State and Regional Farm to School Conferences and Events: Best Practices from NFSN

State and regional conferences and events offer valuable opportunities to build farm to school and early care and education networks, grow capacity and knowledge for stakeholders and promote best practices in your state.

NFSN has many years of experience hosting a highly successful biennial National Farm to Cafeteria Conference and has represented farm to school in hundreds of local, state and national events. We offer recommendations and guidance for hosting successful farm to school events and highlight the various ways that NFSN staff can support your leadership and coordination of regional and state events.

Communications and Promotions

- **Make your event details widely available.** Before you start spreading the word about your event, make sure you have a home base for where people can go to learn all of the details (who, what, where, when, why, cost, how to register). A simple webpage on your organization’s existing website can be an easy option for making this information available. In addition to a webpage, consider creating a Facebook event with the details of your gathering to help spread the word and recruit attendees. Printed materials like “Save the Date” postcards, flyers and posters are also effective methods for raising awareness and generating interest in your event.

- **Develop an Outreach Toolkit.** Create a simple document with sample outreach messaging that partner organizations can use to help promote your event. Include copy for social media, newsletter blurbs (100 words) and longer text description (200+ words), as well as several graphics that can be shared.

- **Use NFSN printed resources.** Customize your toolkit of print materials to offer to conference goers by including NFSN’s fact sheets and resources. Professionally designed and formatted, these resources are available on the NFSN website for you to download and print. Our most popular materials include:
  - About National Farm to School Network
  - Getting Started with Farm to School (available in Spanish)
  - Getting Started with Farm to Early Care and Education (available in Spanish)
  - Starting and Maintaining a School Garden (available in Spanish)
  - Benefits of Farm to School (available in Spanish)
  - National Farm to School Month resources, including posters, stickers, fact sheets and more

- **Don’t forget your local media, policy makers and funder.** Your gathering of farm to school and ECE stakeholders is a great opportunity to gain local media attention, share stories of success with policy makers, and show funder the impact of farm to school in your community. Don’t forget that these important influencers should be on your invite list! Find tips for building strong media relations and pitching winning story ideas [here](#).

Program Planning

- **Start program planning early.** The program and agenda may determine facility and timing needs (e.g., number of breakout rooms, size/capacity of keynote session rooms) so do not delay in making program decisions. NFSN recommends planning for an event at least a year in advance.

- **Highlight a variety of local and national speakers.** Encourage attendees to learn from local successes, but also feature standout speakers from across the country to motivate attendees and bring in new ideas. We also recommend inviting speakers that represent diverse sectors, perspectives, communities and races/ethnicities.

- **Include structured and unstructured networking time.** Support peer learning and networking with a variety of opportunities for building relationships and connections. NFSN prioritizes this at the National Farm to Cafeteria Conference and receives good feedback when we provide the space for networking.
• **Prioritize audience engagement.** Encourage presenters to engage audiences through interactive sessions and discussion and participation opportunities. Include this requirement in a workshop application to ensure presenters plan for engagement from the beginning.

**Conference Evaluation**

• **Keep it simple!** Ask only for information that you absolutely need. Delete information that will be “nice to have.”

• **Identify what you want to achieve.** If you had pre-set goals for the conference, use them as guidelines for designing an evaluation form.

• **Act quickly.** Provide space in the agenda if doing a paper evaluation. If sending an online survey, have it ready to go before the event and hit send right after the event closes. Provide 10-15 days for responses.

• **Put results to use.** Analyze results soon after the survey and share results with your stakeholder, coalitions and funders.

**Featuring Local Foods**

• **Do your research.** Speak to local farmers/producers about what local options are available and be creative. Consider using frozen or greenhouse grown produce in off-season or using less traditional products such as local chia seeds on a salad bar.

• **Negotiate local sourcing as part of your venue contract.** State up front during the venue search process that local food is non-negotiable for your event and get this commitment in writing in your contract. Offer sample menus and examples and bring specific conditions to the table in these negotiations (e.g., % local required, distance traveled) to establish expectations right from the start.

• **Connect local farmers/producers/distributors to the venue directly.** Making direct connections to local food sources can make venues more receptive to this concept. Stay engaged in these relationships throughout event planning but encourage communication between producer and venue.

• **Acknowledgement and appreciation.** Put visible signage near the food that acknowledges the local farmers/producers and highlights their products. Thank the catering team for going "above and beyond" and bring them into your meeting for a round of applause. Ensuring that everyone feels acknowledged and appreciated will encourage these connections to grow.

**National Speakers**

NFSN staff are available to speak at your conference and / or brainstorm ideas for speakers. Several states have shared that they value the national perspective and their audiences find it inspiring to hear about the state level efforts feeding into the national movement. [Contact us to learn more](#).

**Training and Technical Assistance on Trending Topics in Farm to School**

NFSN staff are available for strategic planning discussions, topical presentations, short course consideration, agenda development and support in identifying key speakers for your conference. [Visit our staff page](#) to learn about our areas of expertise, including farm to early care and education, state policy advocacy, state networks and evaluation, and [contact us to learn more](#).

If you and your conference planning team are interested in more in-depth support and technical assistance on any of the above topics, please [contact our Development Team](#) to discuss consultation services.