



Farm to School Playbook 2024

Communities Unlimited

Healthy Flavors

Northwest Tennessee Local
Food Network

Eat Real

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Developing the Farm to School network in the Mid-South and beyond



Imagine with us.

It's lunch time at school. American school children rush to the cafeteria, excited for school lunch. On the line, they see colorful, fresh, seasonal fruits and vegetables grown by a local farmer a few miles down the road from their school. The “center of the plate” protein is from a rancher in the state. The grains were grown and milled locally. These children learn that apples can come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, that cauliflower can be purple, and that cheese can be produced in their state.

The hidden, enormous potential.

Schools are the largest “restaurant chain” in America – more than Starbucks, McDonalds, and Subway combined – serving enormously important customers, the future generation! Child nutrition programs have tremendous buying power, enough to reshape the way our food system operates.

It is possible to put control back into local relationships between local farmers and Child Nutrition Directors, creating thriving local economies and helping resolve some of our country's largest health challenges. Succeeding at this means better health outcomes for future generations and healthier economies with local job potential everywhere that Farm to School takes root.



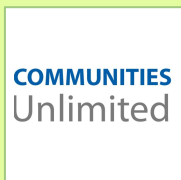


Farm to School takes a village.

Since the late 1990s, the Farm to School movement has proven it can work. However, each region and corner of the country has experienced varying levels of success and implementation. Building the movement takes time, effort, and partnerships – finding like-minded stakeholders who want to realize this vision, building relationships between busy farmers and Child Nutrition Directors, learning each other’s unique operations and finding ways to create an efficient supply chain.



We are four organizations who share a passion for farmers, underserved communities, and nutrition security. We each bring unique expertise from the farming and school communities to help build the Farm to School movement in communities with particular needs and the motivation to change.



Communities Unlimited:

A nonprofit working to build healthy communities, food systems, and generative livelihoods in seven states in the Southern U.S.



Healthy Flavors:

A social entrepreneurial enterprise with farms in Arkansas and Tennessee that promotes farmer-led, locally focused, community infused and sustainably based agriculture.



Northwest Tennessee Local Food Network:

A nonprofit dedicated to fostering a thriving and equitable local food system with a focus on Farm to School and sustainably grown, local food.



Eat Real:

A nonprofit whose mission is to nourish the future of American school children by putting real food on the table at school, at home, and in local and national policy.



The inception of this playbook.

Our four organizations were awarded a USDA Farm to School grant in 2022 to design and develop an approach to Farm to School in the Mid-South. We chose to focus on the Delta Region where Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi share the incredible Mississippi River, a gifted resource of farmland dominated by agricultural interests for more than a century.

Whereas this region is fruitful agriculturally, it is characterized by large farms and agricultural interests generally following the ag industry dynamics of consolidation: industrial scale farms focusing on commodity crops driving the prevailing food system. But there are small-scale farmers in the region, and we wanted to understand the potential of the Farm to School movement to help them solidify and grow their enterprises.

The region is also notable for some of the most endemic poverty in the nation, along with related chronic health issues. Tennessee was #4, and Arkansas #5, in childhood obesity in the 2019 Robert Wood Johnson State of Obesity report. Food deserts are not uncommon here, and the National School Lunch Program is an important source of food and nutrition for the region's residents. But what is the state of awareness and interest in Farm to School amongst school food service authorities? We wanted to better understand the possibilities for building strength and momentum in Farm to School in this challenging environment.

Over the last two years, we tested our assumptions and ideas and learned many lessons along the way. These lessons have been translated into this playbook, articulated as actionable steps anyone can take in their region and community.



Sharing, (not reinventing) the wheel: How to read this playbook.

This playbook is intended for stakeholders who want to grow the Farm to School movement in their community. Some sections are specifically intended for Child Nutrition Directors and their teams (such as School District Support) while others are more geared towards farmers or local organizations interested in bringing farmers and school districts together.

You can read the whole playbook, or you can read individual chapters that most interest you.



02 Stakeholder Mapping



In order to build a sustainable Farm to School movement, we needed to understand the landscape and the key local community stakeholders located within proximity to the Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee Delta region.



The purpose of stakeholder mapping is to find school districts in communities that could benefit most from Farm to School, which are primarily in rural and underserved areas, and learn about their operations, pain points, and successes so the program partners can tailor their support.

Our goal was to begin the conversation with driven Child Nutrition Directors from low-income, low-access communities and inspire them to increase access and consumption of local agricultural products in their school meals.



Learning & Tips

- Focus on the school districts that have some prior Farm to School experience.
- Begin the relationship-building process prior to requesting the Child Nutrition Director participate in visioning workshops (see info about visioning workshops in chapter 03).
- Gather data on the demographics of the community, such as low-income, food insecurity, health, etc.
- Begin with new-to-the-role Child Nutrition Directors who might like to engage in a new initiative.



Recommended Approach

Identify 10 school districts to engage on Farm to School. Some ways to find school districts:

- Reach out to your state agency that houses Farm to School and ask for their list of districts that participate in Farm to School
- Visit school districts' websites and social media accounts to see if they talk about Farm to School
- Look for your state's local food and ag report, which typically has a list of farms, and sometimes districts, that participate in Farm to School

Organize districts into tiers of their Farm to School engagement. Tracking this info will help you tailor your communication and build your stakeholder map.

- Tier 1: District participates in Farm to School regularly
- Tier 2: District seems to do one-off purchases, not regular Farm to School activities
- Tier 3: District doesn't seem to participate in Farm to School

Contact each Child Nutrition Director requesting an opportunity to schedule a brief Zoom or Teams meeting to discuss Farmto School. It may take multiple follow-ups to catch the Child Nutrition Director.

During the meeting, begin the discussion with "What's for Lunch?"

Share with the Child Nutrition Director that the purpose of the meeting is to learn about their child nutrition program and their participation in Farm to School. Here are some other potential discussion questions:

- Do you locally source from growers?
- Do you know any local growers?
- Do you contract with a food service and facilities services provider?
- Are you interested in sourcing locally grown products?
- Is there some flexibility in making adjustments to your school lunch menu?
- Are you interested in participating in the Farm to School program?
- Do you have a cooking kitchen?
- Do you have any infrastructure challenges that would prohibit you from preparing locally grown produce?

In the meeting, take detailed notes about the conversation to document the learnings in the database.



Considerations

01

Remember that these are listening sessions for partners. Keep an open mind regarding the items that are described on the daily school menus or their operations.

02

Do not try to fix any problems at this time. This is time to listen to the Child Nutrition Director and to create a safe space.

03

Watch out for coming across as “preachy” or a know-it-all person.

04

Do not talk to the Child Nutrition Director as if they are less intelligent than you about sourcing locally grown agricultural products.

05

Show respect for their positions as Child Nutrition Directors who are devoted professionals with the responsibilities of meeting the nutritional and educational needs of our children daily.

03 Visioning Workshops



Our “hypothesis” was that Farm to School awareness in the Mid-South was low to begin with. Visioning workshops are a great way to both “plant seeds” for something new, and to elicit feedback and “meet people where they’re at.”

The project anticipated multiple rounds of workshops with varying layers of constituencies.





Learning & Tips

- Host a visioning workshop to engage and share stories and experiences
- Use visioning workshops to both engage and assess for motivation.
- Tailor the content to the specific target audience.
- Focus on Child Nutrition Directors, especially in areas where Farm to School awareness is low, to assess a district's readiness for deeper Farm to School activities.
- Remember, broader visioning workshops take time, established foundations, and a core of internal support to be relevant and effective.



Recommended Approach

For Farm to School programs aiming to establish economic relationships between local farms and school districts, facilitate more locally grown food into school cafeterias, or to evaluate school menus for awareness and improvement insights, we recommend gaining acceptance first with Child Nutrition Directors.

Child Nutrition Directors are the gatekeepers of menu plans and procurement activities. Their support for Farm to School is critical to success.

We invited Child Nutrition Directors to a webinar where we shared the principles of Farm to School and some success stories, ranging from activities in the classroom to the cafeteria to the community. We emphasized that Farm to School can take as many forms as there are schools who run it, and that by starting in the cafeteria with local menu analysis and understanding of local procurement opportunities, Child Nutrition Directors can have a direct impact on those who consume food every day in the cafeteria.

See our [template webinar slides](#) for your visioning workshop.



Considerations

01

Assess the environment for its level of Farm to School awareness and “maturity” before starting. Tailor your content and messaging to the needs of your specific region.

02

For example, within the Mississippi Delta region of Arkansas, Tennessee and Mississippi, we found that in one area, a regional nonprofit organization had been investing in awareness about local food systems for five years prior to our program, which included some work on Farm to School.

03

Within this area, we found more schools with “stories to tell” about their Farm to School experiences. Therefore, the visioning webinars were more productive and impactful when awareness was higher and experience with Farm to School was stronger.

04

If you are aiming for broader impact and sharing a Farm to School vision on a wider scale, consider the amount of time it might take – possibly years – to build up enough positive experiences to build upon before spreading the messaging to school administrations, school boards or other broader groups in a school’s community.

04 Farmer Support



Apart from assessing the child nutrition programs in the districts with which we partnered, we wanted to “build bridges” between those programs and farmers in their region.

The intent was to kick start new relationships, or to scale existing relationships with expertise and advice by fostering communication, planning and infrastructure to achieve a greater flow of locally produced food into the schools.





Learning & Tips

- Every farm has a unique set of experiences that has defined what it grows, how it grows, how it processes/packs, and to whom it sells.
- Every farm has a unique set of ambitions that defines how much it wants to evolve, develop, maintain the status quo, or change.
- Even amongst farms that have engaged in Farm to School sales, there are highly variable mindsets in play that drive the intensity of focus on the schools, relevancy of crops produced for schools, and approach to pricing. This directly impacts the amount of locally grown food going to child nutrition programs.



Learning & Tips Cont.

- Every district has unique approaches to feeding kids and building menus.

- Every district has unique procurement approaches, processing and meal prep capabilities.
 - There are many districts that purchased locally grown food items as a “one off” occurrence or on an “occasional” basis, which is a great place to start.
 - There was only one school district we encountered that made a habit of purchasing locally produced foods from a handful of farms; these farms also focused to some degree on Farm to School as a part of their sales efforts.
 - One district that purchased regularly was the result of sustained, nonprofit organization’s activity in the region. The Child Nutrition Director demonstrated a high integrity passion and understanding that feeding her kids with local grown products would lead to better meals, better nutrition, and better outcomes for her program and constituents.



Recommended Approach

Set a “radius based” range around the district being supported for local procurement assistance. The shorter the distance the better, but 50 miles is reasonable for most farmers to contemplate a practical logistics solution. 100 miles implies that the farmer would drive 4 hours round trip to make a delivery. It would require a very large order to justify driving that distance. For what it’s worth, USDA defines “local” as within a 400 mile radius.

After defining what “local” means to your project, survey for and research a list of farmers within your area. Many states have associations or affiliation “branding” with the local food movement in their territory. For example, Tennessee sponsors “Pick TN Products” and Arkansas administers “Arkansas Grown.” Many local farms are listed in the online databases from the state Departments of Agriculture.

It is also worthwhile searching for local nonprofit organizations in your area who may have done earlier groundwork of collecting information and data about existing farms and their capabilities. The produce safety division at the Arkansas Cooperative Extension is also active in promoting local food system development and is a knowledgeable and helpful resource. Extension in your region may be another valuable resource.

Make it a priority to visit each farm in person. For farmers, seeing is believing. They face many risks every day and they need to trust that something new and unknown is worth taking a chance on. A range of variables goes into determining whether a Farm to School stream to business is right for the farmer and the district.



Recommended Approach Cont.

Consider these criteria when assessing a Farm to School “fit” for your farmers:

- Crops currently grown
- Crops potentially grown
- Seasonality of production
- Storage and handling capabilities
- On-farm food preparation capability
- Logistics and distribution capabilities
- Price points achieved with existing customers
- Desire / willingness to work for new business opportunities (mindsets)

Most importantly, you will get a feeling for how enterprising and interested the farmer is to new markets, making the extra effort to develop new relationships, and considerate of the impact they can have for neighbors in their community.

In parallel, each district needs to be assessed for willingness and capability to procure, handle, process/prepare, and serve locally produced foods in their cafeterias.

These considerations include:

- Ability to serve fresh, locally supplied foods
- Ability to scratch cook
- Ability to prep and pre-process locally supplied foods
- Menu items and patterns that could utilize locally procured foods
- Frequency of menuing recipes with propensity to include local
- Flexibility to shift menu patterns based on local ingredient availability
- Clarity of quality specifications / expectations for locally produced foods
- Clarity of packing specifications / expectations for locally produced foods
- Ability to store and handle local ingredients
- Types of storage (refrigerator / freezer)
- Quantity of space available
- Types of containering available / needed
- Types of handling equipment



Recommended Approach Cont.

These considerations include (Continued..)

- Ability to receive centrally and distribute vs. need for decentralized delivery
- Types of procurement processes followed
- Value assessment (and related price considerations) for locally procured foods
- Ability / willingness to plan and commit to volumes of locally procured items
- Ability / willingness to devote time building / developing new supply chains
- Previous and existing experiences procuring locally from farmers



Considerations

01

Build on existing relationships and be constantly “on alert” for win-win opportunities when collecting information and data from both the districts and farms. Building new supply chains and commercial relationships have enough inherent challenges and risks built in. The trick is to look for the opportunity to “grease the skids” and make a compelling case for change, both for schools and for farms.

02

In this program, we found one district and one farm that were, by design, highly focused on local procurement and supply. The farmers – a couple with non-agricultural backgrounds (they are medical doctors) – had seen an opportunity to grow their farm through Farm to School and understood the nutritional and health benefits of getting more locally grown leafy greens onto school menus.

The Child Nutrition Director was inherently passionate about serving the highest quality and best foods to the benefit of students at her schools. She also was active in the local food movement in the region and served in leadership positions for school nutrition and organizations working to shape the local food system.

In this situation, the farmer was still quite small and had no on-farm refrigerated storage, which was a barrier to consolidating harvests across multiple days and consolidating orders for more efficient delivery schedules.



Considerations

Cont.

03

While visiting farms in the region, we found a farmer whose core business is selling in the Memphis farmers market. He traditionally planted two acres of okra to hit the peak demand early in the summer growing season. Because demand tapers off as the summer progresses, he traditionally plows under one acre of the okra.

With the Child Nutrition Director agreeing to buy the farmer's surplus okra, we have agreed that this year, the farmer will retain all of their plants through the entire growing season and pack the okra for delivery and sale to the district.

The challenge in this scenario is that the district needs to plan for kitchen staff to be available when the okra comes in to do the necessary processing, preparation and packing.

04

In another scenario, a local farmer is growing large quantities of a diverse range of vegetables, selling them to a wholesale broker. Whereas the farmer has made sales to a nearby school district, they have been ad-hoc and based on the requests of the Child Nutrition Director. The farmer never considered discussing his range of potential offerings, despite his deliveries to schools being "too small to make money on."



Considerations Cont.

04

Many of his crops and his traditional planting schedule would not match the timing when schools could buy his food. But when asked if a school was willing to buy a larger quantity of cantaloupe starting in August and September, the farmer readily said “tell me how many and I’ll plant a later crop to meet this need.”

In this case, the ability of the district to procure local cantaloupe and serve them on scale would require procurement of a melon peeler, to drive efficiency and safety in processing. Our program had an equipment budget to procure and provide the peelers to participating schools, thereby unlocking this supply chain for the school and for the farmer.

05 School District Support



Child Nutrition Directors and their departments are the other critical players in the Farm to School movement. Many motivated Child Nutrition Directors want to participate in Farm to School, but they don't always have the bandwidth, funding, and / or resources to get started.

Through this grant, we found three strategies that can spur a sustainable Farm to School program in districts: data collection to help measure progress, equipment funding so school sites can process more fresh local foods, and marketing materials so students learn the important skills of knowing where their food comes from.





Learning & Tips

— Motivated Child Nutrition Directors want to participate in Farm to School, but they don't have time to build or realize the hidden potential of procurement data analysis to help them make decisions and places to start. Keep guidance clear and concise for Child Nutrition Directors.

— Data is a powerful storyteller and motivator. Taking the time to pause and analyze procurement data can drive change and help tell the story of Child Nutrition Directors' Farm to School goals and vision, providing pre/post data. Child Nutrition Directors are interested in seeing their procurement data analyzed in ways they typically don't review it, but they don't have the time or personnel to support this.

— Districts won't be able to collect procurement data alone. Partnerships and strong relationships with distributors and suppliers are key. Vendors aren't typically asked to provide information on farm location or size, so it will take time for them to come around and provide this data, but it's an important part of building the Farm to School movement.



Data collection on Farm to School

Recommended Approach

Below are steps a Child Nutrition Director and their teams can take to collect procurement data about their meal program. This is specifically re: produce, but it can be applied for other local products, such as animal proteins and dairy.

Choose one month to track all produce procured in that month:

- Tip: Choose a month that highlights your region's most seasonal, bountiful time of year for produce

Track the following data over a one-month period:

- Type of each produce procured
- Total lbs of each produce
- The state the produce is grown in
- Local/regional farm and the name of the farm if possible (USDA defines local within 400 miles of district boundaries)
- Small to mid-sized farms (Gross Case Farm Income: Small < \$350,000. Mid-size > \$350,000 but less than \$1 million Small: 961 acres. Midsize: 1582 acres (Source: USDA Farm Typology Report))
- (Optional): Family / women / minority / veteran owned; organic

- Note: You may not be able to get all the granular level of data. Vendors are typically not asked to track this information, but we encourage you to keep asking for this information. The more people ask, the more commonplace this information will be in the future. If you only get data on type of produce procured, total lbs, and state,, that's still great information to know about your procurement practices!

Ask your produce distributor(s) and local farmers help you track your produce data over the month.

- Tip: Give your distributors & farmers an early enough heads up that you'd like to collect this data, so they can prepare if needed
- Tip: Ask procurement or billing manager within the Child Nutrition department to track this data or check-in on distributors/farmers

Analyze your data. Some aggregate data/questions you can ask yourself:

- Total lbs of produce bought in the chosen month
- Top 5-10 produce by weight
- % of produce that comes from your state, local, and / or small to mid-sized farms



Data collection on Farm to School

Recommended Approach Cont.

Set your goals for the next 1-2 years. Some goals could look like:

- I will find [X number] of local farmers and build relationships with them. I will learn what produce they typically grow.
- I will buy [X number] lbs of produce from local farmers.
- I will buy [X number] lbs of [X produce] more from [existing local farm I have worked with].

Share the data and goals with your Chief Business Officer, Superintendent, board, students, and community.

In 1-2 years, repeat the steps above to collect next set of data and do a pre/post data review.



Considerations

01

Other district tips: The peak of local produce season may not align directly with the school year in many parts of the country, but that doesn't stop districts from procuring local produce and preserving it (freeze, canned, made into sauces, etc) to serve to students during the school year. Districts have used the summer months during peak produce season to pay their staff to clean, process, and cook/preserve the local produce.



Equipment for Farm to School

Learning & Tips

Districts typically need additional equipment to grow and expand Farm to School because more fresh produce is being procured. They can always use additional equipment given their limited budgets. Providing equipment stipends can be a great motivator for districts to start or further build out their Farm to School work.

Don't restrict yourself to only providing a specific type of equipment to a district, like fridges or freezers only. It's best to be flexible with the type of equipment a district may need because each district has different needs. Some will need fridges / freezers. Others have enough storage, but could use processing equipment, such as peelers, vegetable or fruit choppers, or food processors to efficiently prepare the produce for service.



Equipment for Farm to School

Recommended Approach

Decide how much you will provide for an equipment stipend: If possible, provide an equipment stipend for districts to incentivize them to participate in Farm to School. We recommend a stipend of \$10,000 or less per district in order to utilize micro-purchases and remove the need to go out to bid.

- Current federal micro-purchase threshold is \$10,000, but it is worth looking into the threshold by state as they can vary.

Develop a timeline for ordering equipment and create an implementation plan.

Things to consider:

- Will the stipend be sent to district or will the equipment be bought by you (the partner) and be delivered to the district?
- If the partner is purchasing the equipment for the district, have the district share the specific brand & equipment they'd like.



Considerations

01

If finances and resources are available, consider providing equipment stipends for local farmers who are committed to work with districts. Like districts, they also have limited budgets and could use support with equipment to store or distribute.

**Farm to School Marketing**

Learning & Tips

— School cafeterias are classrooms and places for students to learn about seasonal produce, local produce, and where their food comes from. The more students learn about where their food comes from, the more excited they are and willing to try new foods.

— One district in Tennessee had a whiteboard sign on the service line marketing local fruit from a local farmer. The student loved the fruit so much that they told their parents and the family now buys produce from this local farm when they can!

— Child Nutrition Directors and their staff need partner support to have cafeterias as a place for learning. Existing turnkey marketing templates for cafeterias that feature Farm to School are extremely helpful for time-strapped Child Nutrition Directors. Districts are able to do more by partnering with other nonprofit partners that have turnkey Farm to School marketing templates.



Farm to School Marketing

Recommended Approach

Below are some ways districts can get started with Farm to School marketing.

Find Farm to School partners: Visit the National Farm to School Network website to find who those partners are in each state. Build this in your stakeholder map (see Chapter 3 to learn more).

Participate in Harvest of the Month: Majority of states run their own version of “Harvest of the Month” program, which teaches about and encourages eating local, seasonal produce. Each month features a seasonal product (produce and non-produce) with the hopes that districts feature said product on the menu that month. It provides a great way for students to try new foods and learn about variety and seasonality. Free resources, such as monthly seasonal product posters and Featured Farmer templates, are available. For some examples, take a look at TN Harvest of the Month or AR Harvest of the Season.

Feature local farmers with turnkey poster templates: Each state’s Harvest of the Month programs typically have free poster templates to feature local farmers, such as AR’s Harvest of the Season poster below. Even a whiteboard sign that calls out the local produce is great!

Hold student taste tests during lunch once a semester: Taste tests are a fun way for students to try new foods. When they see that new food on the service line the next day or later that week, they’ll be more likely to take some with their meal.



Considerations

01

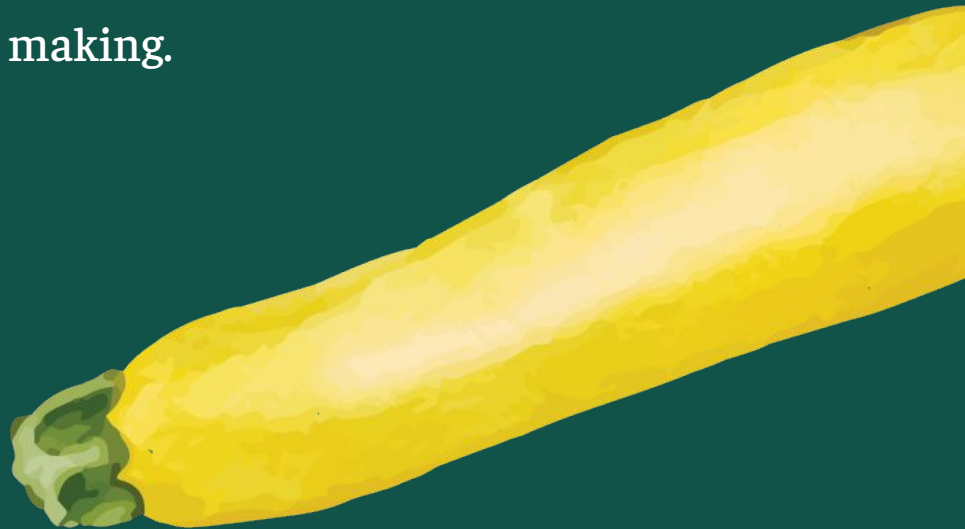
Choose 1-2 tools in the recommended approach section above to incorporate into your school meal program.

06 Farm to School Gathering



It's so important to find moments to celebrate the movement you're building, and for everyone in your Farm to School community to see the progress you're making together.

We recommend hosting gatherings to share wins, showcase progress, invite others into the fold, and taste (literally) the change you're making.



Learning & Tips



— Be able to answer these three questions before you start planning your event:

- Who are we talking to?
- What do we want them to take away from this event?
- And what do we want them to do?

Our answers were:

- A diverse representation of the local Farm to School community.
- We want everyone to feel a renewed connection to the movement and make new and deeper connections with the people involved.
- Come away inspired to try new things and push the movement even farther, including bringing new advocates into the fold.

— These events work best when you have diverse representation in the room: farmers, child nutrition teams, nonprofits, legislators, vendors, parents and even students! Having all those perspectives represented will lead to interesting conversations, bigger ideas, and a ton of energy.

— Have it on a farm! (Or in the school cafeteria.) The more connected you can get your community to the food they eat, the more inspired they'll be.



Recommended Approach

Showcase the movement in action: Offer live demonstrations of various aspects of the movement: food being picked (or a tour of the farm where it's grown), school recipes being made, or processing equipment in use. These demonstrations give everyone in the room a chance to see some aspect of Farm to School that they might not be active in.

Feed them well: The key to any good event is great food and that is doubly true for Farm to School! We recommend sourcing recipes from the local schools who are active in Farm to School – it really brings the cafeteria to the farm!

Design room for conversation: The most important goal for the event is connection: making everyone feel more connected to the movement, to the food and farm, and to each other. That means they need to have time and space to talk to each other! That can be casual, like open socializing time, or it can be curated, like planned Q&A, a panel discussion, or even just conversation prompts at each table. It all depends on what will work best for your community.

Give them memorable goodies: People love free stuff, especially if it reminds them of a great day and makes them proud of their community. We curated goodie bags with fun items from each of our organizations: fresh herbs and recipes, a lunch box, stickers, pins, and a hat!

Publicize the event and feature those doing the heavy lift as local food “heroes:” Social media makes this easier these days. We also brought a photographer/videographer and created a short film to tell our story. You also can invite representatives from local media organizations to amplify the sharing.

Thank You

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