



# HOW COOPERATIVE EXTENSION PROFESSIONALS CAN SUPPORT FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAMS

\* \* \* \* \*

**ACROSS THE COUNTRY**, an increasing number of schools and districts have begun to source more foods locally and to provide complementary educational activities to students that emphasize food, farming, and nutrition. If you are a Cooperative Extension professional, this means there are more opportunities than ever to help connect local and regional farm products to school meal programs, support school gardens, and teach students about the importance of eating healthy and how food is produced.

Farm to school programs exist in every state across the country and chances are these programs are flourishing in your region. As an Extension professional, there are many different ways you can get involved:

## Help Schools Purchase Local or Regional Products for School Meal Programs

There are many different types of foods that can be sourced locally for school meal programs including fruits, vegetables, meat/poultry, eggs, baked goods, milk, herbs, and plant-based protein items such as beans, seeds, and nuts. Local foods can be used in all sorts of school meal programs such as breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks, and summer. Local foods can also be purchased by schools from a variety of different sources including directly from a farmer or rancher, or through an intermediary source such as a food distributor or buying

cooperative. Sharing information with farmers, ranchers, and fisherman about schools as a market for their products is a great way for Extension professionals to support local and regional procurement.

## Assist Schools with Their School Gardens

School gardens provide an excellent opportunity for cross-programmatic collaborations among several Extension professionals working on different program areas and have been shown to play an important role in improving students' knowledge of nutrition and preferences for some types of fruits and vegetables. Extension professionals can help with the planting, cultivation, and harvesting of local foods, or complete lesson plans/curriculum involving school gardens; they can also help organize Master Gardener volunteers that may be excited about supporting school gardens.

## Participate in Experiential Education Programs or Activities

Delivering presentations in the classroom or cafeteria, or participating in school fieldtrips to nearby farms, is a great way for Extension professionals to support agricultural, food and nutrition-related education. Other educational activities may include conducting local food cooking demonstrations or taste tests, visiting a farmers market, providing in-school farmer presentations, or hosting other types of farm to school related

“ Farm to school is a great fit for Extension. In northeast Iowa, the school food service directors asked Extension for help in meeting the new school meal requirements. We saw it as an opportunity to create a menu that would be very friendly to Iowa-grown food. ”

- Teresa Wiemerslage,  
Iowa State University Extension and Outreach



community events. Extension professionals should participate in the farm to school activities that fit best with their programming focus, interests, and skills.

### Collaborate on a USDA Farm to School Grant Project

Each year starting in 2013, the **USDA Farm to School Grant Program** funds diverse farm to school projects. Applicants can include schools and school districts, Indian tribal organizations, agricultural producers or groups of agricultural producers, non-profit entities, and state and local agencies. Extension professionals have been involved with grant projects in a variety of ways. For example in Cleveland, Ohio State University Extension partnered with Cleveland Municipal Schools to facilitate several public meetings that were important to developing a district level farm to school plan. In Maine, Cumberland County Cooperative Extension partnered with Portland Public Schools to offer nutrition education classes and local food taste tests. In Oklahoma, Oklahoma State University Extension partnered with the Chickasaw Nation Nutrition Services Department to introduce them to producers that could help supply local and regionally grown foods for school meals. And in Minnesota, the University of Minnesota Extension Service supported a grant project by providing evaluation assistance to measure and document outcomes and impacts. USDA encourages grant applicants to collaborate with Extension on proposals and hopes that Extension professionals will share information about the grant program with potential applicants.

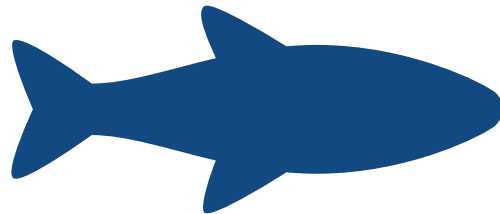
### Explore the Farm to School Census

In 2015, USDA released the second **Farm to School Census** that reports on how school districts are purchasing local and regionally produced foods for school meals. When working with different organizations or community groups, the Farm to School Census is a good resource for completing a local or regional situational analysis or needs assessment. As an

Extension professional, the Farm to School Census can tell you which school districts are currently purchasing local foods for school meals, which schools plan to start, and which schools need additional assistance in buying locally. The Farm to School Census can also tell you which school districts have school gardens or are involved with other types of farm to school activities. The Farm to School Census can also be used to help Extension professionals provide information to local and regional producers about the size and direction of the local food market and which types of products school districts are currently purchasing or would like to purchase in the future.

### Connect with Farm to School Regional Leads

The Office of Community Food Systems is housed in USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, which has seven regional offices around the country. In each regional office is a Farm to School Regional Lead who is available to provide farm to school related support to state agencies and other entities in their region. These regional leads can help you to better understand the regulations governing the procurement of local and regional foods, identify best practices, and make connections to additional farm to school resources. Regional leads are also available to Extension as guest speakers for educational programs or as a resource for completing farm to school program activities. A list of regions, along with the names and contact information for regional and national USDA Community Food Systems staff, can be found on the **USDA website**.



\* \* \* \* \*

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](http://www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool). Questions? Email us at [farmtoschool@fns.usda.gov](mailto:farmtoschool@fns.usda.gov).

