2) How do federal procurement guidelines dictate the division's procurement options of your produce items?
 - Are there special programs or grant funds available for the school to purchase local foods?
- 3) What is the payment schedule?
 - How frequent are payments made to school vendors (monthly, bi-monthly, weekly)?
 - What is the procedure and timeline for invoicing?
 - Does the payment schedule provide you with an adequate cash flow?



Source: 401kcalculator.org

Are there any constraints you have that will be a challenge for accommodating the school system?

- 1) Do you need to expand your business operation to sell in this market?
 - More volume
 - More labor
 - More equipment
 - Bigger facility (cooling units, transport vehicles, etc.)

- 2) If expansion is not possible, would it be more profitable to sell through a regional wholesale distributor or regional food hub that can provide logistical support?
 - Use the following calculator to look assess and compares cost/benefit ratio of using a distributor vs alternative sources of transportation
 - <http://okfarmtoschool.com/growers-tools/tips-tools-and-guidelines-for-food-distribution-and-food-safety/>

especially so you can anticipate crops, plantings, volume needed, and timing.

- When expanding your business operation to gain greater market access, be aware that if you are tapping into special pilot programs, these funds are typically limited to a specific time period; the demand for your produce in the future may fluctuate, so plan ahead!

- Are there options for distribution that the school can help with to avoid excessive delivery demands?

- How much effort and time requirements are needed to sell to schools?

- Would it be more cost effective for you to sell to a wholesale distributor or regional food hub?

- Find ways to tell your story and showcase your local produce since this will increase your visibility.



Source: Lance Cheung, USDA photo.

Recommendations

- Communication is critical to promote a strong working relationship: Ask the right questions at the right time.

- Consider timing: late November-January are good times for you and school nutrition directors to plan for the upcoming year,

Resources

Accessing Virginia's Public School (K-12)
Market Sector: Fresh Produce Food Safety
Considerations

<https://www.hort.vt.edu/producesafety/producers/documents/Public%20Schools%20Market%20Sector%20Factsheet%20.pdf>

USDA Farm to School Planning Toolkit

https://www.fns.usda.gov/profiles/fns_gov/themes/fns/farm_to_school/toolkit/F2S_Planning_Kit.pdf

Virginia Farm to School Resource Guide

<http://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/AEE/AEE-77/AEE-77-PDF.pdf>

Virginia Produce Food Safety Website

<http://www.hort.vt.edu/producesafety/>

This website provides information about the efforts of the Virginia Fresh Produce Food Safety Team, as well as timely and science-based resources geared to reducing fresh produce contamination risks, beginning at the farm level, progressing through the market-place to the final end-user, the consumer.