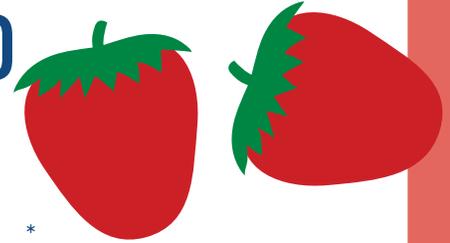




INTEGRATING LOCAL FOODS INTO CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS



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FRUITS AND VEGETABLES, milk and cheese, whole grain breads and pastas, beans, meats, seafood, and poultry; the opportunities for serving local foods in child nutrition programs are abundant. Not only can local foods span the plate, operators can serve local foods in all types of programs – summer meal programs (Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO)), afterschool and early childhood settings (Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)), snack programs (Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP)), and National School Lunch (NSLP) and School Breakfast Programs (SBP). From childcare to afterschool settings, through the school-year and during summer months, the following steps will help program operators find, buy, and incorporate local foods into any child nutrition program.

Defining Local

It is up to you to define what local means for your program, and there are many options! Local for one program operator might mean within the county, while local for another might include the entire state and even adjacent states. Definitions of local can also vary depending on the season, type of product, and may also change by program or event.

Getting Started

When planning how to integrate local items into meals, start by reviewing your menus to see what local foods you are already serving. Talking with suppliers and checking packaging and invoices for city/state of origin may reveal that local foods are already being served. The next step is determining how to feature additional local products. Here are several ideas for incorporating local items:

Harvest of the month program: Pick one seasonal item to highlight each month your program is in operation. Feature special menu items, taste tests, or educational activities to showcase local products.

Ingredient substitution: Look for ways to trade out items in recipes to highlight local foods when they are available in your area.

Seasonal cycle menus: Plan what to serve based on the season as an excellent way to keep menus fresh and to find local foods at an affordable price.

New recipe development: Create recipes based on what is in season for a fun way to integrate new foods. For recipe ideas and cookbooks, check out the What’s Cooking? **USDA Mixing Bowl website**.

Salad Bar: Kids love to help themselves! Feature local foods on salad bars in order to highlight local produce and allow kids to choose new foods on their own.

Themed menus for special events: Celebrate the season! Include local items to compliment special events, such as summer kick-offs, back to school BBQs, holiday harvest meals, or spring flings.

Gardens: Harvest foods from school, day care, or community gardens and feature them in the meals you serve or coordinate garden crops with what you are serving to help introduce children to new foods and understand where their food comes from. Check out the garden-based nutrition education curricula from **Team Nutrition**.

Learn More

A list of helpful menu planning and recipe resources can be found on USDA’s Office of Community Food Systems website:

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool/farm-school-resources>



Developing a Plan

Once you have determined how you want to offer and feature local foods, it is time to plan how to purchase them. You can plan for buying local items the same way you would any other foods, considering your budget and forecasting what you will need. Think through these important considerations as you develop your plan:

- 1) Consider capacity:** Review your budget, equipment, and preparation needs, in addition to storage and distribution requirements before reaching out to farmers, producers, and distributors.
- 2) Think about scope:** Consider which child nutrition programs you operate, and how the timeframe for those programs aligns with seasonal availability in your area.
- 3) Identifying sources:** You can seek local items from a variety of food suppliers including distributors, food service management companies, processors, producers, food hubs, gardens, and USDA Foods. No matter if you are buying direct from a farmer or through a distributor, proper procurement methods must be followed. Deciding which procurement method is right for you will depend on a variety of factors (see this [Decision Tree](#) and the [Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Programs](#) guide for more information).

Tips from the Field

Start small: Identifying one or two items that will effortlessly fit into your menus each year will put you on a road to success, and encourage early buy-in that will help propel your program moving forward.

Market and promote your efforts: From signs on the serving line to features on the school menu, parent newsletters, district websites, and fun items like farmer trading cards, getting the word out on what is local on the menu is a key step to building and sustaining the program.

Track your purchases: Keeping tabs on the total dollars spent and pounds purchased is a good indicator of progress, shows economic impact, and is a great tool to illustrate success to your staff and the community at large.

Top Menu Planning Challenges - SOLVED

1) Hard to find products that are available year round/in the volume I need

An item does not have to be fresh to count as local. Freezing, dehydrating, or processing local foods for use later in the year is a great way to offer local items. Value-added items, such as salsa or applesauce, made from local produce is another way to offer items year round and support local businesses.

Consider food components that may be available year round such as grains, meats, and dairy.

Explore what local products have been on neighboring school districts' menus, at the grocery store or farmers market, or contact your state department of agriculture to learn more about the products available in your state.

Small volumes of local food can still make a large impact on your program, and can be integrated in many creative ways for certain portions of your programming like FFVP,

or for taste tests and special events.

2) Local items are not available from primary vendors

Request that vendors identify local items on invoices or provide lists of products they know are being produced in the state; list source of origin labeling as a vendor requirement in solicitations for goods and services.

Use geographic preference when procuring unprocessed products to encourage distributors to carry more local items.

3) Local foods cost more

If procured competitively and at the right time of the growing season, local foods are often comparable in price to out-of-state counterparts.

Forecasting needs in advance for all child nutrition programs you offer will help leverage your buying power, and entice vendors to offer competitive pricing.



For more information, and to sign up for the bi-weekly e-letter from the Food and Nutrition Service's Office of Community Food Systems, please visit www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool. Questions? Email us at farmtoschool@fns.usda.gov.

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