

**Developing resources to help Virginia food producers sell and distribute
products through the farm to school program**

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In

Food Safety and Biosecurity

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ABSTRACT

Encouraging procurement of food via Farm to School programs has become an emphasis of many schools throughout our nation and state. Farm to school produce/products benefits children and communities in many different ways. Contact between farmers and school management needs to be fostered and nurtured to be successful and provide the students with the freshest and safest product possible. School divisions often need a starting point to begin the process of procurement between the local farmer and the school nutrition department. Development of a checklist and other tools for farmers and school division nutrition managers/cafeteria managers to use when gaining access to fresh local produce may be beneficial for school nutrition departments trying to start a farm to school program. This project developed a checklist and fact sheets to lead and guide school nutrition directors and producers seeking to increase purchases and consumption throughout the state of Virginia. Farm to school is a vital program and allows farmers to reach markets that may have been untouched in the past. We are excited to share our resources and information with educators, farmers, and nutrition directors as well as our colleagues in extension.

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Introduction

Background and Setting

The emphasis on farm to school food procurement first began during the mid-1990s. Farm to school is defined as “a program that connects schools (K-12) and local farms with the objectives of serving healthy meals in school cafeterias, improving student nutrition, providing agriculture, and nutrition education opportunities, and supporting local and regional farmers” (National Farm to School Network, 2013). Virginia’s Farm to School program began in 2007 because of state legislation passed. Recognizing the problems associated with childhood obesity and the search to open additional markets for fresh farm products in Virginia, the General Assembly passed Senate Joint Resolution 347 (2007). Educating the people of the Commonwealth was a big part of the bill and providing funding to expand local foods being sold to school systems throughout Virginia. Todd Haymore, Virginia Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry, summed it up best, “Virginia’s Farm-to-School program is about creating connections between growers, distributors, and educational institutions. Through these connections, we can provide healthy, locally grown foods and support our agricultural economy (VDACS, 2012).

Farm to school programs are increasingly becoming a sustainable concept and much more than just an idea but a reality. Farm to school programs help create jobs for cafeteria staff and increases income for local farmers and producers. For every job created by school districts purchasing local foods, additional economic activity creates another 1.67 jobs. Farmers have

reported an average increase of 5% in their income and the movement has allowed them new opportunities for growth (Kane, Kruse, 2010).

Trista Grigsby, Virginia Department of Education, (VDOE), Farm to School Specialist reached out to Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) specialist, Amber Vallotton and VCE extension agent, Carol Haynes to work with them to create resources for producers, as well as school nutrition directors, to outline and describe the steps in the process of procuring local food for the school system in their area. The process of entering into the farm to school program has become a challenge for many, and these types of resources are much needed for the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Statement of the Problem

Local school nutrition directors/administrators often do not have the contacts or know the right questions to ask when trying to purchase local produce/products. Likewise, farmer's often do not have contact with nutrition directors or understand the procurement process for local school divisions. Therefore resources are needed to help both audiences (school nutrition directors and producers) maneuver through the process of successfully meeting any requirements, ultimately resulting in local foods being served in schools. The overall goal of Farm to School is for students and teachers to be provided safe and nutritious foods that are, at the same time, contributing to boosting the local economy.

Purpose of the Project

The overall purpose of the project was to create appropriate resources to assist these audiences. After completion of the project all resource drafts developed will be finalized and distributed throughout Extension channels and Virginia school divisions. Additionally, drafts of resources will be previewed by participants attending the Farm to school conference in Hampton VA. This will allow participants a firsthand look at the product which will be distributed at future meetings with growers and producers. The resources will be readily available for use and an asset to all in the procurement process. They will focus on satisfying the best practices, requirements, and request that the Virginia Farm to School administrators have asked the Virginia Cooperative Extension to create.

Project Objectives

- 1) Brain storm and outline draft checklists to be considered by school nutrition directors and producers, using needs assessment and strategic plan for locality.
- 2) Interview local farmers and cafeteria nutrition managers and staff to help understand their specific perspectives and needs related to Farm to School.
- 3) Develop resources for school nutrition directors and producers seeking access to schools.

Review of Literature

In Virginia, the Farm to School program strives to meet the nutritional needs of students and generate income through economic development. Virginia has an obesity rate of 14.3%, food insecurity rate is 9.8%, and the number of students receiving free and reduced-priced lunch

is 40.2%, these issues can be addressed with farm to school initiatives. In Virginia, for every \$1.00 spent on local food it can help create an additional \$2.16. This alone can lead to over \$1 billion in local dollars over a one year period (Curwood, R. D. VDOE directory conference, Hampton 2019).

Virginia ranks 48 out of 50 states in local food purchasing. There is an increasing demand for farm to school in Virginia. Over 57% of Virginia, school districts report some form of participation in farm to school. Virginia invested \$7,778,180 in (VDOE, Hampton2019).

Under federal law, small purchase procurement allows school nutrition directors to complete small purchases using informal methods for securing services and supplies including produce. Virginia school nutrition directors can purchase local and regional foods with a set amount of money. The amount of money that each school system has for these purchases is different. School systems sometimes have to apply for grants to purchase local foods and also the size of the school district influences the amount a school system is awarded for local purchases. (USDA , 2019)

Food safety is a big concern within the school systems. Many schools like to visit the farm to verify food safety practices are implemented and practiced. Incorporation of good agricultural practices are critical in all farm to school operations. Many types of food can be contaminated, but an overwhelming number of outbreaks are attributed to produce. In a recent study, 46% of all outbreaks are linked to produce. Fresh produce is often served raw without any further preparation. For this reason, the growing conditions and handling of the produce prior to consumption is extremely important. When assessing whether safe practices are being

implemented on a farm, there are here are five essential steps that are conducted when looking at food safety and the farm:

- 1) Assess the risks. A producer must know the risk and understand the risk before any practices can be put into place.
- 2) Implement practices to help reduce risk.
- 3) Have a system in place to monitor those practices to help ensure a safe product.
- 4) Establish a corrective action that can be used if unsafe practices are observed.
- 5) Have a record system in place (Vallotton A., 2018).

Food safety is the number one priority for school nutrition staff and farmers.

Virginia First lady, Pam Northam, announced at the Farm to School conference in Hampton Virginia that the goal by 2022 is to increase annual statewide local food purchases to at least \$22 million (nbc.29). “Serving locally grown food products in our schools is a great opportunity to connect our exceptional agricultural resources with Virginia’s greatest resource- our children” (Northam, 2019).

New opportunities are now available to farmers/producers like never before. Virginia Cooperative Extension is an excellent resource for school nutrition directors to contact. All agents within VCE are available to help make the connections for farmers and school nutrition directors. Virginia Cooperative Extension website is a great place to get started www.ext.vt.edu click on visit your local office and give the local extension agent a call.

Project Design, Methodology

To determine the needs of these audiences, we conducted one-on-one interviews and attended the 2019 Virginia Farm to School Conference. Amber Vallotton and I met in February and early March 2019 to brainstorm ideas for presenting at the Farm to School Conference in Hampton Roads, Virginia. Trista Grigsby, VDOE Farm to School Specialist also gave input into the creation of the checklists. The checklist was presented at the conference and also put into packets for each participant to use. Interviews were conducted with local cafeteria managers and owners of Four Oaks Farms. Listening to producers and school nutrition manager were equally important in the creation of a checklist. Flip charts were used to compile the data and organize the information. The target audience-growers and producers who desire to sell to the local school division and nutrition directors were present at the Farm to School conference in Hampton, VA. Receiving feedback at the conference was beneficial to Amber, myself and Trista. The fact sheets were designed with the correct template and layout that Virginia Cooperative Extension requires.

Results

Jerry and Joyce Conner, owners of Four Oaks Farms in Rocky Mount, Virginia have reached out to the school nutrition directory, Heather Snead, and secured a contract to purchase local greens grown in their hydroponic green house. In February 2019, Amber and I contacted Jerry about what worked and what didn't in regards to selling to the local school systems. Jerry

said, “The hardest thing for them is distribution.” (Conner, 2019). Getting the produce to all the locations at the right time and having the product readily available has been the biggest challenge this past growing season. Jerry and Joyce’s operation is GAP certified and I have personally seen the green house, it is efficient and follows food safety regulations. The best source of information on farm to school procurement comes directly from the producers themselves. Several concerns were expressed during our recent interview. Large amounts of rainfall in 2018-2019 has also become a factor in providing the necessary amounts to satisfy the school system. Jerry and Joyce expressed the desire to expand the operation to better meet the demand for their produce from the school system. During the interview Jerry was optimistic for future growth within the school system but cautious at the same time. Expansion means debt and the current contract with the school system may not be sustainable without the Federal Grant money that they have secured in the past. The school cafeteria managers are enthusiastic and have a strong desire to continue to buy fresh local produce. Today, April 11, 2019, during my annual meeting with cafeteria staff the school administration again expressed the desire and willingness to continue to promote farm to school initiatives (Lynch 2019).

During the recent Farm to School conference in Hampton Roads, Virginia, many questions and conversations were generated in response to promoting an increase in buying local fresh produce. The Henry County school nutrition director, Marci Lexa, expressed interest in purchasing local produce but didn’t know the farmers in the area and was unsure of the products they have to sell. The Local food guide directory generated in many counties by the master gardeners is a great resource and place to start. During the Farm to School conference examples were taken to share. Floyd County has an excellent website for school nutrition directors to

explore www.buylocalvirginia.org and Franklin www.franklincountyfreshfoods.org during the process of generating the checklist for farmers and school nutrition directors/cafeteria manager's interviews proved to be essential. Dale Lynch, cafeteria manager at Sontag elementary took time out of her busy schedule to talk with me during her normal lunch routine while running the register in the process. I asked her what is your greatest obstacle and how can we help to fix the problem? Dale said her biggest problem is having enough local produce and delivery. Many times she will order a particular type of lettuce and it won't be available. She loves fresh produce and wants more! That was so encouraging to me as an extension agent and also to local farmers. Dale wanted to see the grower bring the produce to her back door and have it ready to be stored. The steps she needed prior to delivery were crucial to her continued reordering. The product needed to be washed and packaged in containers that would fit her refrigeration units. The product that was presented in prior taste tests at the school for her cafeteria workers were also a factor in purchasing.

Making sure the product was transported safely and held at correct temperatures were sometimes an issue with local producers. Vehicles that do not have refrigeration and cooling units were a barrier when deciding to make local purchases. After interviewing a local farmer selling to the school system he reassured me and Heather Snead, Franklin county school nutrition director, that they would have delivery to the back door of the school cafeterias within 2 hours of harvest. Adequate storage and transport coolers are essential to ensuring and safe and quality product.

Finding the right time to introduce your product to a school nutrition director and school cafeteria managers will also increase the farmers chance to sell to local school divisions. Lee M.Waid, cafeteria manager, suggested famers/growers reach out to schools in April for the following school year. Many school nutrition directors begin planning and secure funding opportunities in April and May (USDA, 2012).

The overwhelming theme during the entire interview process was to provide a wider variety of products available to students with greater ease and remain cost effective. Farm to school has a large number of supporters throughout Virginia, over 1300 Virginia schools have participated since 2015 (USDA, Farm to School census 2015). Virginia farmers are constantly looking to expand their markets and income and farm to school is growing in every area of the commonwealth.

Outcomes

As a result of interviews and discussions at the Farm to Table Conference, resources were developed to help farmers and school nutrition directors try and overcome some of the barrier that were found related to enhancing local produce procurement for the farm to school program. The factsheets were created using interviews, food safety best practices and Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences. Publications from the USDA were also utilized. Amber Vallotton, has also consulted and guided during the development of the factsheets. Trista

Grigsby, Farm to School Specialist, VDOE has also been instrumental in providing guidance and feedback to further the development of the factsheets.

The following fact sheets have been developed to further the farm to school movement.

- 1) *Produce safety on-farm Risk Assessment (Appendix A)*
- 2) *Grower Checklist (Farm to School) Considerations for Producers wanting to Sell to Schools (Appendix B)*
- 3) *School Nutrition Director Checklist (Farm to School) Considerations for SND wanting to source local products for Schools (Appendix C)*
- 4) *Considerations for School Nutrition Directors Seeking to Increase Farm to School Purchases (Appendix D)*
- 5) *Considerations for Producers Seeking Market Access to Schools (Appendix E).*

Additionally, an updated checklist for *Produce safety on-farm Risk Assessment* was also developed (Appendix C) . The factsheets are formatted with the correct template and will soon be ready for Distribution.

Discussion and Recommendations

Food safety on the farm and in the school cafeteria are equally essential to ensure a safe food source for the youth within our schools. Education continues to be the first line of defense in combatting foodborne illness outbreaks. Increasing access to local produce is essential to the longevity of the farm to school initiative. Virginia Cooperative Extension is an excellent resource and provides the latest in research-based knowledge for the residents of Virginia and

throughout the nation (www.ext.vt.edu). Building relationships between producers and growers are vital to the success of farm to school. Virginia Cooperative Extension agents will help you build that relationship and foster the connections farmers and nutrition directors form.

Acknowledgements

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Appendices/Tables/Logos

Figure1. The Virginia Farm to School logo



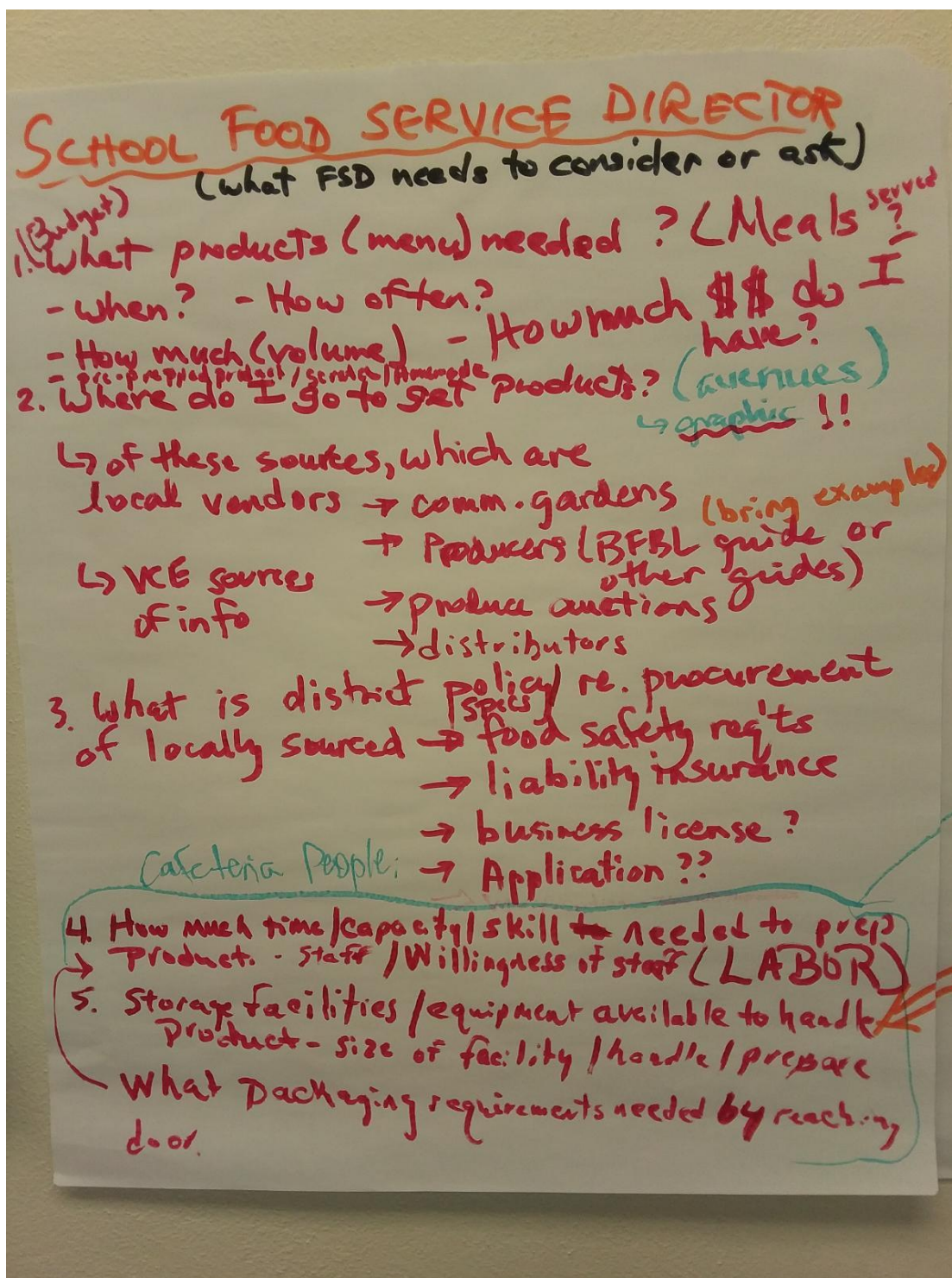


Figure 2. Flip Chart-School Nutrition Director Brainstorming

MONTH: _____

SUNDAY MONDAY TUESDAY WEDNESDAY

GROWER CHECKLIST (what grower needs to consider)

- Communication (who is ^{1. who is} Point of Contact?)
- ✓ 2. Visit county/city school website (find on DOE website)
School nutrition director

Build + Foster Relationships

- ✓ - Meals served - Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner
Volume - How much do I need to supply
Availability
- ✓ - Products - Does my product fit your needs? (consistency)
tomatoes - Market similar products
give them choices for schools to use - promote product / tell you story
(talk up your product to necessary working staff)
- ✓ - Raw product - what do I need to do before you decide to open
(washing, sorting, packing (division of product))
- ✓ Reusable containers / turnaround time + willingness to return containers in timely manner.
- How much - does it cost to grow/prepare product
Need to add extra money for extra prep/trav time. ✓ What is the budget school have to work with. What's value of my product to school.

extra time will be required

Figure 3. Grower Checklist Flipchart Brainstorming

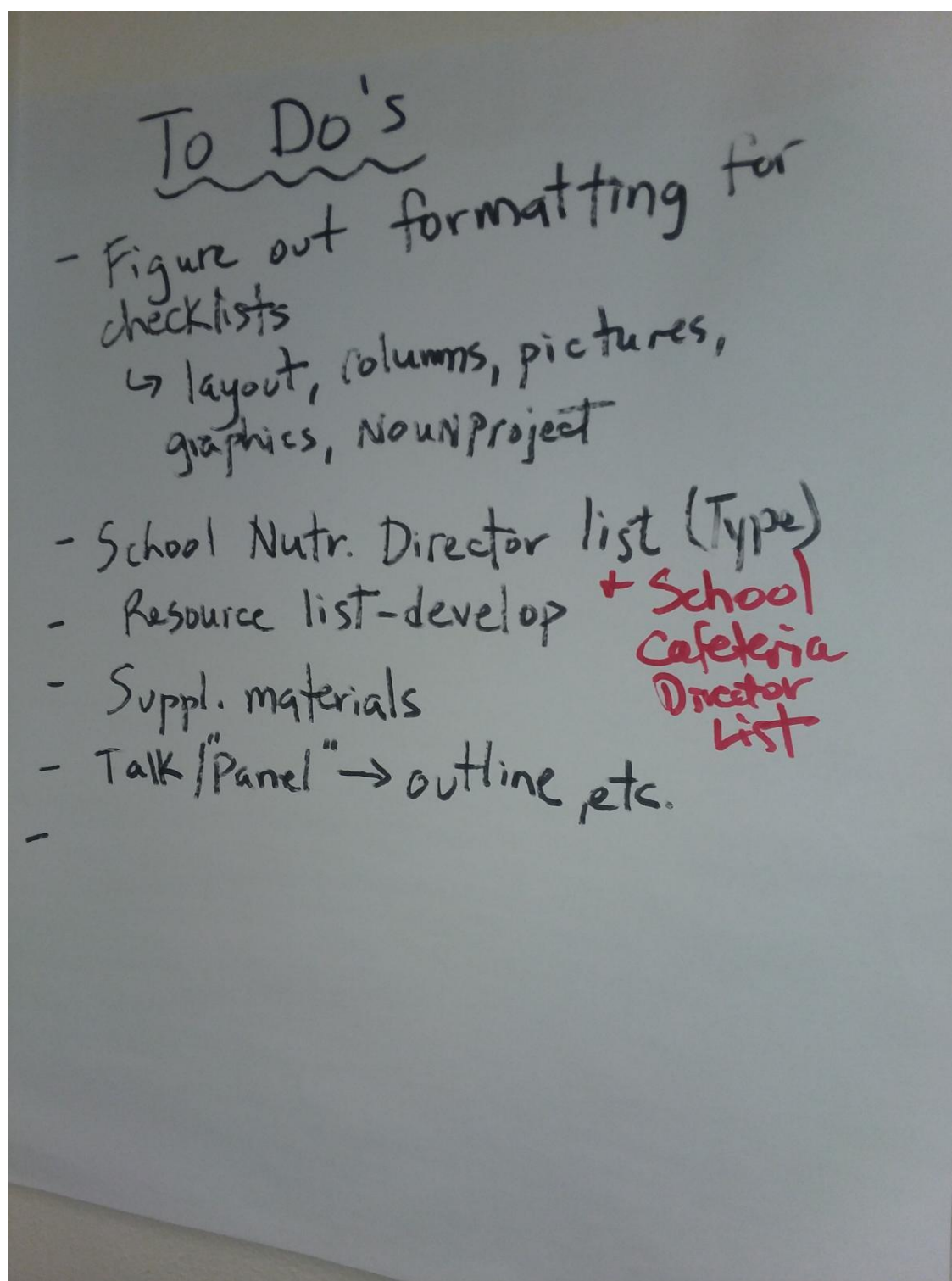


Figure 4. Flip Chart to Do List

APPENDIX A

Produce Safety On-Farm Risk Assessment -Checklist

Check boxes for all items you have completed as a part of your on-farm food safety program. For items that do not apply, write N/A next to item.

General (applicable to all stages)

- All workers, including family members, have been trained in proper health, hygiene, and produce handling practices and policies for any of the stages they are involved in.
- Visitors are instructed in expectations, especially if they are allowed in any production and packing areas.
- Appropriate signage is posted to remind workers and visitors of food safety practices and policies.
- Port-a-johns or indoor restrooms and wash stations are readily available.
- All workers and visitors wash hands after using the restroom and at other specified times as stated in training/policy
- Eating is only permitted in designated eating areas.
- Drinking water is only allowed in different areas if containers are not breakable.
- Smoking, if permitted, is never allowed in production and handling areas.
- Anyone who is exhibiting signs of an infection, sickness, or has an accident knows to report to the supervisor and not work around produce until authorized to do so.
- A first aid kit and emergency contact numbers are readily available.

Pre-Plant Stage

- For each crop being grown, I have identified any risks known to be associated with the crop (i.e. netted rind, stem scars on fruit, or high risk crop in terms of related outbreaks, etc.).
- For the different kinds of plant material I am using for plant propagation (i.e. seeds, transplants, bulbs, tubers, rootstocks), I have maintained and stored appropriately prior to planting.
- For seed starts and transplants, I have made sure seed flats are clean and not a source of contamination
- Prior to field preparation, including protected culture (i.e. greenhouses, high tunnels), I have determined that the prior land history does not pose contamination risks to current production areas. This includes:
 - Previous flood events
 - Septic system drain field areas
 - Chemical spills or dump sites
 - Previous early 1900s orchards
 - Concentrated livestock operations
- ☐ Where possible, production fields are not located where there is a potential for runoff from livestock or grazing areas.

Production Stage

- For field preparation, I have made sure any equipment and tools used are not a source of contamination.
- Soil amendments, such as manure or biologically-based compost, have been applied 120 days prior to harvest.
- For any purchased composts used, I have a certificate of analysis, which provides information about the different inputs used to make the compost, the composting process, and contact information for the manufacturer.
- Any bulk fertilizers and plant protection products are stored in such a way as to prevent contamination.
- For protected culture systems being used, steps are taken to reduce risks:
 - Channels, containers, and rafts, are regularly cleaned and sanitized between rotations
 - Overhead lights are protected to prevent breakage
 - Acids used for lowering pH are stored so as to prevent accidents and contamination
- The sources and quality of production water (irrigation, frost protection, plant sprays) being used is tested at least annually.
- Production areas are monitored for evidence of animals such as animal tracks, feces, droppings, trails, damaged crops.
- Measures are taken to exclude or deter wildlife.
- Domesticated animals are not allowed in production and packing areas.
- Outdoor and indoor spaces, are kept clean to reduce rodent habitat and refugia.

Harvest Stage

- Harvesting tools, bins, and totes are cleaned and sanitized prior to use.
- Harvest wagons and machinery are in good repair and lights protected to prevent glass breakage.
- Harvest equipment is not a source of cross contamination.
- When harvesting, any produce showing signs of visible contamination is discarded.

Post-Harvest Handling Stage

- Harvested produce brought from fields or protected culture areas is handled so as to prevent cross contamination.
- In open pole barn structures, measures have been taken to prevent bird roosting, as well as live traps set for rodents.
- For indoor packing area, non-baited, live rodent traps are used and regularly checked.
- Light fixtures are protected to prevent glass shattering over product.
- Food contact surfaces are made of construction materials that can be cleaned and sanitized prior to use.

- Prior to repacking, all dirt, mud, and other debris is removed from produce.
- All wash water, when used, is tested annually to ensure it is potable. Test results are kept on file.
- When a sanitizer is added to wash water, it is monitored to make sure it is working.
- Boxes and containers used for re-packing are stored to prevent cross-contamination.
- Cardboard boxes are new, or if re-used, are free from signs of soiling and always lined with new plastic.
- Repacked product has identifiable traceback codes to provide a traceability system.
- Storage coolers are kept cleaned, maintained, and do not contain both produce and non-produce items (such as meat).
- Produce in coolers is kept at appropriate holding temperatures, which are monitored.
- When produce is put on ice, the water used to make the ice is from a potable source.
- Transport vehicles are clean and well maintained to maintain cold chain to the marketplace.

Name

Signature

Date

APPENDIX B

Grower Checklist (Farm to School)

Considerations for Producers wanting to Sell to Schools

Recognize that every school system is different.

➤ ***Communication: Build and foster relationships***

- ✓ *Talk to the school nutrition director to find out how to navigate pathways to selling to their school system*
 - *Who is the point of contact? When is the best time to plan a meeting?*
 - *VDOE website*
http://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/nutrition/resources/nutrition_programs_dir.shtml
 - *Visit county or city school district website (look for school nutrition director or coordinator)*
 - *If the school nutrition director is interested in your buying your products, arrange a time to introduce your product.*
 - *Consider doing a presentation about your farm and product line*
 - *Bring products for taste testing and how the product can be used*
 - *Host a farm tour*
- ✓ *Does the school system run their own school nutrition program, or do they outsource to a food service company?*
 - *What is your 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.*
 - *What is your 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 Geographic Preference to add value to a local bid, providing a competitive edge for local products in the bid evaluation process.*

➤ ***Questions to Ask the School Nutrition Director***

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

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, preschool meal program)

✓ ***What products are needed for various menus?***

- *When are products needed?*
 - *Season of year*
 - *Month*
 - *Week/Days (frequency)*
- *How much volume of product is needed?*
- *Are there products 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)*
 - *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 handling requirements must be met?

- *Produce*

- *Does it need to be washed, sorted, packed a certain way?*
 - *Are there specific storage and transportation requirements?*
 - *Is the school willing to work with me in terms of reusable containers?*
- *Non-produce Items*
 - *Are there Time/Temperature Control for Safety (TCS) requirements?*
 - *Are there any packaging/storage/transportation needs to avoid cross contamination?*
- ✓ ***What are the school's delivery needs?***
 - *Where are the drop off sites?*
 - *Is there one central drop-off location, or are there numerous drop-off sites?*
 - *When do products need to be delivered?*
 - *Days of the week*
 - *Times*
 - *How do the schools want it delivered?*
 - *Single packaging (cases)*
 - *Bulk pack (bins)*
 - *Do you have the capacity to meet the delivery demands?*
 - *Transport vehicle*
 - *Time allotment*
- ✓ ***What are the school's food safety considerations***
 - *Have you identified food safety risks on your farm?*
 - *Have you implemented practices to reduce risks?*
 - *Written food safety plan and/or procedures*
 - *Note: GAP certification is neither a federal nor state requirement, though individual school divisions may require it.*
 - *Are you following any regulatory guidelines for your product inspections?*
 - *VDH*
 - *VDACS*
 - *USDA*
 - *Other*
 - *How does the school verify your food safety practices?*
 - *Verbal or written agreement*
 - *Visits your farm*
 - *Reviews your food safety plan*
 - *Obtains a copy of your GAP certification record or business license*

- *Does the school require you to have liability insurance or do you need an insurance bond?*
- *How much liability insurance do you have to carry?*

✓

✓ ***What budget does the school have to work with?***

Is the school able and willing to pay the fair value of your product?

How do federal procurement guidelines dictate the division's procurement options of your products?

Area there special programs or funds available for the school to purchase local food?

What is the payment schedule?

How frequent are payments made to vendors (monthly, bi-monthly, weekly)?

What is the procedure and timeline for invoicing?

Does the payment schedule provide you with an adequate cash flow

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

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.)

If expansion is not possible, would it be more profitable to sell through a regional wholesale distributor or food hub that can provide logistical support?

Use tools like spreadsheets for calculating cost/benefit ratio of using a distributor (attach)

Recommendations Summary

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

- ✓ *When expanding your business operation to gain greater market access, be aware that if you are tapping into a special pilot programs, these funds are typically limited to a specific time period; the demand for your product 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 the school?*
- ✓ *Would it be more cost effective to sell to a distributor or food hub?*
- ✓ *Find ways to tell your story and showcase your products since this will increase your visibility*

APPENDIX C

School Nutrition Director Checklist (Farm to School)

Considerations for SND wanting to source local products for Schools

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

- *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 items can be used for various menus?***

- *List all products*
- *Are there products needed to fit special events?*
 - *Virginia Harvest of the Month*
 - *January: sweet potato*
 - *February: butternut squash*
 - *March: kale*
 - *April: lettuce*
 - *May: strawberries*
 - *June: cucumbers*
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 - *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)*

- *When and how often are each of these products needed?*
 - *Season of year*
 - *Month*
 - *Week/Days (frequency)*
- *How much total volume of each product is needed?*
- ***For each menu item, determine the following:***
 - ✓ *Willingness of staff to use*
 - ✓ *Specific food preparation skills required for staff Available time/labor of staff*
 - ✓ *Equipment needed*
 - ✓ *Available facilities (i.e. size of storage units)*
 - ✓ *Special handling needs*
- ***What budget does the school system have to work with?***
 - ✓ *Total allotted budget*
 - *Food budget*
 - ✓ *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?*
 - ✓ *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?*
 - ✓ *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 product?***
 - ✓ *Produce*
 - *Has the producer identified on-farm food safety risks for their farm?*
 - *Does the producer have a written food safety plan and/or procedures in place to mitigate identified risks?*
 - *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*
- *How much liability insurance does the producer carry?*
- *Does the producer meet any relevant regulatory guidelines for their product inspections?*
 - *VDH*
 - *VDACS*
 - *USDA*
 - *Other*
- *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?*
- ✓ *Non-produce Items*
 - *What handling requirements need to be met for Time/Temperature Control for Safety (TCS)?*
 - *Are there any packaging/storage/transportation practices required to avoid cross contamination?*

➤ ***What are the school's delivery needs?***

- *Where are the drop off sites?*
 - *Is there one central drop-off location, or are there numerous drop-off sites?*
- *When do schools need products delivered?*
 - *Days of the week*
 - *Times*
- *How do schools need products delivered?*
 - *Single packaging*
 - *Bulk pack*
- *Does grower have the capacity to meet the delivery demands?*
 - *Transport vehicle with proper temperature control*
 - *Availability to meet our schedule*
 - *Time allotment*

➤ ***How can I find Local Producers?***

- *There are several resources that are helpful*
 - *Virginia Market Maker <https://va.foodmarketmaker.com/>*
 - *Determine if there are local food guides in your locality*
 - <https://sustainfloyd.org/food-guide/>
 - *Other links*
- *Once you find possible producers who you are interested in buying their products, consider the following next steps*

- *Have the producer bring samples for you and some of your nutrition services staff to try*
- *Perform sampling paired with promotion to see how the product is received by students*
- *If the product is a hit and there are adequate funds to continue purchasing, arrange a time to introduce the product to nutrition staff*
 - *Invite the producer to present to nutrition staff about their farm and products*
 - *Ask them to bring their products for taste testing and how the product can be used*
- *If the relationship develops and is a good fit, ask for a farm tour*
- *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 products*

Recommendations

- ✓ *Communication is critical to promote a strong working relationship.*
- ✓ *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*
- ✓ *Ask the right questions!!*

