

Farm to School—Getting Started

When thinking about starting a farm to school program, it is important to keep in mind that every school, school district, and college is different. Physical infrastructure and kitchen equipment may vary from one to school to another, as will the interests, skills, and motivations of the people who work there.

Every school context is unique as well: The agricultural capacity of the area (e.g. the kinds and amounts of foods grown and raised nearby) needs to be considered. As does the availability, access, and affordability of food distribution networks, and storage facilities.

Keeping these potential unique characteristics in mind, there are several keys to successfully planning, implementing and sustaining farm to school connections. Communication and relationship building are critical. Here are some suggestions for getting started in farm to school. More detail can be found in the farm to school Toolkit ([LINK](#)).

Getting Started Worksheet

Available at <http://farmtoschool.cce.cornell.edu/steps-for-getting-your-project-started.html>

Steps	Notes and Progress
<p>Do your homework.</p> <p>Going into your first farm to school planning meeting armed with knowledge about existing models, lessons learned and successes will get you started in a positive direction.</p> <p>If you are not a food service professional learn as much as you can about school food service and/or college dining. Most public schools participate in the National School Lunch and/or Breakfast Program. Participation in these programs places many requirements on the school food service directors, and will impact every decision, including those having to do with farm to school.</p> <p>The National Farm to School program website has a wealth of information about farm to school programs across the country.</p> <p>Watch this excellent introductory video from the Vermont Farm to School program.</p>	
<p>Develop community partnerships.</p> <p>The time constraints placed on a food service director are enormous, and adding a local food program may seem like an unrealistic request.</p> <p>Even a highly motivated, passionate food service director can't do it all. They might need help identifying sources, pick up and delivery, and even some on-site handling. Part of developing successful farm to school programs is often identifying these needs and developing strategies for meeting them.</p>	

Forming a farm to school committee, a task force, or working group -- whatever you want to call it -- is a good way to start learning about roles, needs, assets, and responsibilities.

Communication is key!

Many groups have a stake in the quality of school meals. Communication with stakeholders including food service staff, teachers, school administrators, students, parents, and other community members is critical. Try not to go into communication with assumptions about roles, responsibilities, and practices. Go in to learn and understand, and with a desire to plan change together.

Here are some tips for involving different people in your farm to school project:

Administrators: Administrative support is critical in order to change established purchasing patterns, to purchase food products outside of existing contracts, and to find that these changes will not negatively impact the overall budget.

One important strategy for insuring acceptance of foods or dishes that might be new or unfamiliar is to conduct taste-tests either in classrooms or in the cafeteria. The school principal will likely need assurance that we would not create more work for the custodial staff, or disrupt the flow of students and shorten their already brief lunch period.

Teachers: Don't forget these key partners in your farm to school efforts. Seek support and involvement of teachers to provide Farm to School announcements in their classrooms and to encourage students to try the local foods that are being featured.

Committees: The Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act of 2004 mandated that every school district with schools participating in the national school lunch program develop and implement wellness policies for students and staff, starting in the fall of 2006, that included:

- Goals for nutrition education;
- Goals for physical activity;
- Goals for school-based activities that are designed to promote student wellness in a manner that the local educational agency determines is appropriate;
- Nutrition guidelines for all foods available on school campuses with the objectives of promoting student health and reducing childhood obesity.

School wellness committees are crucial partners for your farm to school efforts even though there is nothing in the national mandate that specified the use of locally-produced foods or school gardens.

The National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity has developed a [Model School Wellness Policies](#) that provides a potential starting point for communication with your school's wellness committee.

Start slowly, and plan carefully.

Planning needs to begin many months in advance of the date when you expect to serve a food item. You need to:

- Find out what is [available by season from local producers](#).
- Promote seasonal eating with the [Northeast Regional Food Guide](#).
- Choose a few items to target for inclusion in school meals.
- Plan and volunteer to conduct taste tests.
- [Find a farmer or distributor](#) to supply the food item
- Develop a plan for [promoting](#) the local food idea to your school.
- Decide how the food item will be served and [find a good recipe](#) such as those of the [UM Farm to School Website](#). Since the mid-west region is similar to the Northeast, these recipes will adapt well to New York.
- Develop a plan for school food service staff training on use of fresh/stored/preserved local and seasonal produce.

Connect students with the food.

Go beyond simply adding a local food to the lunch menu. Utilize materials in this toolkit to engage children:

- farm visits
- classroom announcements
- school newsletters
- hands-on activities like gardening and cooking that connect children with delicious and nutritious local foods

Don't be afraid to ask for help.

Remember that there are people across New York and the country that are invested in connecting young people with local and healthy foods in their school lunchrooms. Please contact them. A good place to start for assistance in locating local growers who may be interested in selling to schools is your local Cornell Cooperative Extension Association. Extension educators can also assist you with meeting planning and facilitation when you are ready to bring stakeholder groups together for Farm to School planning.

Network with organizations involved in farm to school work in New York.

The [New York State Department of Agriculture & Markets Farm to School Program](#) offers downloadable resources including posters and educational materials.
<http://www.agmkt.state.ny.us/f2s/index.html>

The Cornell Farm to School Extension and Research Program offers a downloadable Toolkit with numerous ideas and strategies to get started. <http://farmtoschool.cce.cornell.edu/toolkits.html>

(Adapted from University of Minnesota Farm to School Toolkit available at: http://www.mn-farmtoschool.umn.edu/getting_started_2.html)