

Top Ten Findings Regarding Farm-to-School in Maryland

From 2009 to 2010, a partnership of researchers and Extension specialists developed a study to examine the supply chain for local foods in Maryland school meals, investigate the barriers and opportunities for increasing local foods in schools, and develop outreach programs to meet the needs identified with an eye towards improving farmer incomes. Local food was defined as being grown or raised in Maryland or in the states bordering Maryland. Interviews and surveys were administered with stakeholders from the entire supply chain, including farmers, distributors, food service directors, and school principals. This report summarizes those results. Specifically, the 'top ten findings' are taken from the following four reports:

- 2010 F2S MD Survey Results
- 2010 F2S MD Interview Results
- 2010 F2S MD Research
- 2010 F2S MD School Product Interest

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://mdagnrpolicy.arec.umd.edu/> and select "Local Foods." Contact information for research team members can be found at the end of this report.

The Situation

1. School Lunch Budgets are Self-Supporting with Little Room for Additional Costs

Providing food to K-12 students is an enormous enterprise in Maryland. Public schools serve approximately 70 million lunches and 25 million breakfasts annually. School lunch services are self supporting without financial payments from their respective local school systems. Through the National School Lunch program (2009-2010), however, the federal government reimburses schools for each meal served to children. Specifically, low income children may qualify for either free lunches (\$2.68 reimbursement per lunch) or reduced price lunches (\$2.28). If a school system participates in the School Lunch Program, then the federal government pays an additional \$0.25 for each full priced lunch. With funds from the School Lunch Program and funds from children paying full price for their own lunches, the Food Service Director must pay for food, labor, administrative costs, utilities, maintenance, and other costs. The pressures on these food service directors to balance their budgets are extreme. In the case that local food is more expensive, or perceived to be more expensive, this can prove a great hindrance to its purchase.

2. There are Perceived Barriers to Increased Local Food Purchases

Food service directors were surveyed regarding their perceived barriers to increasing local food purchases. Responses to these questions from public and private schools and by level of difficulty were combined into a single index ranking. These barriers are listed below, according to their ranking, from barriers that present larger problems to barriers that are less troublesome.

- a. Seasonal availability
- b. Delivery considerations
- c. Pricing
- d. Liability (farmer compliance with food safety standards)
- e. Lack of local food supply
- f. Extra staff time needed to prepare fresh foods
- g. Lack of partially processed products
- h. Product quality
- i. Developing relationships with farmers
- j. Consistent product quality
- k. Lack of information about where/when local foods are available

3. Decision Makers' Attitudes vary between Public and Private Schools

Food service directors were surveyed regarding their perception of the principal decision-makers in the purchase of local food. For public schools, Food Service Directors (59% of food service directors), School Boards (50%), and Superintendents (47%) were very interested in serving local foods. For private schools, food service directors felt that Principals (58%), Food Service Directors (56%), and Parents (56%) were very interested in serving local foods. There are also structural differences in the management operations of public and private schools. For example, Principals, in public school systems with centralized food systems, have little influence over menu and food choices and, as a result, only 19 percent of food service directors felt they were very interested in serving local foods. By comparison, food service directors rated Principals as the most interested stakeholder for private schools. Advocates for local foods should consider the type of school with which they are working so, as they formulate their plans, they ensure that they are communicating with the appropriate stakeholder or group.

4. Higher Local Food Sales are Possible with Large Public School Systems, but More Flexibility Exists with Private Schools and Small Public School Systems

Public school systems in Maryland are based around the county or Baltimore City jurisdictions. The counties with large populations of students have contracts with a small number of distributors who deliver to one centralized receiving center. Most of these school systems have a small number of central kitchens and the schools only have food warming capabilities. The large school systems would prefer to purchase their local food from their existing distributors (e.g., local farmers sell to the distributors who then sell to the schools). Smaller counties and private schools have a greater flexibility to purchase directly from local farmers. Survey results show that public school food service

directors (82%) are very interested in purchasing local foods from a distributor, while only 50% are very interested in purchasing from a farmer. Private school food service directors, compared to their public school counterparts, are less interested in purchasing local food from a distributor (47%), but, similar to public schools, 47% of private schools are very interested in purchasing from a farmer.

Structural Changes Necessary to Increase Local Food Purchases

5. Increasing the Ease of Purchasing Local Food through Changes in Contract Language

Public schools must follow state and federal guidelines to ensure that food purchased meets quality standards and is purchased at competitive prices. However, small changes can be made in these food purchasing contracts that requires distributors to indicate the price and availability of local food when it is available.

6. Increasing Farmer Participation will Require Investments in Marketing Infrastructure

Maryland farmers, the vast majority of whom have smaller operations, need regional collection centers so that smaller loads can be combined to enable sales to distributors or larger institutions such as public schools and hospitals. Farmers will likely need to be Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certified and carry product liability insurance to be able to sell to schools. Many of the larger farmers have product liability insurance, however, smaller farmers typically do not. This should not be a big stumbling block for most farmers as product insurance is fairly inexpensive. However, GAP certification is a bigger issue and will likely impose additional requirements on the farm operation.

7. Improved Processing and Storage Capabilities of Fruits and Vegetables can Increase Purchases from Local Farmers

Local in-season produce is an affordable option for distributors and schools. However, the lack of processing and storage capacity present barriers to the use of more local produce in schools. In terms of processing, many schools need produce to be partially processed. These schools do not have labor or equipment to process raw product themselves. Some distributors have this capacity, while others do not. Increased processing capacity on the part of local farmers could alleviate this barrier. In terms of storage, use of local produce in the off-season would require, in addition to modest processing, increased refrigeration and freezer capacity. Both schools and distributors face critical limitations on this front. Investments in processing and preservation capacity on the part of producer cooperatives, local school systems, or in the collections centers mentioned above are likely necessary.

***Improved Communication among all Participants Increases
Local Food Purchases***

8. Increasing Communication between Farmers and Schools is an Important First Step

Ad hoc County-based Farm to School Action Teams can increase the availability of local foods within schools. These action teams would allow food service directors and farmers to communicate about product demand and availability. Including other county-based employees, such as Extension educators and agriculture economic development specialists, on these teams encourages creative solutions to local barriers. The Report entitled, “The Use of Local Foods in Maryland Schools: Product Needs by Schools in Maryland” can be used by farmers to ascertain what local fruits and vegetables their local schools want.

9. Farm Friendly School Environments make a Positive Difference

Some schools are expanding their Farm to School activities to include fruit and vegetable tasting and developing a curricular component that teaches students about the path from ‘farm to fork’. Others are creating outdoor displays with school food gardens and farm animals and taking students on school-to-farm field trips. Schools participating in Maryland Agricultural Education Foundation’s ‘Ag in the Classroom’ receive education that helps students better understand where their food comes from and its value to their health. These types of school activities are an encouragement to the purchase of local foods.

10. The Jane Lawton Farm to School Act is Increasing School Awareness of Local Foods.

The Jane Lawton Farm to School Act was passed in 2008. Currently, it does not include any public funding to support its activities. All Maryland public school food service directors have heard of the Jane Lawton Act, while only 10% of private school food service directors were familiar with the Act. Additional attention should be paid to including private schools in work being done at the state level to bring awareness of the issue to their food service directors. Most public school food service directors generally support the intentions of the Jane Lawton Farm to School Act, however, they face challenges in implementing the bill due to the severe staffing and budget constraints. That said, all public school systems enthusiastically support the annual “Homegrown School Lunch Week” scheduled in early September. Progress is being made and the findings represented in this report shed light on how the purchase of local foods by schools can be increased in Maryland.

About the Research Team

Project Contact: Dr. James Hanson, Project Director and Extension Specialist, University of Maryland's Department of Agricultural & Resource Economics, jhanson@arec.umd.edu

Dr. Carolyn Dimitri, Associate Visiting Professor with the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health, New York University (carolyn.dimitri@nyu.edu). [Research conducted while a Senior Economist, USDA, Economic Research Service].

Lydia Oberholtzer, Senior Researcher, Pennsylvania State University (office in Maryland); lso3@psu.edu

Nessa Richman, Consultant, marketing and food systems (Maryland), nessa.richman@gmail.com

Jack Gurley, Farmer advisory -- operator of Calvert's Gift Farm and President of Future Harvest—A Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture; giftcal@aol.com

Dr. Gerald Brust, IPM Vegetable Specialist with the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension; jbrust@umd.edu

Report Author: James Hanson

September, 2010

To obtain a copy of this report, please visit <http://mdagnrpolicy.arec.umd.edu/> and select "Local Foods."



COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES
Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics
2200 Symons Hall
College Park, Maryland 20742-5535
Telephone: 301.405.1293; Fax: 301.314.9091



Funding for this project was provided by the Northeast Center for Risk Management Education and USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (Award Number 2007-49200-03888)