



Tips for Farmers Selling to School Nutrition Programs

School nutrition directors* across the country are becoming increasingly interested in purchasing their school food ingredients from local farms and producers. But for local purchasing to work, directors and farmers must develop relationships and trust. Below are some ideas for beginning and building such relationships.

**formerly named "food service director," but these directors do much more, such as nutrition education!*

1 BEFORE CONTACTING THE SCHOOL

Be realistic and start small.

To develop a reputation as a reliable vendor, decide upon a realistic sales volume and delivery schedule that will suit you.

Set up business appointments.

Call the school early in the morning or after 1:00PM. Ask for the name and phone extension of the school food program. Find out if they're interested in your products, and, if so, who makes purchasing decisions. For a food service management company, it may be a regional director. For a school-run program, it may be a school-level manager or district-level director.

Create a product availability and pricing sheet.

Consider the cost of farm practices (organic, hormone free), packaging, delivery, and profit in your pricing. Ensure this market will be sustainable.

2 THE CONVERSATION

Market yourself. Present what you can offer the school nutrition director and how your products will meet their needs.

Bring samples of your product. Your products are your best marketing tool. Taste testing is a great way to introduce your product to schools.

Invite the school nutrition staff to visit your farm. Show off your farm and your products. When school staff visit, they will see how well you care for your farm and the work it takes to produce the food they want.

Explain your farming practices. Communicate about your farm liability insurance and food safety plans, including harvesting and post-harvesting practices. Be aware that schools will have a food safety program based on the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) principles.

Consider crop diversity to gain a competitive edge.

Highly perishable fruits, fresh meats, or unusual products can be of great interest. Cherry tomatoes and multi-colored fresh beans, for example, only require washing; they store well, and are easy to serve. Talk to schools as early as possible to plant vegetables accordingly.

Discuss and negotiate the important details:

- Estimated volume of products the school would like
- Delivery schedule including time of day, frequency, and location
- Packing requirements: standard box, grade, loose pack, bulk, etc.
- Seasonal availability of your products
- Ordering and billing processes and best way to contact each other

Keep the discussion going.

If you show consistent communication and reliability, the director will know you value the relationship. As this relationship develops, you could suggest additional products you offer.

Stay in touch. Inform the school nutrition directors what will be harvested or processed throughout the seasons. If you can let them know what products to expect one to two weeks ahead, they can plan for them in the cafeteria. Try to get a standing order through a contract.

Have lunch at the school and sample the foods prepared.

Seeing how the program operates with the staff, students, and cafeteria space will give you great insight into which foods work the best. Consider offering to conduct a taste test of your product with students.

3 FOLLOWING THE CONVERSATION

Follow up with the school nutrition director. Confirm the meeting details, agreements, and next steps in writing.

Clarify a billing and payment procedure. School districts often have a payment cycle of 30-90 days or longer. As a farmer, however, you may be used to presenting an invoice and receiving payment upon delivery. The differences between school district and farmer operations need to be worked out before purchasing begins.



Photo courtesy USDA



Vermont FEED is a Farm to School partnership project of NOFA-VT & Shelburne Farms. Learn more @ vtfeed.org.