

***Farm to School:***  
***Strategies for Managing Food***  
***and Labor Costs***

It is important to look at the total cost of the menu when incorporating Farm to School foods so that Farm to School works within your overall food and labor budgets. Experience shows that Farm to School foods may be more or less expensive than other options, so careful planning and product selection are key. Here are a few approaches to consider:

**Menu Planning**

- Talk with your farmers and/or distributor to explore the different types of Farm to School products that are available to you and their pricing. Start small, focusing on Farm to School foods and menu items that work within your budget, labor environment and kitchen facilities.
- Look not only at the cost-per-case of produce, for instance, but at the total yield, labor costs, and total cost per serving.
- Explore whether it may cost less to make a product from scratch, like a whole grain pilaf, than to buy a similar packaged and processed item.
- Consider how you might move costs “around the tray”. For instance, on a given day, can you accommodate a higher cost vegetable by pairing it with another, lower-cost item elsewhere on the tray?
- Build flexibility into your menus by offering “Local Harvest Vegetables”, for instance, instead of a specific vegetable so that you can use one or more Farm to School foods that are at the peak of harvest and most affordable.
- Salad bars are a great way to highlight minimally processed, local produce while retaining the flexibility to use a variety of products when they are affordable and in-season.
- If the Farm to School item is a choice option on your menu, the impact on your overall food cost for the month may be modest. The number of times a Farm to School item is served will also influence the overall impact on your foodservice budget.

**Purchasing Strategies**

- Look for a Win –Win with the farmer
  - Several schools use small size apples that the farmers may have difficulty selling at retail. This can allow the school to get a lower price for the apples and the farmer to sell product with a limited market.
  - Buying larger quantities from the farmer may also enable the farmer to offer you a lower price.
  - Getting to know more about your farm partners may open up new possibilities as they learn what you need and you learn what they have to offer. Getting in touch about your mutual needs well in advance can be helpful to both parties.

- Can your distributor help? Ask your distributor if they offer local produce in the fall or other times of year. Often this is the case and the pricing will likely be the normally quoted price.
- Are seconds or surplus product available? Your distributor or farm partners may have seconds available or an over-abundance of product available at the last minute. If you can accommodate products without too much notice, this may work for you and the farmer alike.
- Use donated product – explore using donated product that is produced according to your standards and food safety requirements.

### **Labor Cost Strategies**

- Purchase Farm to School products through a distributor who handles purchasing arrangements with the farmers.
- Ask to have your distributor pre-cut local produce. Some offer a wide array of pre-cut local produce items (including husked/cut corn, cut winter squash and the like.)
- Find creative ways to cover periodic increased labor requirements:
  - Some schools have used husking corn as a learning experience for classroom involvement in Farm to School activities.
  - School clubs and community members/partners can be called in to wash fruits and vegetables or even light processing, when under school supervision.

### **Offsetting Cost Factors**

- Can obtaining very fresh products reduce your waste rate in the kitchen?
- Would students waste less food if the foods taste great and are part of your Farm to School promotional and educational effort?
- Consider the opportunity for boosting meal rate participation with the raised awareness and enthusiasm for Farm to School products.
- Recognize (and celebrate!) the community benefit and goodwill that are generated when more of the school food dollar stays within the local community.



**INSTITUTE FOR AGRICULTURE AND TRADE POLICY**

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