

WSDA Farm-to-School Program

A 2012 Advocate Policy Brief



Connecting Farmers, Schools & Health

Washington State's Farm-to-School Program is a component of the Local Farms-Healthy Kids Act that was passed in 2008 by a nearly unanimous vote. This legislative act generated provisions around farm to school efforts and included the creation of a farm to school program to support the purchase of Washington grown produce for schools. The Program aims to support expanding economic opportunities for farmers while providing nutritious and local foods to students. Administered by WSDA, in coordination with the WSDA Small Farms & Direct Marketing Program, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, WSU Small Farms Team and other partners around the state, the Program provides information, inspiration, assistance, and policy solutions for those working to supply healthy Washington-grown food and related education to youth in our State.

Since the passage of the National School Lunch Act in 1946, key legislation has played an essential role in providing our Nation's children with access to healthier meals. Farm-to-School is one such initiative that is targeted at providing children with nutritious diet; at the same time it improves the local economy by encouraging farmers to sell their fresh produce to schools. More than 30 million children nationwide eat school food five days a week, 180 days a year. When schools can improve the health of children, develop new marketing opportunities for farmers, and support the local economy, everyone benefits.

2011 WSDA Farm-to-School Survey Results

In its ongoing efforts to assess the interest, capacity and needs of the area's agricultural providers and school systems, and provide advice, informational resources and technical assistance to its partners, the WSDA Farm-to-School team fielded an online survey in April 2011. The survey, conducted among Washington State School Food Service Directors, sought to identify trends in local Farm-to-School programs, identify capacity gaps and technical needs, and learn about program successes and challenges. The survey data will be used to:

- ✓ Identify Core Areas of Program Focus
- ✓ Develop New Offerings & Resources
- ✓ Spotlight Regional Success Stories as Educational Tools

Highlights of findings from the study follow below.

Interest in Buying Local is High

Locally produced crops are currently very popular in Washington State schools. The survey responses show that 4 of the 10 most commonly purchased fruits and vegetables, including apples, pears, potatoes and grapes are also part of the top 10 commodity crops grown in Washington State, offering significant economic opportunities for state agriculture and provides logistical benefits. Other findings include:

- ✓ Approximately two-thirds of school districts are willing to purchase locally grown produce, and in some instances the data shows willingness to purchase local foods is greater than current purchasing habits.



Top Whole Fruits and Veggies*

Apples, Oranges, Broccoli,
Carrots, Banana,
Cucumbers, Potatoes,
Lettuce, Pears, Grapes

**Purchased in 2009-2010
school year*

- ✓ All of the respondents that have purchased locally grown produce directly from farmers and producers said they would do it again.
- ✓ Respondent top perceived benefits of local purchasing, including supporting the local economy, enhanced community relations, and ability to offer fresher and healthier produce for school meals.



Strengthen Connections

Washington State has rich soils, diverse climates and large-scale irrigation systems that make our state one of the most productive growing regions in the nation, enabling farmers to produce some 300 crops each year.

Indeed, Washington has been nicknamed “the fruit basket” of America. In fact, a promising finding was that compared to other state’s farm to school programs, Washington State school districts did not identify “inadequate supply in local area” as a barrier. The following recommendations support the necessary strengthening of connections between our states valuable agricultural resources and the farm to school program.

- ✓ Development of on-line small farm directories, “matchmaking” tools and other networks to link schools and farm suppliers more succinctly.
 - ✓ Focus resources and efforts on the 47 school districts that are not currently purchasing food directly from Washington farmers.
 - ✓ Continue efforts around the “Befriend your farmer” programs to support interpersonal connections and foster community.



Schools Need Further Support

The top five perceived barriers to serving Washington grown food in school districts included consistent availability of product (n=45), seasonality constraints (n=35), budget constraints (n=32), finding growers in my region (n=30) and distribution (n=28). Based on the survey further development of programs and training efforts to address key barriers will help support overall success of farm to school efforts in Washington State school districts.

- ✓ Training around availability of regional farm products identified as a need
- ✓ Assistance with seasonal recipes and menu planning would help with seasonality concerns
- ✓ Farm to school advocates need to assist in securing supplemental funding opportunities
- ✓ Rapidly changing procurement legislation has resulted in some confusion; procurement support tools could help streamline purchasing. Consideration around incentivized local purchasing is recommended.

Policy Leverage

All school districts are required to have a child wellness policy. Amendment of current school wellness policies to include farm to school initiatives will help dovetail efforts and more efficiently support both programs that can support the improved health of our youth.

The WSDA will need focused advocate support to generate continued partnership and collaboration statewide between educational organizations and schools, producers, community members, and policy makers. A thriving Farm-to-School program can have far reaching beneficial effects across the entire state, supporting local economy, health and community.

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March 2012

