

## Distribution

**What is Local?** Local food is food that is produced and/or processed in close proximity to where it is consumed. There is no legal definition of local. While some define it in terms of a set number of miles, others look at it in terms of a county, state, region, “foodshed” or other geographical area of production.

Perhaps the most daunting aspect of implementing a Farm to School program is sourcing local foods. There are many ways to find and take delivery of local products. Your geographical location, local agricultural profile, school size, kitchen facilities and equipment, and staff time will all affect your choice of distribution method(s). Whichever method or methods are chosen, they should meet the needs of both your school foodservice and the local farmers involved in order to be sustainable over the long term.

This section describes some of the options for distribution methods to follow. Schools can choose to follow one or a combination of these methods depending on the individual need.



## A. Buying Direct from Local Farmers

The most basic distribution system for a Farm to School program is for schools to buy directly from farmers. Buying directly from a farmer or several farmers has many unique advantages and disadvantages:

### Advantages:

- Direct contact with grower
- Can request specific products be grown
- Assurance that products are local
- No middle man which may result in lower cost
- May be exempt from bidding due to small dollar amount of contract
- Least time spent between harvest and consumption assuring optimal flavor and quality

### Disadvantages:

- May need to contract with many growers to get variety of products
- Multiple farmers require multiple contracts, deliveries and paperwork
- Need to make multiple calls for orders, delivery scheduling, etc.
- May be difficult to find enough farmers to supply variety of products or to supply enough of any one product depending on size of school.

### Idaho Example: Gooding School District

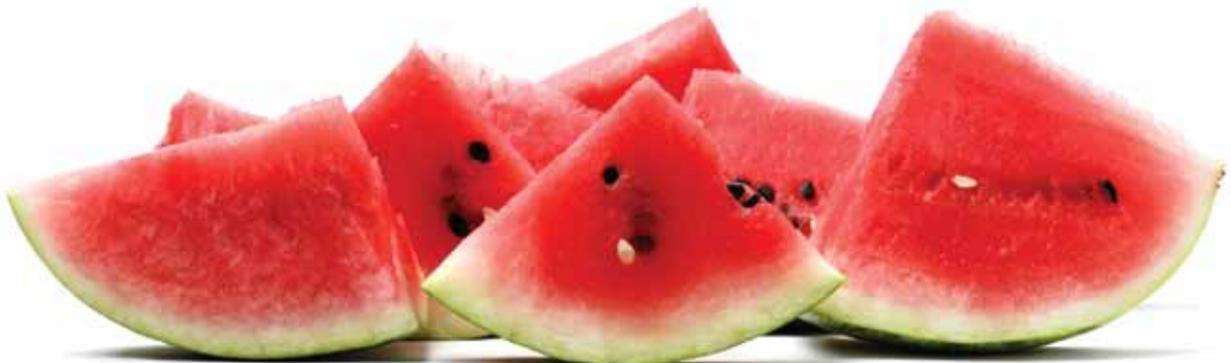
We are fortunate enough to live in a small agricultural community, and the relationship with a local farmer is very simple. Our children are friends and they play the same sports so establishing the relationship (with a farmer) was no big deal.

A few years ago, there was some discussion about watermelon. The idea was to simply plant a few in a corner of a field and see what happened. The watermelon was a success. It was sweet, juicy, looked beautiful, and smelled wonderful; it was simply delicious. So we purchased some for school and THAT was the beginning of a great relationship!

The following year, more watermelons were planted and cantaloupe was added to the mix. Once again, we purchased the produce for school. Now, each spring, our favorite farmer calls to see what we are interested in for the following year. The local produce is so successful, he has opened a small highway stand where you can find green beans, purple string beans, zucchini, yellow squash, tomatoes, cucumbers, corn, cantaloupe, red potatoes, watermelon, and pumpkins. Next year, plans are being made to purchase corn on the cob (shucked – of course.)

By purchasing local produce, costs were significantly reduced. A standing order each week has eased the ordering process, and I can always depend on watermelon in the walk-in waiting for us when we need it.

*Anji Baumann, Foodservice Director,  
Gooding School District*



## B. Buying from a Farmer Cooperative

A cooperative is a group of farmers who work together to market their products. Cooperative members work together either formally or informally to find buyers and deliver their products.

### Advantages:

- More variety and usually larger and more consistent supply of products
- Reduced number of vendors and deliveries for school foodservice
- Benefits more than one farmer

### Disadvantages:

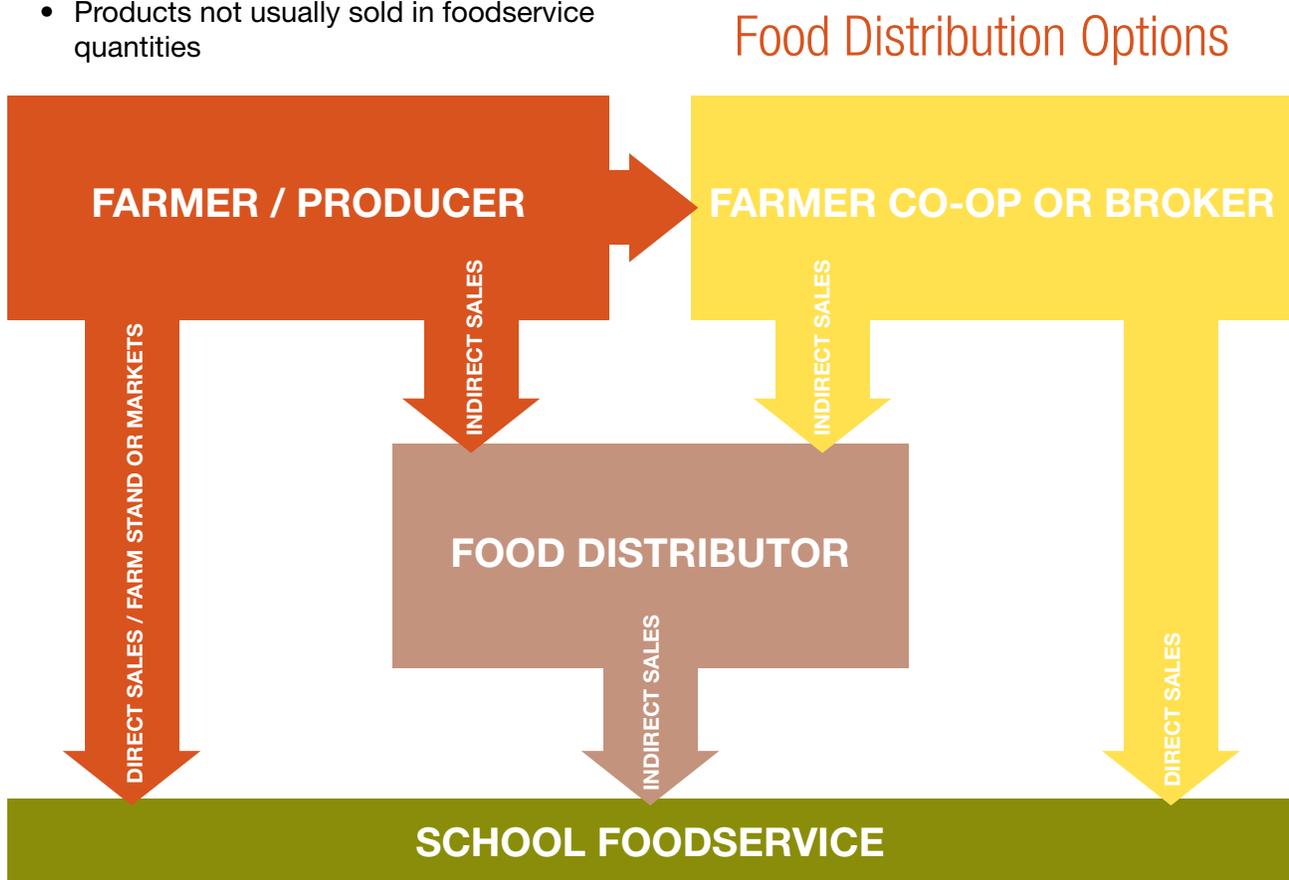
- Very few fresh product cooperatives in Idaho
- Less direct contact with individual farmers
- Limited distribution/delivery options
- Products not usually sold in foodservice quantities

### Idaho Example: Idaho's Bounty

Idaho's Bounty is a cooperative of local growers and producers of fruits, vegetables, meats, dairy, breads and many other specialty products. Currently, the co-op only delivers to the Treasure Valley and Sun Valley areas.

Here is how it works. In order to buy from Idaho's Bounty Co-op, you must first become a member. Members go online once a week and place their order. Delivery is made once a week to a common site where buyers pick up their orders. Payment is made via Paypal or with a check at pick-up.

For more information go to:  
[www.idahosbounty.org](http://www.idahosbounty.org)



### C. Purchasing at a Local Farmers' Market/Farm Stands

Farmers' Markets are growing rapidly in popularity and can be found in almost every community. In Idaho, there are over 50 Farmers' Markets from Bonners Ferry to Bear Lake. Each market has a unique variety of local products depending on geographical location and agricultural community. Schools who want to buy from Farmers' Markets generally start by attending a market to assess the availability of products and make contact with farmers. Then, foodservice personnel will usually develop a relationship with one or more vendors at the market. Vendors who agree to sell product to schools will generally contact the school prior to market day and get an advance order. Then, the farmer will bring the school order, along with their general market supply, on market day. The farmer will then deliver to the school or the school will pick up at the market, depending on the agreed upon distribution method. On-farm stands may also provide options for schools seeking local fresh fruits and vegetables. This option requires school personnel to drive to the stand, purchase products, and transport, load and unload product.

#### Advantages

- Direct contact with farmers
- Ability to assess product quality and quantity in advance
- Farmer able to make two deliveries at one time saving time and money
- Prices competitive due to competition at the market
- No middle man so prices are often reasonable

#### Disadvantages:

- Farmers' markets are seasonal and may not coincide with school year
- Often time markets are in the evening or weekends presenting staffing issues for pick-up or taking delivery
- More time consuming – may have to shop weekly
- Supplies may be inconsistent
- May need to work with more than one vendor to gather adequate supply of products
- Farm stands require customers to come to them and most often do not offer delivery services

#### Idaho Example: Caldwell School District

Rae Karpauskas is the Foodservice Director for Caldwell School District. In 2009, she began actively sourcing local products for school lunch and Fresh Fruit and Vegetable programs. She regularly works with her foodservice distributor to order local produce during the early fall. She insists that local peaches, pears, apples and plums be delivered when they are available during the growing season. However, when what she needs is not available conventionally, she goes directly to the orchard for fresh fruits. On-farm fruit stands at Symms Fruit Ranch and Williamson Orchards, both in Caldwell, offer a great variety of local fruits – picked at the peak of flavor - at a reasonable price. She reports that students look forward to local fruit season!



## D. Purchasing Through a Traditional Distributor

Perhaps the easiest way to implement a Farm to School program is to work with your regular distributor to source and deliver local products. Most foodservice distributors in Idaho are currently working with producers and customers to facilitate the availability of local products. Fresh Idaho fruits and vegetables, as well as non-perishable products such as breads, tortillas, dairy products and meats are available through several distribution companies. Due to increased interest in local products, wholesalers are aggressively seeking local producers and working with them to help make their products available to schools and other foodservice establishments statewide.

### Advantages:

- Already have established contract and relationship with the distributor
- One order, one bill, one delivery for all products
- Distributor can help do the work of finding local products
- Wider distribution area for regionally grown products
- More consistent supply due to storage capabilities
- Can now write state/regional preference into bid to encourage sourcing of local products by distributors

### Disadvantages:

- No direct contact with farmers – but can request local connection
- Distributors not always diligent in assuring local product delivery when ordered
- Non-local substitutions common

Idaho Example: Sysco, Food Services of America, Grasmick Produce and Sheppard Produce all offer local products

Due in part to increased demand from their school customers, most major distributors are now aggressively seeking local growers and local products. Fresh fruits and vegetables are available in season from most distributors – but schools must be diligent in demanding local products when available. In addition to fresh produce, distributors may have many other locally produced items available including breads, tortillas, dairy products, trout products, beans, lentils and other non-seasonal products. Again – talk to your sales representative about what they currently carry and request additional Idaho product options.

In 2008-2009 FSA sold an additional \$125,000 of Idaho apples, stone fruit, grapes, potatoes and onions to schools and SYSCO reports selling an additional \$50,000 of Idaho products to schools.





## Does it cost more to use local food?

There is no simple answer to the question. Local food is sometimes less expensive due to reduced transportation costs. Farm to School programs naturally force buying produce during the growing season. Foods that are in season will most likely be available at prices that are competitive with conventional sources or may even be less expensive.

- Local produce is fresher and tastier than its conventional counterpart, adding more value to your meals.
- Local produce may be fresher so it lasts longer. You can use a higher percentage of the product than something that has been shipped and stored for an unknown period of time, thus reducing waste and loss from spoilage.

Farm to School programs typically increase the participation rates in school meal programs enhancing the overall financial viability of school foodservice departments. Overall, schools report a 3 percent to 16 percent increase in participation in school meals when local, fresh food is served. Increased participation can cover the additional labor costs often associated with food preparation of farm-fresh products<sup>2</sup>.