



## Communicating with School Nutrition Directors

Successful experiences with schools begin with School Food and Nutrition Services Departments. Most school districts in Oregon are self-operating, meaning they manage the day-to-day operations of their meal service programs – from menu planning, recipe development to sourcing and fulfillment – staff in this department are tasked with ensuring the meal programs run smoothly and schoolchildren receive healthy meals every day. The school nutrition director is often responsible for making procurement decisions and is the person you should make plans meet when you are interested in a particular school district.

Many school districts are participating in Oregon’s Farm to School Procurement Grant Program and their directors are looking for local products to source, so they are eager to hear from you! This tip sheet is meant to help you prepare for those first conversations with directors and get you off on the right step towards a long-lasting working relationship.

### **UNDERSTANDING THEIR GOALS**

One of the first topics to discuss with directors is their goals for serving local products in their school meal program. Some directors serve Oregon products monthly and follow what’s in season, others promote local products via our Oregon Harvest of the Month Program, and some choose specific Oregon products to serve for special cultural events. Every school district is different and has a unique vision for their Farm to School Program. Discussing these goals will help you gain a better understanding of where your products might fit into their meal programs and how you might get started working together.

This is also a good time to ask if the school meal program is operated by the district or whether the district is in a contracted meal service agreement with a Food Service Management Company (FSMCs). FSMCs do have the ability to use their Farm to School Procurement funds to purchase Oregon products but sometimes the process can take a little more time and effort – but it’s totally doable!

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**Products.** It's important to discuss the variety and types of products directors use daily and what opportunity there is to source these products locally. Many directors are interested in local products but often need to know how the product will fit the meal pattern and how it will pair with other items. You'll want to know how frequently they make purchases and whether they prefer products in bulk sizes or individually packaged. They may also prefer that your product arrive in a minimally processed form (frozen, chopped, peeled, etc.) that is convenient to prepare and serve. If they intend to serve fresh produce, you may want to ask them to describe their expectations and whether produce needs to be cleaned and ready to serve or whether they will be able to provide that preparation on site. If you are producing value added products, you may want to ask them about the types of recipes they use and whether they need tips or suggestions to use your product in combination with other meal categories. In terms of promoting your product among students, you may want to ask about what Point of Sale promotions of local products they display in the cafeteria serving line. Consider providing the Director samples of your product to give them a chance try your product with the rest of their food service team.

**Sourcing.** Many school districts have a variety of distribution channels they source local products from; you'll find that each district is unique in this aspect. Some are motivated to purchase directly from a producer while others may rely on their broadline distributor to source local products. This may be because they aren't aware of local options, or they may have had trouble sourcing local products in the past. You'll want to ask about their distribution channels and the experience and comfort level they have buying direct versus wholesale.

**Site infrastructure.** Directors often work with limited equipment and storage capacity to store, prepare and cook food. You will want to discuss what processing equipment they have available and whether they have on-site storage, including freezer and cooler space. Some school districts have a central kitchen and warehouse where all fulfillment, storage and meal preparation occurs, while others may have multiple locations where delivery may be required. You'll want to discuss who coordinates deliveries and whether there is a regular schedule, including days and times when they receive product. This will give you a sense of the volume of self-stable and perishable products they can handle and how frequently they may expect deliveries to be made.

**Procurement.** School districts follow federal purchasing policies to procure all food served in their meal programs. Often districts put out solicitations for certain products and they typically do this prior to the following school year as they forecast their menu items. You should ask directors about how you can be notified of upcoming solicitations and how to stay informed about those opportunities, so you have ample time to negotiate contracts. It's also appropriate for you to ask them to disclose product price ranges to determine if your products would be competitive and where flexibility may lie on either end. Directors have procurement tools to purchase local and you'll want to ask whether they can buy off contract and whether they use

micro-purchasing agreements for certain products. These are two purchasing methods they often use to buy directly from producers. Some directors will enter in to forward contracts with vendors. This can be a useful tool that outlines mutual expectations of working together and details about product delivery and payment. It's important to have a plan to address any unexpected events to reduce risk to either party and maintain good working relationships. You'll want to make sure that the contract outlines the terms for missed or delayed deliveries, product quality issues, and any unforeseen circumstances that affect product availability such as crop disaster or batching spoilage.

**Payment.** School districts typically have a 30 to 90 day invoicing and payment process. You'll want to make sure to discuss this with directors to ensure their billing cycle will work for your business. You'll also want to introduce yourself to the person in charge of billing so you can begin building a relationship and discuss any terms they might have for payment or receipt of product. Additionally, discuss what templates they require, software applications and how frequently (monthly, quarterly, etc.) they would like to be invoiced.

## More Tips for Working Together Effectively

Remember to be patient – working directly with producers may be as new to School Nutrition Directors as working with schools is to you! Here are a few things you can do to help jump-start relationship building and build trust:

### **Be prepared for your conversation.**

Come prepared with an overview of your practices and a list of questions to cover with them, to help ensure that the meeting is productive and benefits both of you.

### **Know your products.**

While schools have some flexibility in the way they can receive products, you will have the most success if you have a broad knowledge of the usability and application of your product when it comes to storage, preparation, and use in recipes and menus.

### **Do some market research.**

Take the time to learn about them by practicing some basic school food vocabulary and reviewing current menus.

### **Highlight your brand.**

Bring along some product to sample – the quality will speak for itself! Also, share any marketing materials you may have developed, so they can get to know you better, support retention for your brand, and see you as a partner in achieving their farm to school goals.

### **Share your expertise.**

Be proactive in sharing information about your operational cycles (production planning, planting cycles, product availability, etc.). This will help you find common ground and help support negotiations.

### **Never show up unannounced.**

Always call ahead, make an appointment if possible, and avoid busy times such as during lunch periods (i.e., 10 am – 1 pm).

### **Avoid judgement and don't shame school food.**

Remember, school food service staff have the same goals as your farm: to feed hungry kids and support the community.

### **Note that communication is key.**

Be sure to get direct contact information for all parties involved in the procurement process, ask them what their preferred mode of communication is (email, text, in-person), and establish follow-up actions.

### **Recognize that developing trusted relationships takes time.**

It may be necessary to start slowly and build trust through offering samples, piloting sales, and pulling in support from local food champions at the school. Also, fulfilling your agreements on time and with a quality product builds trust.

For questions about the Farm to School Program please contact Amy Gilroy at [amy.gilroy@oda.oregon.gov](mailto:amy.gilroy@oda.oregon.gov).