Building Sustainable Relationships with School Nutrition Programs

Rae Rusnak, L&R Poultry and Produce, Goodhue County, Minnesota

Meet the Farmer

Rae Rusnak owns L&R Poultry and Produce, a 72-acre farm in Goodhue County, Minnesota, where she grows organic vegetables and maintains a flock of 300 chickens for free-range eggs. She began her farm in 2003 and made her first school sale in 2010. Today, her largest school market is Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS). As the second-largest school district in Minnesota, MPS serves more than 35,000 students across 63 school sites. Kate Seybold is the district’s Farm to School Coordinator and works directly with farmers like Rae to purchase local food for the district’s food service program.

Expanding to School Markets

After several years of selling her products to food co-ops and at farmers markets, Rae made a connection with a food service director at a nearby, small school district who was looking to start incorporating local foods. This one opportunity quickly branched out into working with other school districts. In 2012, Rae received an email about MPS seeking opportunities to connect with local producers. At the time, MPS was transforming its food service approaches, including working to put kitchens back in every school, returning to scratch cooking, and serving more fresh produce. Farm to school purchasing was a natural fit for these efforts.

For Rae, the status and magnitude of MPS’s food service program made for an exciting opportunity. In addition to providing a large-scale market for her products, MPS also offered Rae training and support to become more knowledgeable about selling to institutions. “There are a few more steps involved than just selling to the local co-op, and it takes some getting used to,” said Rae. “I was happy to get the institutional-sales education, so I knew how that purchasing worked. Now I feel very comfortable with the process.” MPS is also committed to helping producers see the whole process of what happens when their food leaves the farm. “We get to meet with students in the classroom, meet with parents at community meals, and have had tours of the dining rooms with school food staff. Seeing this whole picture is invaluable,” said Rae.

Matching Products to The School Market

Over the years, Rae and Kate have worked closely to hone in on what products work best for Rae’s farm and MPS’s school meal menus. This included considering several factors:

• What grows best in the soil and microclimate on Rae’s farm?
• What can be grown in quantities that meet MPS’s needs?
• What grows reliably year after year?
• What will MPS purchase?
The answers to these questions for Rae and MPS have been winter squash (butternut and spaghetti squash), summer squash (zucchini and yellow squash), and root vegetables (rutabaga and kohlrabi). Focusing on these items has allowed Rae to become more mechanized and efficient in her growing. “I was looking to grow fewer vegetables, but at larger quantities. These vegetables were a good fit for that,” she said. Knowing these vegetables are consistently a good fit for MPS has also allowed Rae to get more specialized in the varieties she’s growing. Unlike co-ops and direct-to-consumer markets, school districts can handle large-sized produce, which can have high processing yield and less waste.

MPS uses a local food processor to wash, chop, package, and deliver local produce from farmers like Rae to individual school kitchens. This third-party company is an important one to highlight in Rae and MPS’s relationship. While MPS facilitates an annual Request for Proposals (RFP) and works directly with farmers to plan and order produce for the year, the local food processor is the one to send purchase orders to farmers. It’s where the farmers deliver their products and get paid, and the company from which MPS buys finished, local produce for its school meals.

**Keys to Successful Long-Term Relationship Development**

Rae and Kate identified several key elements that have made their long-term farm to school relationships successful:

**Consistent Communication:** Communication is a two-way street for Rae and Kate. They use both email and phone calls to stay in touch throughout the entire procurement process – from the annual RFP in the winter, through Rae delivering her produce to the local food processor. “Farming is a dynamic process, and no two years are the same. But if I communicate things early and clearly – like if a crop got washed out – it helps us both plan and avoid anxious moments,” said Rae.

**Learn from Others:** “A school and a farmer starting farm to school together will have some logistics to figure out,” said Rae. “As a farmer, I didn’t know what the school didn’t know. And the school didn’t know what I didn’t know!” Rae recommends connecting with other schools and farmers who have successful relationships to hear their recommendations and stories, so newcomers don’t have to learn the hard way early on.

**Building Trust:** As MPS has built up its farm to school program, there has been a dedicated effort to solicit honest feedback from the farmers it works with to create a program that’s impactful for all involved. Candid feedback from farmers has made the program stronger. This has been key to building trust and the successful long-term relationships that make MPS’s farm to school program work.

**“Fair and Just Business Relationships”**

For Rae, farm to school has been a “tremendous business opportunity.” Through her steady and long-term relationship with MPS, she’s been able to scale up her business, become more mechanized, and increase her farm’s productivity. MPS’s large purchases have also allowed her to save time and fuel in deliveries, compared to when she made smaller sales to co-ops, and they have also made it easier to have additional employees, since she knows what the season’s work will be and how much it makes sense to invest in labor costs.

For producers looking to build relationships like that between L&H Poultry and Produce and MPS, Rae and Kate offer these suggestions based on their experiences working together:

- Start small, while also thinking forward about how you want to grow
- Think strategically about products that work best for your farm and for the institutions you want to sell to
- Be persistent and patient
- Keep up with good communication

“Most of us want to feel like we’re doing something that matters. And I really feel like this program is good for everyone involved,” said Rae. “It’s good for the land, good for animals, good for growers, good for schools, good for kids and families, good for the community. It’s people treating one another decently. These are fair and just business relationships.”