

Farm to School Across the Nation

HOW CAN FARM TO SCHOOL WORK IN DIFFERENT CLIMATES?

There is a common perception that farm to school programs are more difficult to organize in areas with colder climates. While seasonality may appear to be a barrier, folks in the Midwest and Northeast have found some very creative ways to develop farm to school programs that reflect the flavors and features of their regions. One successful strategy has been to emphasize farm purchases in the fall and spring, when a variety of crops are more abundant. Fall is a wonderful time for apples, which are produced in many regions of the country and are generally popular with children. Apples that are small in size and hard to sell through normal channels, are a big hit with students. →

Another strategy is to focus on special events or special meals, offered during different seasons and prepared using locally grown products. This has the advantage of highlighting what's in season during the school year. For example, some schools in Wisconsin offer three special meals every year—one each in the fall, winter and spring. Educational sessions also lead up to these celebratory events, and parents are invited to eat dinner with their children and experience the seasonal menus.

New York has used this strategy by establishing "NY Harvest for NY Kids", an annual week-long event that takes place in October and is backed by the state legislature. During this week, field trips to farmers' markets or nearby farms, give students the opportunity to churn butter, make applesauce, milk cows, and participate in other farm-related experiences. Last year, beef from a local farm was used to make hamburgers! The exposure to the bounty of New York farms led to the creation of a Farm to School Committee within the New York School Food Service Association, which is now looking for new ways to incorporate New York foods into New York schools.

Another method of highlighting the seasons is to pick a fruit or vegetable of the month, and have that product featured once a week or more in the lunch program. Some of the winter crops that might be highlighted include potatoes, sweet potatoes, beans, eggs, honey, kale, winter squash and apple cider, and products that have been canned, dried, frozen or stored. Here's another creative strategy from Wisconsin: →

The Wisconsin Homegrown Lunch Program is considering offering free fruits and vegetables to children during lunch or as a snack. The produce would be purchased locally whenever possible, and supplemented with non-local food as dictated by the season.





One of the best ways to use the seasonal produce is to prepare for those cold, snowy months by processing the abundant harvest of summer and fall to last all year. This can be done by either school food service staff or the farmers, but it is generally the farmers who take on this task. Most schools are not equipped to do food processing - many of them lack the tools, storage space, and labor necessary to process fresh fruits and vegetables. One great example of this strategy comes from North Florida - where it gets chilly in the winter! ↓

Salad bars are a popular item in school cafeterias, particularly with farm-fresh produce. Salad bars abound in warmer climates, but even in areas such as New Mexico, it is difficult to find farm produce year-round for a complete salad bar. Because of this reality, most salad bars incorporate non-farm produce during the colder months. New Mexico is a good example of this, and has experimented with several kinds of salad bars. ↓

The New North Florida Cooperative began selling collard greens to the local schools, but found that their product was suffering from the heat during the summer months, and not lasting through the school season in the winter months. So they decided to do what was necessary to deliver fresh, perky collards in the summer, and bags of chopped, frozen collards in the winter. By purchasing basic processing equipment, they were able to wash, chop and bag collards that were ready to cook, or ready for the freezer. The schools appreciated the product in its processed form, which saved them labor.

The Santa Fe Unified School District has implemented farm to school in three different formats. One elementary school exclusively offers a daily salad bar that includes meat and vegetarian entrée options on alternate days. Another elementary school offers a side salad of mixed greens, sunflower sprouts, and other seasonal items with the hot lunch. The high school offers students the choice of salad bar or hot lunch daily.

Although colder climates do not have the benefit of a long growing season, the above examples illustrate that it is possible to create a thriving farm to school program. Some of the most successful programs are those that integrate agriculture education with what is eaten in the lunchroom. Incorporating agriculture into the curriculum, involving students in school gardens, touring a local farm or visiting a farmers' market - all of these experiences help children to understand the connection between what they eat and their own health and nutrition. This is a strategy that can be pursued by everyone.

