USDA Farm to School Update: History, Challenges and Opportunities across the Country

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USDA Farm to School Team
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Agenda

• History of Farm to School at USDA
• USDA Farm to School Team Site Visits
  – Common Challenges and Opportunities
• Grant Opportunities
• Staying Connected
• Questions
What is Farm to School?

• Serve regionally and locally produced foods in school meals

• Connect students to the food they eat through nutrition and agriculture education
  – School gardens
  – Ag in the Classroom, Taste-tests, etc.
  – Farm Field Trips

• Efforts vary across communities

• Growing demand from around the country
Why Farm to School?

• Connecting kids to agriculture
• Economic opportunities for farmers and rural communities
• Providing fresh, healthy foods to school children
“The benefits are vast—for kids, for schools, for producers, and local economies and communities.”

Kathleen Merrigan
Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture
History of Farm to School at USDA
Recent History

• 1997: USDA began a comprehensive effort to connect small farms to the school meal programs
• Early on several publications were issued
Recent History (cont.)

• 2008: Farm Bill gave more flexibility in procurement
  – Geographic Preference Option
• 2009: USDA Farm to School Team established
• 2010: Child Nutrition Reauthorization
  – Farm to School Grants
Geographic Preference Option

• 2008 Farm Bill amended NSLA to allow institutions receiving CNP funds to apply a geographic preference for unprocessed locally grown or raised agricultural products

• Unprocessed = agricultural products that retain their inherent character
  – See final rule for definition
Geographic Preference Option (cont.)

• Final Rule published April 22, 2011

• Implementation Guidance:
  – Policy Memo SP 18-2011 (issued 2/1/11), Procurement Geographic Preference Q&As
  – Procurement FAQs on USDA’s Farm to School website
    http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/F2S/
USDA Farm to School Team

- **Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food** initiative
  
  [www.usda.gov/knowyourfarmer](http://www.usda.gov/knowyourfarmer)

- Comprised of FNS & AMS employees

- Regional & Other HQ Representation
Farm to School Team Goals

• Provide access to resources and information on beginning and maintaining Farm to School activities.

• Provide technical assistance to help schools and farmers in the development, progression, and/or sustainability of Farm to School activities.

• Identify obstacles faced by schools and farmers in implementing and/or sustaining Farm to School activities.
Farm to School Site Visits

• Late 2009/Early 2010 - received 300 requests to be considered
• Visited 15 sites in 9 different areas
• Diverse demographics
• Various stages of implementation
Farm to School Visits (cont.)

• Regional Representation
• Rural, Urban, Suburban, Tribal Schools
• Large and Small School Districts
• Self-op, Vended and Management Company
• Various Distribution Models
• Different Stages of Farm to School Implementation
• New or Novel Ideas for incorporating Farm to School activities
15 School Districts

- Harrisonburg City Public Schools, Harrisonburg, VA
- Boston Public Schools, Boston, MA
- Jamestown Public Schools, Jamestown, RI
- Burlington School District, Burlington, VT
- Jefferson County Public Schools, Louisville, KY
- Montgomery County Public Schools, Mount Sterling, KY
- Chilton Public Schools, Chilton, WI
- Hilbert School District, Hilbert, WI
- Independence Community School District, Independence, IA
- Union Public Schools, Tulsa, OK
- Morrison Public Schools, Morrison, OK
- Ventura Unified School District, Ventura, CA
- Riverside Unified School District, Riverside, CA
- Bethel School District, Eugene, OR
- Eugene School District, Eugene, OR
Areas of Interest

• School’s Food Service Infrastructure
• Farm to School Implementation and Promotion
• Procurement Process
• Farm to School Education
• Food Safety
• Impact and Evaluation
• Local, State and Federal Policy
• Farmers’ Perspective
Common Challenges and Opportunities
Overall Lessons Learned

• Efforts vary across communities
• Take advantage of local resources
  – Don’t need to recreate the wheel
• Keys to success:
  – Communication & coordination
  – Community partnerships
  – Networking opportunities, i.e. national and regional conferences, stakeholder meeting, buyer/grower meeting, etc.
Food Service Infrastructure

Examples of Challenges
• Lack of staff
• Lack of culinary skills
• Lack of storage and equipment

Examples of Opportunities
• Assess which products should be purchased based on staff & storage
• Match labor-intensive local food items w/ easy-to-prepare center of the plate items
• Look to the entire district for available storage; not just individual schools
Implementation & Promotion

Examples of Challenges

• Unfamiliar with where to begin
• Unsure of how to connect with local farmers

Examples of Opportunities

• Go slow and start small
• Start with the most receptive schools
• Contact your local agriculture extension office
• Visit farmers’ markets
Procurement

Examples of Challenges

• Understanding of general procurement regulations and implementing the geographic preference option
• Local supply may be inconsistent

Examples of Opportunities

• Work with your State agency for procurement assistance
• Consult the USDA’s Farm to School website
• Create menus with seasonality in mind
• Be flexible and have a plan B if the local farmer is unable to supply
Education

Examples of Challenges
• Lack of easy to implement curriculum
• Disconnect between education efforts and school food service

Examples of Opportunities
• Connect with FFA or 4H programs
• Consult the USDA Farm to School website for materials
• Reinforce classroom lessons in the cafeteria
Food Safety

Examples of Challenges

• Directors feel ill-equipped to certify the safety of local farms and their products
• Expense of GAP certification

Examples of Opportunities

• Contact your local agriculture extension office
  – Many have self-assessment/self-audit instruments
• National GAP Network for Education and Training
• State Department of Agriculture for GAP training
Impact and Evaluation

Examples of Challenges
• Unaware of evaluation resources
• Lack of time and funding to conduct evaluations

Examples of Opportunities
• USDA Farm to School and National Agriculture Library websites for examples of evaluation tools
• Look to nonprofit organizations (e.g., AmeriCorps VISTA) for assistance
Local, State & Federal Policy

Examples of Challenges
• Defining “local”
• Lack of Farm to School support in local wellness policies

Examples of Opportunities
• Consider a tiered approach to defining local
• USDA’s Team Nutrition website gives examples of local wellness policies
• Involve nonprofit organizations and food policy councils
Farmers’ Perspective

Examples of Challenges

• Seasonality
• Capacity to meet district needs
• Unsure of how to connect with school districts

Examples of Opportunities

• Check with school district or local processors
• Install hoophouses to extend season
• Contact the school food service director
• Contact State Dept’s. of Ag and Ed, cooperative extension offices, nonprofit organizations
Staying Connected
Farm to School Website

http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/F2S

• Procurement Regs & Policies
• Available Federal Grants
• USDA Resources
• Food Safety Resources
• FAQs
• Farm to School Team Updates
• Sights, Sounds and Stories (stories, pictures, and webinars)
Farm to School Grants

Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010

- Funding for competitive grants
  - Administered thru USDA
  - Training, supporting operations, planning, purchasing equipment, developing school gardens, developing partnerships and implementing Farm to School activities
  - Individual grants are not to exceed $100,000; total funding $5M
  - Grant funding available October 2012 (i.e., FY 2013)
Staying Connected

USDA Farm to School Website
http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/F2S

Farm to School Listserv
Go to “Email Updates” on USDA website

National Contact
farmtoschool@fns.usda.gov
Supporting farm-to-school programs will increase the amount of produce available to cafeterias and help to support local farmers by establishing regular, institutional buyers. Many schools are using farm-to-school programs as an important component of nutrition education.

Tom Vilsack, Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture