



Considerations for School Nutrition Directors Seeking to Increase Farm to School Purchases

*Amber D. Vallotton, Food Safety Extension Specialist, Virginia Tech School of Plant & Environmental Sciences,
Carol Haynes, Family Consumer Sciences Extension Agent, Virginia Cooperative Extension-Franklin County,
Trista Grigsby, Farm to School Specialist, Virginia Department of Education
Renee Boyer, Professor and Extension Specialist, Food Science and Technology,
Laura K. Strawn, Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, Food Science & Technology,
Eastern Shore Agricultural Research and Extension Center,
Robert Williams, Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, Food Science & Technology*

Over the past decade, the Farm to School movement has led to schools in Virginia increasing purchases of locally produced foods. While there are hurdles faced by School Nutrition Directors, there are some considerations that can help navigate the challenges. The following checklist will help you to set up or increase Farm to School purchases.

Where could local foods fit into menu development for meals served?

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

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

What possible local foods can be used for various menus?

As you plan out all the foods needed for various menus for the different meals served, be sure to also consider special events, seasonality, and frequency of when various food items are



Source: Bob Nichols, USDA photo.

needed. The next set of questions will help you narrow down specific locally sourced foods that might meet your menu needs.

- 1) Are there specific foods needed to fit special events or niches?
 - 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)
- 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)

- 2) When and how often are each of these foods needed (frequency)?
 - Season of year
 - Month
 - Week/Days
- 3) How much total volume of each food is needed?



Source: Lance Cheung, USDA photo.

For each menu item, determine specific handling needs

Know and understand specific handling requirements since locally sourced food items can often require more time, labor, food preparation skills, equipment, and facilities.



Source: DC Central Kitchen

What budget does the school system have to work with?

- 1) Total allotted budget
 - Food budget
- 2) Does the school system run their own school nutrition program, or do they outsource to a food service company?
 - Can local sourcing be integrated into the FSMC contract?
- 3) If they manage their own program, what options does the school have to work with local procurement in light of competitive bids?
 - What funds are allocated toward local product procurement? What funds are allocated toward fresh produce purchases?
 - Is the division maximizing use of USDA Foods and reducing storage fees?
 - Does the district emphasize nutrition education or local food procurement in the Local School Wellness Policy?
 - Vendor application/bid process
 - Does vendor need a business license or to meet other requirements prior to putting in a bid?
 - Are there special programs or funds available for the school to purchase local foods?

- 4) What is the invoicing and payment schedule for vendors?
 - Is the schedule workable for growers in terms of their cash flow considerations?
 - Does the school system have options related to the payment schedule?

What Food Safety Requirements must be met for each food item?

Regardless of whether or not food items are sourced locally, having a well-defined food safety policy is important so you can convey how you need and want potential farms to satisfy the school district’s requirements. While a GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) audit is not required by most school systems in Virginia, farms need to know the potential risks at production, harvest, and post-harvest handling stages. They should be able to verify how they are addressing these risks. For farms providing other products, they should be aware of any regulatory guidelines they need to follow and adhere to any Time/Temperature Control for Safety (TCS) handling.



Source: Amber Vallotton

Produce Food Items

- 1) Has the producer identified on-farm food safety risks for their farm?
- 2) Does the producer have a written food safety plan and/or procedures in place to mitigate identified risks, such as providing worker health and hygiene training?

- 3) How will the school verify producer food safety practices?
 - Verbal or written agreement
 - Visit to farm
 - Review of the farm food safety plan
 - Copy of GAP certification record
- 4) How much liability insurance does the producer carry?
- 5) Does the producer meet any relevant regulatory guidelines for their product inspections?
 - VDH
 - VDACS
 - USDA
- 6) Has the school conveyed how it needs product to be washed, sorted, packed, and stored a certain way before delivery to the schools?
 - Are there specific transportation requirements the producer must follow?
 - If the grower prefers reusable containers, can schools accommodate?



Source: Amber Vallotton

Non-produce Food Items

- 1) What handling requirements need to be met for Time/Temperature Control for Safety (TCS)?
- 2) Are there any packaging, storage, and transportation practices required to avoid

cross contamination between produce and non-produce food items?

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 growers 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 products delivered?
 - Days of the week
 - Times
- 3) How do schools need products delivered?
 - Single packaging
 - Bulk pack
- 4) Does grower have the capacity to meet the delivery demands?
 - Transport vehicle with proper temperature control
 - Availability to meet our schedule
 - Time allotment



Source: Lance Cheung, USDA photo.

How can I find Local Producers?

There are several resources that are helpful, such as Virginia Market Maker <https://va.foodmarketmaker.com/> and other local/regional food guides in your locality.

Once you find possible producers who you are interested in buying their food items, consider the following next steps:

- 1) Invite the producer to bring samples for you and some of your nutrition staff to try.
- 2) If the food item is well received and there are adequate funds to purchase more, consider a special sampling paired with promotion to see how the local items is received by teachers and students.
- 3) If the producer relationship develops and is a good fit, ask for a farm tour, and/or have the producer share their story as part of a promotional event. Promoting the food and the farmer can excite students and encourage them to try new food items.

Recommendations

- Communication is critical to promote a strong working relationship.
- Consider timing: late November-January are good times for farmers and school nutrition directors to plan for the upcoming year. School nutrition could plan to host a farmer info meeting in early winter ahead of farmers' seed ordering schedule.
- Train staff on efficient preparation for fresh foods. Provide proper equipment for food preparation. Train servers and cashiers to promote the featured local items.
- Are there options for distribution that the school can help with to avoid excessive delivery demands?
- Would it be more cost effective to purchase from a distributor or food hub?
- Find ways to tell the farmer's story.

- Contact your local extension agent for information on how Virginia Cooperative Extension can assist you in your F2S efforts. <https://ext.vt.edu/offices.html>
- For more information, contact Trista Grigsby, VDOE Farm to School Specialist, trista.grigsby@doe.virginia.gov (804) 225-2331

Resources

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

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

Enhancing the Safety of Locally Prepared Foods: What do I need to know to provide SAMPLES at the farmers market?

<https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/FST/FST-310/FST-310.html>

Master Food Volunteer Foods Demonstration Guide

https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/FST/FST-100/FST-306.pdf

Temperature Danger Zone

https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/wcm/connect/8b705ede-f4dc-4b31-a745-836e66eeb0f4/Danger_Zone.pdf?MOD=AJPERES

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 Department of Education Farm to School Nutrition

<http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/nutrition/index.shtml>

Virginia Farm to School Resource Guide

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