Leveraging Partnerships to Access School Markets: Part I

Alma Maquitico, Anthony Youth Farm, Anthony, New Mexico

Meet the Farmer
Alma Maquitico is a farmer and Director of the Anthony Youth Farm located in Anthony, New Mexico, a small community right on the New Mexico-Texas border. Anthony Youth Farm provides farming and training opportunities for low-income and rural youth in southern New Mexico while growing and selling organic veggies to school districts across the state through a purchasing cooperative and the New Mexico Grown Approved Supplier Program. “Our goal and our vision for the farm is to create economic opportunity for rural youth and families through sustainable food and farming,” Alma describes.

About Anthony Youth Farm
- Anthony, New Mexico
- 25-acre farm: 22 acres dedicated to alfalfa and wheat and 3 acres dedicated to organically grown vegetables
- Primarily sells to schools through New Mexico’s state purchasing cooperative as well as a CSA-model veggie box, farmers markets, and retail
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School Markets Support Youth Farming and Training Programs

“Our farm was created around a community concern with poverty and lack of professional opportunities for youth,” Alma explains. “The Anthony Water and Sanitation District spearheaded efforts to convert land into a farm training program that could help create professional opportunities for rural youth and to create a space for youth to go after school.” The impact has been significant. The youth farmers producing food at Anthony Youth Farm are students themselves, and their products are often served in the schools they attend. One of the youth farmers describes their farm to school work as “we farm, so we can go to school.”
Anthony Youth Farm is able to offer training and programming to youth in southern New Mexico due to the success of the various market channels through which they sell. The state purchasing cooperative and approved supplier program, in particular, opened doors for the farm. “The farm to school program and being able to sell to schools helped in many ways. It created a market that met both social and economic goals: to feed communities that are food insecure and the opportunity to have a sustaining income as a farm while hiring and training youth,” Alma shares.

**Origin of New Mexico’s State Purchasing Cooperative**
During the 2018-19 school year, New Mexico’s Public Education Department (NMPED) piloted a purchasing cooperative of school districts to:

- streamline procurement and vendor requirements,
- provide more data for price forecasting,
- create a model that could be replicated by other institutions and
- support small growers of color build the necessary capacity to sell to schools.

The bid received 20 vendor responses from state-based distributors, food hubs, farmer cooperatives, and individual small-scale farmers interested in selling to schools – including Alma and the Anthony Youth Farm. The bid was set up as a yearly contract between the 20 vendors and 10 school districts, with the option to renew annually for up to four years. NMPED streamlined the local food procurement process for both the 10 participating districts and the 20 vendors.

There is one anchor district (Santa Fe Public Schools) that took on the role of doing the administrative work (e.g., annual extensions, communicating with farmers, etc.), reducing the load for the other nine participating districts. This process also provided a mechanism to streamline vendor requirements, such as food safety training and farm to school promotional activities, ultimately leading to the development of the New Mexico Grown Approved Supplier Program (see case study on page 21 of the Producer Workbook).

Every year, contracted producers with the cooperative have the option to increase their prices based on changing input needs (seeds, labor, transportation, etc.). Since New Mexico is a big state with diverse needs, prices are set by district.

“The cooperative bid gives each one of us an opportunity to ask for what we think is a fair price with the understanding that we’re feeding children,” Alma explains. “We’re not going to try and increase our prices in a way that’s not sustainable and that’s going to limit the ability of children to receive healthy food. And, we don’t want to lose a bid.”

Alma points out that while New Mexico is a very strong agricultural state, there are more market opportunities than farmers. “We need more farmers in our community. This type of cooperative model doesn’t create a competition but rather opens the door for small-scale farmers across the state that might not have enough produce to sell to schools or might have had a bad year or season due to weather or pests or other circumstances.”

The model has been successful in building capacity for small farmers as well as fostering relationships with state procurement offices. And, as mentioned earlier, it also provided NMPED with information about other possible programs that could support small farmers, such as the Approved Supplier Program. At the same time, a purchasing cooperative like this does take a lot of administrative work for both the anchor district and the administering agency, which made it difficult to get off the ground initially. Ultimately, though, it’s allowed farmers like Alma to sell to districts she would not ordinarily be able to, due to smaller produce volume or administrative burden. Also, it has directly supported her interest in farm to school and efforts to strengthen her community’s resiliency. “Farm to school is not only about food but about economic opportunity and leadership. It opened up a space for a new generation of farmers and thinkers, thinking about resilience, food justice, and social values for a community.”
Building Food-System Resiliency in Anthony, New Mexico

Alma shared that communities in southern New Mexico are in the beginning stages of building resiliency and that there’s a lot that still needs to happen before they can match the capacity and farm to school work happening in the rest of the state. “There’s more capital and infrastructure for small-scale farming in northern New Mexico. In the southern region, there’s no food hub, no place where farmers can pack veggies. We don’t have the infrastructure but we’re trying to build it.”

The way she sees it, there has to be public funding going into her community to provide the opportunity for building a vibrant local food economy. That’s why she has been grateful for NMPED’s interest and support for this work. NMPED recognized that a purchasing cooperative model would better facilitate the bidding process for small farmers and streamline their ability to sell multiple products to multiple school districts throughout the year. Alma says that the purchasing cooperative has also encouraged aggregation and cooperation among small farmers across the state – again, working toward a more resilient local food system. “It has been an amazing opportunity for small-scale farmers, low-income farmers, and farmers of color to come together and participate in a larger scale market and support each other to actually have a sustained source of revenue,” Alma shares.

The pandemic has shown Alma that without having subsidized markets or state-run programs, such as the purchasing cooperative or approved supplier program, farmers without infrastructure, land, and economic capacity are unable to stay afloat and access school markets when times are really tough. That’s why NMPED’s support has been so critical to Anthony Youth Farm’s ability to continue its work throughout 2020. “All of the money the state is providing through the purchasing cooperative bid has a multiplying effect in the community,” Alma explains. “It’s created social and economic benefits for farmers and farmworker communities. It has improved food security and enhanced nutrition for children while providing a safety net to low-income families. The state is making an investment in farmers who use agroecological practices resulting in better soil health, protecting the water streams, taking care of the environment so that families around the state are living a healthier life.”

Alma’s advice for small farmers interested in selling to schools? Be intentional about the partnerships and relationships you build. “Think about how to work to create, intentionally, an inclusive, resilient, and participatory food system. You need partnerships at the community level with business people, with community organizations, with food pantries to really be able to develop a common vision for what agriculture should look like in a particular community and envision how farm to school can play a role in revitalizing or igniting sustainable agriculture in the region.”

To listen to the full podcast conversation with Alma, visit this page: http://www.farmtoschool.org/bringingf2s-casestudies