



RURAL COMMUNITIES LEADING THE WAY: INTRODUCING LOCAL FOODS TO MEAL SERVICE

Rural schools and community providers utilize their agrarian geographies to bring local fruits, vegetables, and even meats and eggs to their meal programs. This close connection to their local farmers and ranchers has created a system that can overcome common supply chain disruptions, invest in their local economy, and create engaging educational opportunities.

Rural communities create these local school food systems by partnering with local and regional businesses, buying directly from farmers, and combining meals with agricultural education. Hear from three different organizations on how they use these local food procurement strategies to create stronger bonds in their communities, purchase local seasonal foods, and create unique educational opportunities for children of all ages.

Read on to learn how these local food procurement strategies can be replicated in your community.

1. Partner with Local/ Regional Businesses

Partnering with local businesses not only invests in your local economy but also allows you to circumnavigate supply chain disruptions.

Local produce distributors, restaurant suppliers, and farmer cooperatives can be great partners to solicit donations or purchase commonly used menu items. When gathering bids for suppliers, think about including a preference for local produce and meats in your selection criteria.



Local restaurants and businesses can use these partnerships as a chance to advertise and build community support.

Think about partnering with your local farmers market vendors to access local fruits, vegetables, and even eggs and meats. Farmer's Markets can also be a great place to advertise your meal service dates/times and the benefits of school meals directly to parents.



Lowcountry Food Bank – South Carolina

Lowcountry Foodbank (LCFB) works closely with Limehouse Produce, a regional distributor of local produce from (VA, GA, NC, and SC). When the pandemic began, Limehouse worked with LCFB to provide local produce and contributed drivers to make deliveries for LCFB. Limehouse and Low Country Food Bank collaborate to supply fresh, local produce to food pantries across the South Carolina coast. Lowcountry Food Bank also partners with GrowFood Carolina to purchase unsold produce at breakeven costs from local farmers.

2. Buy Direct from Farmers

Your local Farm Bureau or Extension Agency can help facilitate relationships with local farmers. These organizations can connect you with local farmers who have excess produce or off-grade, 'ugly' produce and even help set fair prices.

Farmers can also be found at your local farmers market or on social media. Farmers markets are a great place to network with farmers and purchase any product that doesn't sell by the end of the day.

Maintaining relationships with farmers can take more work than a produce distributor. Be sure to set expectations early about the amount and variety of produce you may need from the farmer on a seasonal basis. It's essential to establish a preferred form of communication for both parties early in the process. (e.g., phone calls after harvest hours, texts, or email)



Aloha Harvest – Hawaii

At the beginning of COVID, many local farmers and fisheries had to divert their produce from restaurants and hotels to local food rescue organizations such as Aloha Harvest. Aloha Harvest took this momentum and newfound connections to local food distributors, auction houses, farmers, and fishermen to create their community harvest programs. These programs purchased fruits, vegetables, and even fish at "pack and pick" prices that can be directly distributed to their grocery distribution sites. Aloha Harvest also began a gleaning program where they utilized volunteers to harvest fresh fruits from fruit trees on private property and local farms.

3. Combine with Education

Building lasting relationships with farmers takes patience and hard work. One way to deepen that connection is by involving them in your class curriculum, afterschool activities, or clubs. Farmers can share their skills with students and help students learn how their food is grown. Students that grown their food are more excited to try new healthy meals made with those fruits and vegetables they grew.

Start small when incorporating local foods into your lesson plans and menus. Choose a harvest of the month, such as apples in February, and use apples in your lessons, menus, and even as field trip inspiration. Virtual farm visits are a great way to bring farmers into the classroom for all students, hybrid and in-person learners.



Quality Care for Children – Farm to Early Childcare - Georgia

Quality Care for Children’s team partners with child care programs to help them implement Farm to ECE practices, including serving local foods on their menus. Incorporating food education and gardening into the curriculum helps the children and staff connect with healthy, locally sourced meals. Sites participate in Harvest of the Month, a calendar that highlights a specific vegetable or fruit monthly, and even participate in taste tests of the featured items. The team helps child care program directors identify local farmers through co-ops, farmer’s markets, and social media. Building relationships between child care programs and farmers has led to local procurement and other fun activities. Due to the Pandemic, a farmer brought his pig to the child care program parking lot for a socially distanced visit when field trips were on hold.

Need more supply chain navigation tips?

Check out our [Tips for Navigating Supply Chain Disruptions](#). This resource provides tips for managing supply chain-related issues, including driver, food, and equipment shortages.

Check out No Kid Hungry’s [Materials for Communicating with Your School Community](#) for sample language, in both English & Spanish, that you can use as-is or customize to best fit the needs of your school or district.

