

Defining Success
in the
Farm-to-School Arena

Prepared for the
Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project



by

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Farm-to-school programming is on the national agenda. In March of last year the House of Representatives passed a bill authorizing federal grants to help schools cover the initial costs of bringing locally-grown foods into school meals. School districts nationwide and right here in North Carolina are reporting success with this type of farm-to-school programming. But most of us don't know what success means in this context. Does it mean a school district buys all of their food from local farmers or producers? Not likely. So how much can a school district reasonably substitute locally-grown foods for foods grown in other regions? How do they deal with challenging issues such as coordinating purchase and delivery of fresh fruits and vegetables to individual schools? And how are the students, teachers and other members of the community experiencing success from farm-to-school programming?

To answer these questions, the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) looked to regional farm-to-school success stories, the districts in Western North Carolina where locally-grown foods are being incorporated into school lunches and connections are being made in the classroom between food students eat and how it is grown. Child Nutrition Directors (CND) from the Asheville City Schools and the Madison, Mitchell, Yancey and Rutherford County School Districts were interviewed. They shared insights about working with local farmers and offered advice for overcoming obstacles. In addition, surveys were mailed to Child Nutrition Directors in nineteen other public school districts in Western North Carolina to find out what they think it would take to succeed with farm-to-school programming.

SUCCESS = SMALL STEPS

When it comes to using locally-grown foods in school meals, success is defined by small steps. The best approach, according to Yancey County Schools Nutrition Director Beth Palien, is to start small. "Pick one farmer and one product," she advises. The Yancey County farm-to-school program began several years ago when a local tobacco farmer transitioned to hydroponic lettuce production. The school purchased lettuce from that farmer and now purchases lettuce year-round and tomatoes, in season. In an average week, two to five cases of fresh produce are delivered to the nine schools in the district.

*"Start small.
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*---Beth Palien,
Yancey County
CND*

For Mitchell County Schools, the one product was apples. According to Mitchell County CND Heather Calhoun, they began purchasing locally just this year. Beginning with a harvest celebration event in the fall launching their farm-to-school program, a total of 18 cases of apples were delivered to the eight schools in that district over the next few months. They are looking to expand by adding locally-grown potatoes or lettuce.

Rutherford County Schools, a much larger system with 20 schools and more than 10,000 students, also began buying local apples this year. The apples they purchased were grown and processed by a local farmer, arriving at the district's central warehouse in 3 pound bags sliced – more than 3000 bags of them over a four month period. Despite the

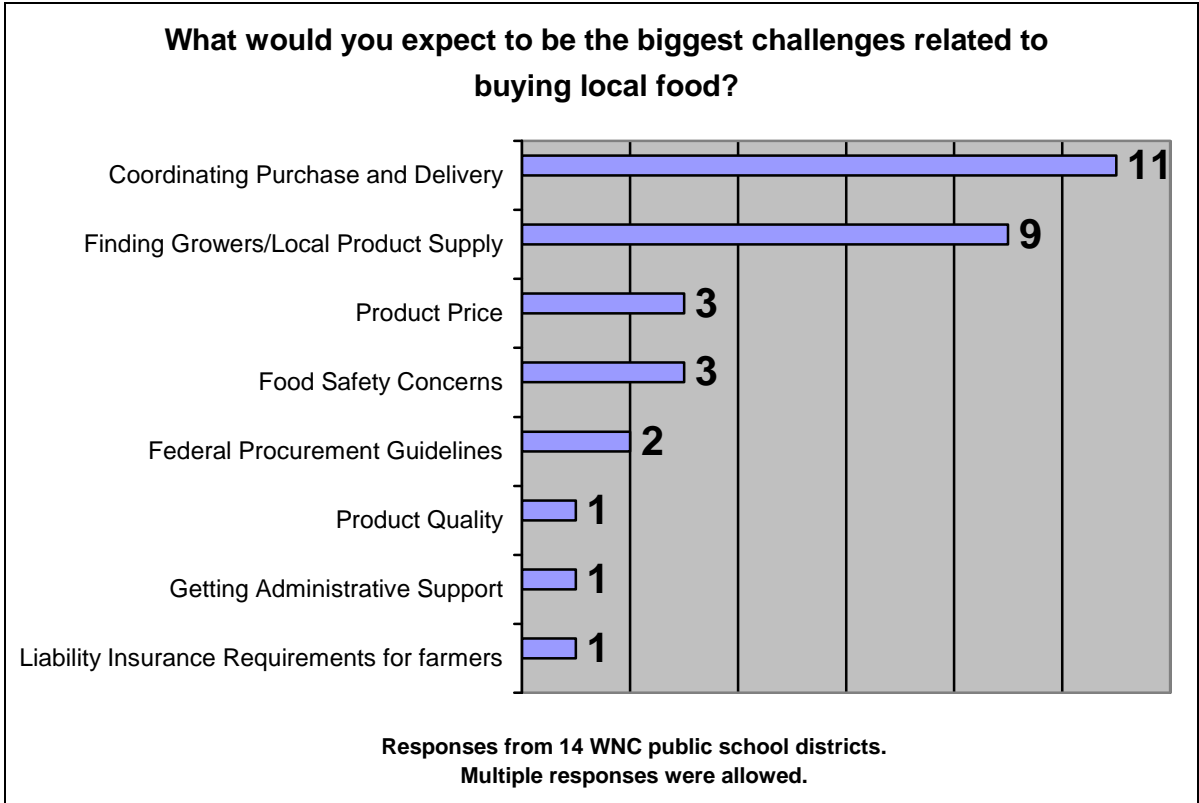
large quantity, Rutherford County CND Lori Moore explains that incorporating the local apples has been easy and well worth the one extra phone call it takes to order them.

Brenda Spence, CND for Madison County Schools, has worked with local growers on and off since 2000, buying such things as cantaloupe, watermelon, peppers, squash, collards, potatoes, lettuce and tomatoes. It all started when Brenda decided to substitute tomatoes grown by a farmer in Madison County for the ones delivered by the district's distributor. It was about taste and freshness, as anyone who has ever tasted a farm fresh tomato can understand.

The Asheville City Schools have been successfully incorporating locally-grown produce in school meals for about a year and a half. Child Nutrition Director Cindy Lawler explained that bibb lettuce and potatoes were delivered every other week to each of nine schools in the system initially. This year they have added a few other items such as cabbage, peppers, squash and tomatoes. Like the other CNDs interviewed, Cindy hopes to see steady growth in local produce purchasing, with growth occurring just as the programs started – in small steps.

SUCCESS = CREATIVITY AND FLEXIBILITY

School foodservice is a tight business. With federally-imposed guidelines for per meal cost and nutritional value, it sounds like the kind of environment where there is no room for creativity or flexibility. But creativity and flexibility abound in the experiences of the farm-to-school programs examined here. Their stories illustrate options for addressing some of the concerns voiced by districts that are not buying from local farmers (see chart).



The logistics of getting locally-grown food to individual schools is in fact a major obstacle that districts have overcome in different ways. In Yancey County, Beth Palien works with a farmer who is located along the route of the district’s regular food service delivery driver. Incorporating local food in that situation simply means adding one extra stop to the regular driver’s route.

Does Locally-grown Food Cost More?

Interestingly, higher prices associated with locally-grown produce tend to be related to delivery costs rather than the actual cost of produce. In fact, local produce is often priced lower than produce offered by a district's regular foodservice distributor. Nutrition Directors explained that the prevailing market price is generally what is paid to local farmers.

Madison County and Asheville City Schools pay extra to have the food delivered directly to each school. While this drives up the cost, they both explain that they are able to do this because of strong School Board and County Commissioner support. (*see sidebar about cost issues.*)

In Mitchell County, delivery occurs less often and is coordinated with other regularly scheduled deliveries to each school. This arrangement is possible because they have chosen products that don't have to be refrigerated right away, like apples and potatoes. These choices also offer a solution to the district's second major logistical challenge, the lack of refrigerated storage.

For a large district like Rutherford County Schools, existing infrastructure including a centralized warehouse and district-owned delivery trucks make delivery less problematic. The challenge for them becomes being able to fill large quantity orders. In fact, since menus must be the same across all schools in a system, quantity can be a problem for a district of any size. "Sometimes you get too much of something and other times what you need is not available," says Brenda Spence. "You have to be creative and work with what you've got. When the menu says 'veggies and dip,' for instance, you could use carrots or broccoli or squash or any number of things." And since most purchasing is still occurring through traditional foodservice providers, they can easily be used as a backup source.

SUCCESS = EDUCATIONAL LINKAGES

According to Emily Jackson, Growing Minds/Farm-to-School Director for the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, success is about pulling the cafeteria into the educational realm. In other words, it's about using the farm or garden setting as a backdrop for learning basic science, math, reading and writing skills. Kids are more motivated to learn when learning is tied to something interesting or relevant to their lives, and what's more relevant than what they eat? In North Carolina, farm-to-school programming also provides a way for kids to reconnect to the state's agricultural heritage, which is particularly relevant to children from farming families.

At its best, farm-to-school programming includes local food in salad bars and lunch menus as well as other educational components such as school gardens, farm field trips, healthy cooking classes and tastings of different kinds of apples, tomatoes and other foods. This type of success is happening in the Asheville City Schools where parents have embraced the concept of farm-to-school. At Isaac Dickson Elementary School, for example, parent volunteers have led cooking classes for students and local chefs have done school-wide healthy cooking demonstrations. Students are responding by trying – and enjoying – new foods like pumpkin soup and 'mac-n-cheese with trees' (broccoli).

In terms of nutrition education, exposure to farm fresh food helps kids learn how to make healthy food choices and appreciate the taste of fresh fruits and vegetables. This positions students to avoid food-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes and hypertension. Cindy Lawler notes that students are learning a lot about different types of fruits and vegetables. Some Asheville City Schools middle schoolers, for example, had never heard of red plums before they were served them in school lunches. And, Cindy explained, some elementary students who visited a farm where okra was growing were amazed that it didn't grow in little pieces with a brown, crispy crust.

SUCCESS = BUY-IN AT MULTIPLE LEVELS

According to ASAP's Emily Jackson, farm-to-school efforts cannot succeed without support from Child Nutrition Directors. Child Nutrition Directors say that administration and parental support is essential. And when kitchen managers and staff are on board, adds Cindy Lawler, problems like different food preparation needs or varied delivery schedules are minimized. Beth Palien explains that incorporating locally-grown food has actually been good for morale among kitchen staff because they appreciate that the district is trying to support local farmers. In fact, supporting local farmers was the top reason given by CNDs interviewed here for backing the farm-to-school concept.

Students cannot be left out of the buy-in equation. After all, they are the ones eating the food, locally-grown or not. For Lori Moore, the fact that students are eating the local apples so well is what makes the effort a success. Many children who don't typically eat whole apples are devouring the sliced apples, she says. It makes her and the kitchen staff happy to see less food going in the trash when lunch trays are returned.

SUCCESS = SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES

Interest is high among WNC Nutrition Directors who completed a written survey about farm-to-school programming. A few of the districts are already using components of farm-to-school programming, such as school gardens, farm field trips and cooking classes. Nearly two thirds expressed interest in initiating those types of activities. And more than half of WNC districts are currently buying from NC farmers through two statewide farm-to-school initiatives (*see sidebar*).

Statewide Farm-to-School Initiatives

In 1994, the Department of Defense began offering its produce buying services to institutions other than military bases. The *Department of Defense Farm to School Program* (also called *DoD Fresh*) was a result of that initiative and schools were given the option of using commodity entitlement funds to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables grown within their state.

In North Carolina, there is also a state-sponsored farm-to-school program (*NC Farm to School*) which facilitates delivery of produce grown by North Carolina farmers to North Carolina public schools.

Most significantly, more than 70% of those responding to the survey scored their interest in buying from local farmers as 7 or higher on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being ‘not at all interested’ and 10 being ‘very interested.’ If each of those districts began buying from local farmers at a reasonable level – *one product from one farmer* – the impact to Western North Carolina farmers and schools would be significant, with slow, steady growth expected over time.