

# Local Foods in Maryland Schools: Findings from Interviews with Stakeholders

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# About the Interviews and Stakeholders

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From 2009 to 2010, a group of researchers and Agricultural Extension specialists examined the supply chain for local foods in Maryland school meals, and investigated the barriers and opportunities for increasing local foods in schools. Interviews and surveys were administered with stakeholders from the entire supply chain, including farmers, distributors, food service directors, and school principals. For the purposes of this report, “local” food is defined as food grown in Maryland and adjacent states.

This Report has three components:

1. **Findings** from a series of one-on-one interviews with school food distributors and school food service buyers.
2. **“How To” Mini-Guides** for school food service buyers, producers, and other stakeholders interested in taking “the next step” toward bringing local food into schools.
3. **Policy Recommendations** for state, municipal, and educational policy makers to further develop the positive impacts of the Jane Lawton Farm to School Act.

For an electronic version of this report and detailed information related to the comprehensive survey and statistical components of this research project, please visit <http://mdagrnpolicy.arec.umd.edu/> and select “Local Foods.” Contact information for research team members can be found at the end of this report.

## Findings

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Sixteen in-depth interviews were conducted in the making of this report. Two were with food distributors who serve public school districts, seven were held with public school food service district directors, and seven were held with private school food service directors. Several key themes emerged over the course of these interviews. They are outlined below.

### Interest in Local Foods is High

We primarily interviewed food service directors that expressed significant interest in integrating local food or had successfully integrated local foods into their business. As such, the opinions expressed in this document represent those directors that generally have a positive approach to the use of local foods in school meals. All of the school food buyers

interviewed expressed a moderate to strong degree of interest in bringing local foods into their schools. Most interviewed also expressed a belief that local foods in schools have a positive impact on the children, teaching them that their food comes from farmers rather than from the supermarket. There was no clear difference in stated interest between public and private school buyers.

### **Experience with the Jane Lawton Farm-To-School Act is Varied**

Most public school food service directors interviewed generally support the intentions of the Jane Lawton Farm to School Act, but the majority is not interested in seeing a mandate for it to expand. By and large, public school food buyers are wary of any additional work due to the staffing and budget constraints they face.

The actions that the public schools take around this legislation are quite varied. A number of schools districts interviewed had frustrating experiences and have kept their programs quite limited (e.g., local apples procured once a year for “Home Grown Lunch Week”). Others had made multiple new connections and have been creative and expansive in terms of program implementation and curriculum impact. The degree to which the buyer is flexible about his or her product requirements seems to play an important role. For example, two interviewed will not accept fruit of different sizes. Another is fine with this and separate out the larger sized fruits for the older children and so on. Likewise, the degree of willingness to allow the children to try out fresh, whole foods in the cafeteria context seems to be important. An example of this is that one buyer stated that they would not consider serving whole peaches to students, as they assumed they would be too messy. Another school stated that they serve whole peaches to students in all grades, and have been pleased with the results.

### **Countywide Local Food Planning Efforts Are a Key Factor in Success**

Another area that came up frequently for public school district food buyers was the need for assistance with locating local producers interested in selling to the schools. A factor in success or failure of a local foods buying effort was the ability of the school food buyer to develop a coalition of professionals in the county who are able and willing to assist in locating farms and developing connections for the school. Most frequently mentioned stakeholders were county University of Maryland Extension Educators and county Agricultural Economic Development Specialists.

In the same vein, almost all school food buyers indicated a desire to learn about what their colleagues were doing in terms of farm to school efforts. Those that had experienced the most difficulty implementing the Jane Lawton Farm to School Act guidelines were the most avid to learn from more successful county school food buyers. They most often mentioned a

desire for a statewide meeting where information could be shared and best practices presented.

## **Procurement Contract Practices Influence Usage of Local Foods**

Most schools use a form of procurement contract to buy food. Some schools – particularly public schools -- indicated an interest in learning more about integrating local food preferences into their existing procurement contracts for produce. Several had already done this, either by developing their own or by finding and using an existing template.

Private schools that contract out their food service to private companies rely on company staff to set procurement practices. Company staff members do not feel a personal interest in altering corporate procurement practices with distributors. These staff stated that if a lot of the company’s clients expressed a strong interest in having more local food, then a change in corporate policy could result. The independently run private schools food service directors interviewed were mildly interested in altering procurement contracts with distributors to favor local foods, but were more likely to actually make individual direct relationships with producers outside of pre-set distributor procurement contracts.

## **A Major Obstacles to Progress: Time and Cost**

Time (including staff time) was most frequently mentioned by interviewees as a barrier to bringing in more local foods. Most buyers feel they do not have enough time or staff to take local foods “to the next level” through better understanding their local food infrastructure, building their local food stakeholder coalition group, and researching what their colleagues have done so they don’t have to reinvent the wheel, despite their expressed interest in doing so.

Cost limitations were also mentioned frequently by public school buyers. Those interviewed had varying experience regarding the relative price of local foods. Several found that local foods were cheaper than the same foods purchase through their regular distributors, particularly in-season local fruits and vegetables. Others stated that they paid more for local. This was especially true for dairy, meat and processed foods such as ice cream and cheese.

## **Another Major Obstacle to Progress: Limited Local Food Distribution and Aggregation Infrastructure**

Most of those interviewed talked about the relative logistical difficulty of purchasing local foods directly from producers. Except for independently run private school food service directors, those interviewed preferred purchasing food from a distributor, and strongly

avored getting local food through either a traditional food distributor or a local food aggregator/distributor. Amish and Mennonite produce auctions provide one example of how local food aggregator/distributors work.

A need for electronic ordering was mentioned by some interviewees, most frequently by the private school buyers who were staff of food service companies. The private schools were also more likely to bring up issues related to producer insurance. Two public school district buyers interviewed used local aggregation/distribution sites (produce auction houses) to purchase local foods. Both had positive experiences. However these facilities are not established in all counties throughout the state. The lack of well developed local food aggregation/distribution infrastructure in the state presents a barrier to increasing local foods in Maryland schools.

## HOW TO: Use Procurement Contracts to Grow the Farm-to-School Market

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Most school food is supplied through a procurement contract with a full service wholesaler or other supplier. It is possible, through amendments or alterations of the terms of procurement contracts with suppliers, that the purchase and distribution of local food could expand. In addition, some schools and school districts have contracted directly with individual farmers to produce food for their school district. Increasing the number of these contracts would also make it possible to increase usage of local food in schools.

Contracting provides an opportunity to bring more local food into schools, both through procurement contracts with food distributors and contracts with individual farmers and farmer cooperatives. Although contracts of these types are limited in Maryland at the current time, they have been developed and implemented in a wide variety of locations in urban, peri-urban and rural areas (see examples below and Resource List).

School food buyers face a core constraint in the development of farm-to-school programs in the form of current procurement contracts with food service companies. Many of the school food buyers interviewed for this project were interested in learning more about integrating local food preferences into existing produce contracts. Several had already done this, either by developing their own produce procurement contracts that specify provision of local foods when available (in the case of Baltimore City) or by finding and using an existing procurement contract template. One step food service buyers can take is to (1) amend current procurement contracts to require access to the buying records of the broker

showing product origin and (2) buy local products when available and equivalent cost-wise. Below are three different examples of language that can be incorporated in procurement contracts. While these examples are taken from actual contracts, school buyers should be careful to develop their own language that meets their school districts' requirements.

***Example 1: Setting a quota for local purchases***

On average throughout the year, twenty percent by cost of all food ingredients and products used in the making of the meals shall come from the Mid Atlantic Region (Washington DC, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Delaware, New Jersey).

***Example 2: Developing a separate contract for local purchases***

This is a contract to provide locally grown fresh fruits and raw vegetables. Some items required are to be delivered in their original form; others are to be further processed into ready to use form, as described on the product requirement sheet of this proposal. The School District will require the following of successful bidders:

- For the purpose of the RFP, Locally Grown is defined as grown within a 200 mile radius from Major City including neighboring states that fall within this radius. The School District prefers certified, locally grown products when available.
- Name and location of farms that respective items are purchased from one week prior to delivery.
- Distributor to establish written agreements in Spring with selected grower(s) requiring them to produce agreed upon quantities at a fixed price for contract period.
- Product purchases and approximate dates are subject to change due to growing conditions and product availability.
- Distributor to report to the School District net price grower will receive on a price per pound or price per case basis for product as purchased. This information will be required with completion of the RFP.
- Product to be labeled designating local source (grower, address of farm). Labeling system to be mutually agreeable between vendor and the School District.
- Availability of product traceability documentation from grower (farm), to further processor to the School District.
- Pricing to be based upon net price to grower, plus processing and delivery fee.
- Distributor and growers to provide documentation twice during the contract period to enable the School District to audit and confirm net prices received by growers during the contract period.
- Distributor to identify any subcontractors that may be involved with obtaining product.
- Completed Food Safety affidavit.

***Example 3: Adding clauses to the original contract that allows the purchaser to evaluate the possibility of substituting local produce for out-of-state purchases.***

- Vendor to update online order guide pricing on a weekly basis. A weekly updated pricing list to be sent to the Procurement Office via fax or online. Pricing list must also note local and sustainable grown products with grower label, vendor code number, and prices for ordering, pack size, product description, etc.
- Product listing must denote pack size, price, quantity available, vendor product code, brief description, retail packaging, and if product is organically grown. System must have a search engine for location new and/or seasonal products.

Contracting directly between schools and farmers provides its own set of challenges to both parties. According to *Bringing Local Food to Local Institutions: A Resource Guide for Farm-to-School and Farm-to-Institution Programs* (Bellows, Dufour, and Bachmann. 2003. ATTRA Publication #IP242), both farmers and schools face several critical constraints in the development of direct farmer-to-school contracts. From the perspective of the institution, these constraints include:

- Current contract agreements they have with food service companies
- Lack of knowledge of food service staff in how to store and prepare fresh farm products and meet mandated portion requirements
- Food preferences of students and other consumers
- Lack of availability of many fresh farm products during certain times of the year
- Lack of efficiency of ordering and payment procedures with farmers compared to contract food service companies
- Institutions having limited funds to purchase food, while local foods often cost more than products available through contract food service companies
- Institutional access to free or low-cost foods through USDA surplus commodities programs

*From Bringing Local Food to Local Institutions: A Resource Guide for Farm-to-School and Farm-to-Institution Programs*

From the perspective of farmers, these constraints include whether they can:

- Supply food in quantities that meet the needs of the institution
- Assure food quality and food safety
- Obtain adequate liability insurance
- Get access to processing, packaging, and storage facilities
- Efficiently distribute and transport products to educational or institutional buyers

*From Bringing Local Food to Local Institutions: A Resource Guide for Farm-to-School and Farm-to-Institution Programs*

Interviewees made it clear that any contracting systems that integrate local foods must use the kind of efficient ordering, delivery, and payment functions that they are used to, while providing them with a dependable source and a reasonable price.

## **Policy Recommendation**

Recommend that Maryland public school districts amend their distributor produce procurement contracts to encourage more local food purchasing. Provide a centralized resource for development of appropriate clauses and contracts.

## Producer Contracts

There have been many successful Farm-to-School programs established using producer contracts. Schools and food distributors are becoming increasingly receptive to these programs, as are producers. Funding and government support for these programs is also becoming increasingly available.

To get started with direct farmer to school contracting, producers may need to convince the institution of the benefits of buying from local farmers. Smaller-scale farmers may need to form cooperatives and work through existing distribution networks. In person meetings between the farmer and the school food buyer are often necessary.

Once an initial agreement to supply food to schools exists, the parties need to create a contract that specifies the terms. Some possible items to be covered are:

- The total estimated volume of each item to be delivered;
- The time an item will be ripe; amount and price of items;
- The quality of the delivered product;
- A delivery schedule and location;
- Any specific packing requirements and handling practices; and
- Payment terms and processes, including recourse if contract terms are not satisfied.

More information is available on how to develop producer contracts in the Resources Section.

## HOW TO: Create a Farm-to-School Action Team

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Several interviewed school districts in Maryland have created an ad hoc Farm-to-School Action Team: a coalition of professionals in the county able and willing to assist the school in locating farms and developing connections for the school. All schools interviewed that have done this successfully have had success in developing their farm-to-school programs. In fact, one of the main differentiators between school food buyers who were satisfied with their farm to school experiences and those who were not was the presence of a self-created



support system within the county to assist with developing connections with local farmers.

Public school food buyers are very busy people. They are wary of additional work. Most interviewed have acclimated to the major provisions of the Jane Lawton Farm to School Act, but the majority interviewed is not interested in seeing a mandate for it to expand. The actions that the public schools take around this legislation are varied. Some schools have had frustrating experiences and have kept their programs very limited. Others have made great new connections and have been quite creative. Farm to School Action Teams can assist school food buyers by bringing knowledgeable stakeholders together to work together toward developing a strong program.

One interviewee suggested an “association of farmers” run through the County Economic Development Office would be a way to establish a greater connection with local growers. This interviewee had a very helpful County Economic Development Office staff, and this worked well in this district’s case. Another interviewee stated that they gathered all the players in the County together to discuss how to make the program a success in their district. Key players included:

- County Agricultural Extension Educator
- County Family and Consumer Science Extension Educator
- County Agricultural Economic Development Specialists
- County Extension Educator for Youth and 4-H
- County Representative of the Agriculture Land Preservation Program
- Executive Director of a producer-based local non-profit organization

Schools and school districts can learn from the successful efforts of these individuals. Development of county wide Farm-to-School Action Teams could take place informally by a public or private school food buyer, county level PTA, or other interested stakeholder. At the state level, a framework could be established for best practices. Such an effort could assist Maryland farms and school districts to overcome barriers to provide students with more fresh, healthy, local produce in their school meals.

### **Policy Recommendation**

Recommend that school districts develop county wide “Farm-to-School Action Teams” and create “County Farm-to-School Action Plans.” Recommend that these plans identify resources, procurement policies, producers, and processes for increasing the amount of local food provided to students in their school districts. Provide centralized statewide support for this process including templates, networking opportunities, and information sharing for school food service directors. Integrate private schools into these networks.

Task forces have been successfully formed in the past. Generally, they focus on the following major topic areas:

- Review existing resources. The task force reviews what resources are currently available to producers, distributors, and schools to promote farm-to-school partnerships.
- Review success stories. The task force reviews available prepared case studies and best practices that describe how school districts have successfully purchased local produce from a local producer or distributor.
- Identify procurement issues for the county. The task force helps clear the path for the school to appropriately purchase and process produce from local farmers and their distributor. This includes identifying barriers presented by school facilities, recipes and menu planning processes, and skills levels of food-service staff.
- Develop a database of growers. Participants collect a resource list that identifies local and state producers' contact and product information and a timeframe for purchasing their products in the local area.
- Identify processes and needs for producers. The task force reaches out to local producers on how to market their products to county schools using best practices based on available resources.

## HOW TO: Take Farm-to-School from the Lunchroom to the Classroom

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Many public schools interviewed have gone above and beyond the provisions of the Jane Lawton Farm to School Act in bringing farm to school and school to farm activities alive in their districts. Multiple counties and individual schools have been quite innovative in their local foods and fresh produce consumption programming. Private schools interviewed have also made much progress in terms of cultivating farm-to-school programs.

Outside of the Jane Lawton Farm-to-School Act, several school food buyers interviewed participated in the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. This program makes fruit and vegetable snacks available at no cost to all children in participating schools. The program began in 2002 as a pilot program in a small number of schools. It has since become a permanent program that was expanded to cover selected schools in all 50 States, as part of the 2008 Farm Bill. The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program is administered by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). Participating schools in Maryland that were interviewed

considered the program to be very successful. The program is only available in selected schools based on need —only schools in which a high proportion of students are eligible to receive free or reduced-price school meals may apply.

Schools have some leeway in the way in which they administer the program. In one Maryland school, they have used many ways to bring in fresh fruits and vegetables, including whole fruits brought around to classrooms on carts, servings of fruit cups brought to classrooms, vegetable trays brought to each classroom, and fruit baskets left on each teacher’s desk. The school food buyer in this district felt that the program not only gives students fresh produce, it also gets healthy food into the curriculum and introduces children to new fruits and vegetables this way. At one school district interviewed, the district does get some of their fruits and vegetables for the program from a local vendor, but it is not necessarily locally grown.

At least two schools interviewed have worked with their County Extension Educators to bring fruits and vegetables into the lunch room in innovative ways. They extension educators have performed “taste test” sampling with a focus on fresh fruits and vegetables. For these programs, the school has supplied the food, and the food is not necessarily locally produced. Besides the County Agricultural Educator, the Family and Consumer Science Educator and the 4-H and Youth Development Educator might both be interested.

Other schools have taken the farm-to-school concept and expanded it within the context of Farm-to-School week. For example, one district ran Farm-to-School “showcase events” at four schools. These showcase events featured outdoor displays including farm animals, plant demonstrations, educational crops and product information, supplementary educational materials, and farm and agriculture-related films, coloring books, and songs. Programs like this are clearly a lot of work, but those who had invested in them stated that the experience was “amazing,” and “a great compliment to the local produce being served in the cafeteria.”

### **Policy Recommendation**

Recommend that the Maryland State Department of Education and the Maryland Department of Agriculture incorporate food, nutrition, gardening, and farm-to-school materials and school-to-farm educational experiences into the state’s core curriculum.

A curricular component to farm to school teaches students about the path from farm to fork, and instills healthy eating habits that can last a lifetime. Many resources exist to assist schools and school districts in implementing these educational programs. The best known of these is the national Farm to School Network. According to their website, the Network “brings healthy food from local farms to school children nationwide (see Resource List).

# HOW TO: Encourage Vegetable Growers to Participate in the Farm to School Program

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Most Maryland vegetable growers are aware of the Farm to School program, but are unsure if it is in their best interest to get involved. One of their main concerns is knowing who to contact, i.e., who has the decision making authority for food purchases. A great majority of growers have dealt with the same person, company or market for many years and a trust has developed. Growers will move into new markets, but these markets are usually set up to do commercial retail or wholesale of vegetables.

The Farm to School program is a new and untested market for the growers. Some schools have resolved this problem by designating a liaison between the school and the growers or the vendor that purchases locally grown produce.

During interviews, several growers who had dealings with a Farm to School program commented that their biggest problem was with distribution. They “did not like having to take their produce to several different schools and would have preferred one central location” -even if they had to drive further to get there. The majority of growers interviewed agreed with the idea of a central location where they would deliver their produce and let a distributor worry about getting it to the various locations. A few school systems have developed a central location for drop-off of produce, while others have local growers deliver their produce only to local school(s). A larger Farm to School program would need to coordinate grower deliveries.

## **Policy Recommendation**

Recommend that the State of Maryland work with farmers to develop regional produce collection centers to allow farmers to combine their products for sales to distributors or institutions such as schools and hospitals.

Growers also are used to working with consistent markets for their produce when it is ready to harvest and sell. Schools need to become one of these consistent markets. Communication needs to be improved between schools and farmers. Schools, for example, should not ask for 50 bushels of tomatoes on Monday to be delivered on Wednesday and then request nothing for the next few weeks. This makes the management of the harvest and delivery of produce very difficult for growers. Almost half the growers interviewed said they would be glad to grow more produce if the schools wanted it just as long as they were assured that the extra produce (which would be difficult for growers to sell through their normal markets) would be purchased by the schools. Schools need to inform growers in advance how much, when, and what produce they will need. Involving growers in the planning stages of school

menus would be a very accommodating idea and one many growers want. Most schools that have had successful programs have included growers early on in the planning.

A major issue with growers that may be a stumbling block for schools to acquire fresh produce from local farms relates to Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification. Almost three-quarters of growers in our interviews did not have a Good Agricultural Practices Program in place on their farm. This is something that worries growers. If the Farm to School Program requires them to be GAP certified; most indicated they would not be interested in the program. Food purchased for school systems usually must pass some level of food safety program. School systems, therefore, should be certain that the growers they are about to work with have some assurance of food safety that would satisfy their school system.

Additionally, many schools have indicated they will require product insurance. Many of the larger farmers have this type of insurance; however some smaller farmers, as sellers of vegetables or fruits at Farmers Markets, typically do not. This should not be a big stumbling block for most farmers as product insurance is not prohibitively expensive.

Another minor problem is timing of production—when fruit and vegetables are most available and when they are most needed. Growers begin to wind down their operations in September and by October do not have many warm-season crops such as watermelon, cantaloupe, tomatoes, and peppers, available when schools would most like to have this produce. This easily can be overcome by the schools working with growers on the school's menus for the coming year. There are ways growers can extend the harvest season late into the fall and early in the spring, but they have to know what produce is needed, how much to grow, and be assured it will be purchased.

While growers have several concerns about the Farm to School program none are insurmountable. Schools could reduce or even eliminate many of the perceived road blocks by including the growers early-on in the development of a program. Several school districts in the mid-Atlantic have been successful in purchasing fresh produce from growers and most have included either the growers or grower organizations early in the planning stages of their programs.

## Resource List

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A wide variety of resources on developing farm-to-school programs, creating contracts with

local farmers, amending contracts with distributors to increase local foods purchases, integrating farm-to-school into curricula, and more is available at the following websites:

- <http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/farmentoschool.html>
- <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELDEV3101426>
- [http://www.kerrcenter.com/ofpc/publications/Farm-to-School\\_report.pdf](http://www.kerrcenter.com/ofpc/publications/Farm-to-School_report.pdf)
- <http://www.farmentoschool.org/publications.php>

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