CASE STUDY

Purchasing from Farmers: A Child Nutrition Director’s Perspective

Ally Mrachek, Director of Child Nutrition, Fayetteville Public Schools, Fayetteville, Arkansas

Meet the Buyer
Ally Mrachek is the Director of Child Nutrition for Fayetteville Public Schools (FPS), a district of about 10,000 enrolled students. The district has 16 schools and 15 meal-serving sites. The district serves approximately 2,100 breakfasts and 4,500 lunches each day. FPS regularly serves local foods in their meals and has had a dedicated farm to school program called Seed to Student for 13 years.

Challenges for Farmers
One of the challenges of selling to schools is that farmers are not familiar of the requirements of selling to schools and may be unsure of how to approach institutional markets. Ally has worked with many farmers to bring local food to Fayetteville students. Ally encourages farmers to talk to the school’s Child Nutrition Director to get an idea of the products and pricing and how it might work for their farm. She welcomes conversations with farmers to explain her program and to hear what products the farmers have and how they might be incorporated into the school menu. She stresses that selling to schools must be a good fit for the farmer’s business. “Farm to school isn’t right for every farm or for every product. There is flexibility, though, and room for all types of pricing. There is the possibility to feature a higher-priced item on occasion or use it for a taste-test instead of making it a regular menu item.”

Products that Work
Fayetteville Public Schools Food Services has found several products that are a good fit for the schools and for the farmer. Apples have been a very successful product, because they serve apples with breakfast, lunch, and snack programs, and it is easy to replace non-local apples with local apples. They are able to serve local apples from August through January. They also regularly serve local ground beef. This is a higher-priced item because it is grass-fed, so they showcase the product with certain menu items like tacos and nachos. This product works well for the farmer and for

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the schools because the farmer is able to deliver the product directly from the processor. The school district buys a large amount of ground beef, stores the product in their district warehouse freezer, and then uses up the supply. With larger, less-frequent purchases the farmer and the school district have a good idea of their inventory and there are fewer transactions to deal with.

Products like rice, sweet potatoes, and winter squash have also been a good fit for Fayetteville’s Seed to Student program because they are shelf-stable. The program is able to purchase large amounts and then use them over time. Throughout the fall and spring, they showcase a variety of fresh products, including bell peppers and strawberries, on their menus.

**Tips for Farmers**

Communication is key to making the relationship work between local farmers and the school. FPS requires that the farmers they work with use email. This provides a consistent form of communication and a document trail of what is decided. They have also implemented an order and delivery schedule. That way, the farmer always knows when their products are expected. Ally does menu planning months in advance, so she will follow up with farmers close to the time when a product is needed to see what they have.

FPS purchases all its local products directly from growers; they don’t purchase local products through a distributor or third party. Ally likes to have a conversation with farmers before buying their products. During this conversation, she will explain the bidding process (how the school buys products) and discuss the types of products they can use in their menus. She will share past pricing of products so farmers can determine if a similar price will work for their business. If so, the farmers can respond to a bid solicitation. A couple of tips Ally wants farmers to know: bring samples of your products to that initial meeting. A Child Nutrition Director will love tasty samples. This can also be a way to showcase the flavor of your product or the different varieties that you grow. It is also very important for you to come to the conversation knowing what you need for your operation/farm business. This includes prices and volumes needed to make it a viable market. Knowing that information can help you and the buyer determine if it is a good fit for your farm.

**Adapting Through the Pandemic**

The COVID-19 Pandemic disrupted many farm-to-school markets. FPS continued to buy and serve local products throughout the pandemic, though purchasing was decreased because they were feeding fewer kids. FPS has been offering weekly meal packs for students who are learning virtually. Because these packs include a week’s worth of meals, they are able to include a whole head of lettuce or whole sweet potato instead of cutting them up for individual meals. They include a recipe card so families know how to use these products. FPS has maintained its commitment to local foods and Ally has worked to secure funds to expand the purchasing of local products.