Is Farm to School Right for You?

Katrina Becker, Cattail Organics, Athens, Wisconsin

Meet the Farmer
Katrina Becker owns and operates Cattail Organics, in a small dairy-producing county in North Central Wisconsin. Katrina has been farming in Athens since 2006 and initiated school sales in 2008-2009 but has increased her sales over the past five years. She and her husband, Logan, maintain separate farm businesses, as they each had their own farm business when they met. They both sell to schools through their separate farm businesses. Those school districts are very different and they have very different relationships with the school food service directors. Katrina says, “Schools are a dependable and inspiring group to work with, but it is a big learning curve and there are a lot of relationships that need to be set up to make it work.”

Developing Markets
Kat’s first experience with selling to schools was in the Athens school district, where they live, and their farm is located. She didn’t have a lot of wholesale experience, so their relationship with the school district didn’t last for long, partly because they weren’t quite ready. Kat attributes their current success with school sales to gaining high volume and wholesale grocery and restaurant sales experience. Both Kat and her husband have a better understanding of the tasks, quality standards, and pricing in the larger marketplace. Kat’s farm currently sells to the Wassau School district. She decided to approach them after reading an article in their local paper about the school district sourcing local foods. She was about 10 years into the farming at that point and connected with the food service director about buying food from the farm. In the past few years, the district would funnel money into purchasing local products for Farm to School month. This year, however, they were engaged in a lot of different ways. This has been made possible by a new food service director. The director and her team are focused and very competent at working with a lot of different farmers. Her husband’s farm, Growing Earth Farm sells to a food service director that manages several small districts. “That food service director is outstanding and one of the best in the country in accommodating different crops such as Daikon, parsnips, and radishes,” says Kat. The food service director reached out to a healthy living group in the county and started working with her husband. “The director really likes good food and goes out of his way to find it for the students in the district. He is willing to try anything for a few weeks—cooked or raw,” says Kat. The Wassau School District is much more traditional in their approach, but their leadership is easy to work with and they are really smart about planning. The district food service director is able to budget and plan so that Kat is aware of which products they want to purchase far ahead of time.

About Cattail Organics
- Cattail Organics
- Athens, Wisconsin
- Produce farmer
- 4.5 acres
- cattailorganics.com

Cattail farm family. Credit: Cattail Organics
Working with Schools on Price
Kat’s first motivation for selling to school was to cycle resources in her own community. Now it has become a nice well planned part of the farm’s income, with the last few years bringing in $16-25K in school sales. That is more than it has been in the past, but school sales have regularly brought in $5-10K.

Originally, Kat thought about competing with distributors on their pricing, but the farm doesn’t do that in general any more. She does good record keeping on costs of production and the profitability of each crop grown on the farm. The farm’s prices would be considered very high by wholesale standards. For example, carrots are sold at a baseline of $2/pound. The farm will sometimes offer discounts for large quantities or if there is some variability in the product, but this is standard for all of its wholesale accounts. Kat mentioned that the food service directors are happy to pay more because there is little waste. Lettuce is a good example of that. Baby lettuce mix is $7/pound, but virtually none of the product is thrown away. The food service director at the Wassau School District has said they can expect to throw away from one-third to two-thirds of the product from a distributor. Kat suggests that this is something to consider when trying to distinguish your products from the products that the food service director gets from a distributor.

History of Partnerships and Adapting School Sales Amid a Pandemic
Kat typically sets up a meeting with the school district in December to talk about how the year went, ask what went well, and discuss what next year looks like. That is standard with all of her wholesale accounts. She typically emails back and forth with the school district in early spring, to see if they want to add anything to the summer program or if they want to start planning into the fall. Those crops and quantities are put into her planning list. She provides the Food Service Director with a list of everything that she grows, with the wholesale prices, similar to a grocery store. She also provides a second list of what products best fit their space for the months that schools are planning on providing food, along with a range of quantities that the farm can provide at a given time. The farm has a very tight planting schedule with a lot of successions, so she is confident in the quantity of products that she will have for school districts. She advises that it is really important not to over-promise things, saying “Certainly if you have never grown cucumbers it is not a good idea to get into selling cucumbers to the school.” She adds, “Thinking about tried-and-true commitments that you can honor is really important for the relationships and being able to creatively address issues that come up.”

This trust has extended into the farm’s work with schools throughout the pandemic. Sales to schools have increased during the pandemic, and sales to the bigger district have gone up considerably. One reason for this is the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. The district Food Service Director asked if Cattail Organics could participate in this program. Now Cattail Organics is providing bags of different vegetables for the kids in the district. Because there are so many virtual learners, the school district has been sending home fresh fruits and vegetables for that program. That was

“That was important for me to realize—you’re not planning as a farmer to provide all of the food for the district. Localizing the entire school lunch program is not my goal as a farmer. Just trying to insert in meaningful delicious food into the season where it mutually works for farmers and school districts is a much better goal. We don’t come close to producing all of the vegetables that a single school district is using—that would take all of our production. Often the farm season and the school season don’t overlap very well. Even with storage crops we are limited in how much we could get them.”
—Kat Becker, Cattail Organics
not preplanned, but Cattail Organics was able to work with Wassau School District and work around what they had in the field and come up with some interesting options. Because the school district continued to provide meals to kids in the community all summer long, there were opportunities to provide fresh produce from Cattail Organics throughout the summer. This was possible because the districts are really good with their budgets and can plan their meals on the fly. This is an example of an opportunity that the farm was able to insert itself into because the district is great at communication and budgeting and they already had a trusting relationship established.

**Processing, Production, and Food Safety**

Cattail Organics practices standard food safety protocols and carries liability insurance for all of their accounts. The schools that both Kat and her husband work with don’t require much that is different from any other market channels that they sell to. Kat mentioned that they adhere to the Food Safety Modernization Act set of best practices and that every farm should be following them. The farm already had a lot of infrastructure in place, such as insulated concrete floors and washable surfaces; that is pretty much standard for produce farms. She also suggested that a cooler is a must for selling wholesale produce.

The districts that she and her husband work with have never asked for a GAP audit; however, many of the aggregators and distributors require this in Wisconsin. She also mentioned that there were additional reasons that the farm doesn’t work with a distributor or aggregator, saying, “We lose control of our pricing. Schools pay more and we pay more. We would rather the school district buy direct from us.”

**Tips for Farmers Thinking about Selling to Schools**

Kat suggests that “schools are a really hard first account and I don’t recommend that to any beginning grower.” Farmers interested in school sales should become equipped and professional around wholesale before approaching school districts. Consider working with restaurants and small grocery stores, or even distributors, as the best training to prepare you to get ready for selling to schools. Treat schools like a normal wholesale account and not some exception. Also don’t assume that they won’t pay you much and think about ways to distinguish yourself.

Having a food service director who wants to work with you is the number one thing that you need to get started. Try to find at least one school in the area to start working with and build from there. Understand that you may have some food service directors who don’t want to work with you. While there are some districts in the area with very nice food service directors who appreciate local foods, their infrastructure and purchasing setup does not allow for purchasing from local farmers. It is important to be realistic about that. “Don’t think that you can transform the entire school food-purchasing protocol in your area without other partnerships on the ground to help with that.”

She also suggests that school sales should not support an entire farm business. Consider them as one channel among several. “Generally, as a farmer, I suggest having different business within the business. Even though I am a produce farmer and always have been, as a diversification strategy, I have never grown less than 50 crops and sold to less than three to four market channels.”