

## The Right Products and the Right Partnership

*Kenneth Sweat, Sweat's Produce,  
Wrightsville, Georgia*

### Meet the Farmer

Kenneth Sweat owns Sweat's Produce, a 100-acre farm in Wrightsville, Georgia, where he has grown peas, butter beans, and other vegetable crops for more than 40 years. In addition to managing his farm, Kenneth operates a farm store where he sells many of his products. He also makes sales to local schools, such as Burke County Public Schools (BCPS), which serves approximately 4,300 students across five school sites. Burke County is located in a rural part of Georgia, and with just two grocery stores in the entire county, fresh food access can be a challenge for many families. Providing students with healthy, local foods in school meals is a key motivator for Donna Martin, the district's Director of School Nutrition Programs. She started the district's farm to school program eight years ago and was the first one to reach out to Kenneth about selling his peas and butter beans for students to eat in school meals. "Kenneth will tell you that I wore him down to grow for us," said Donna. "But I also like to remind him, we're the gate that opened the gate, that opened the next gate...!"

### Making Sales to School Markets

Currently, between 25% and 40% of Kenneth's total produce sales are made to school markets. In addition to selling to BCPS, he makes sales to several other area school districts, as well. In total, he estimates selling 6,000 to 7,000 bushels of peas and butter beans to schools every year. His other markets include local grocery stores, farmers markets, co-ops, and his own farm store.

Selling to schools has several advantages that make it a good fit with Kenneth's business. Security in being paid for his products on time is one of the top advantages. "You're not worried about getting your money," said Kenneth. "It may take 30 days, but they're good people to do business with." Donna adds, "When we award a bid – for whatever the product is – the farmers know they have a guaranteed buy from us." BCPS's annual bidding process – done during the winter months to plan for the next school year – also helps Kenneth know what crops he needs to plant, how much of each, and at what times in order to meet BCPS and other schools' needs throughout the year. "This is a great way of doing it," said Kenneth. It helps both farmers and schools know what to expect and plan for in the months ahead. For



*Credit: Donna Martin, Burke County Public Schools*

### About Sweat's Produce

- Wrightsville, Georgia
- Peas, butter beans, and other vegetables
- 100 acres



*Kenneth Sweat, Sweat's Produce. Credit: Donna Martin, Burke County Public Schools*

Kenneth, there's also a community benefit in selling his products to school. "Some of these foods, kids wouldn't get to eat if not at school," he said.

### Logistics and Details that Make School Sales Work

Kenneth's peas and butter beans have been an especially good fit for BCPS and other school districts. One of the main reasons is that they are easy to cook, and they taste delicious either fresh or frozen. To take advantage of this, Kenneth has been committed to developing a process for freezing his produce in a way that preserves peak quality and lets it be easily stored for year-round use. "I can provide fresh peas and beans about five months of the growing season. And then I can have the rest in the freezer, according to my sales," said Kenneth. Because many school districts lack excess storage space, Kenneth keeps the frozen products and delivers them on a schedule, just as he does when the products are fresh.

Unlike some other farm to school programs across the country, Kenneth and BCPS do not use a third-party local produce processor or distributor. Kenneth’s business model and BCPS’s school kitchen setups allow Kenneth to deliver his farm products directly to BCPS schools. The district’s annual bidding process helps Kenneth know exactly how much to deliver to each site and on what dates throughout the school year. At BCPS, Kenneth delivers products to all five of the districts’ school sites, each of which has its own kitchen. As with all strong farm to school partnerships, he and Donna communicate regularly to confirm plans and details throughout the year. For example, if Kenneth has a bumper crop of something, Donna may be able to make an additional purchase and incorporate it into BCPS’s food service.



Credit: Donna Martin, Burke County Public Schools

**Key Learnings for Farm to School Success**

From their years of working together, Kenneth and Donna have identified several key learnings that have made their farm to school partnership successful. For Kenneth, taking advantage of local Cooperative Extension programs, state agency partners, and other local organizations that provide training and resources on food safety practices was an important first step in his farm to school sales. This is something BCPS is also committed to and provides for all of the farmers it works with. Schools have high food-safety and food-quality standards, and having a solid understanding of how to meet these standards will benefit any farmer looking to make school sales. Donna also recommends using local partner organizations and connecting with other school districts and farmers who have done farm to school to think through important details like stagger planting, packaging, delivery, and billing that may be different when selling to schools than other markets. “Farmers know about growing products,” Donna said, “but they may need extra guidance on packaging it all up to meet schools’ needs.”

Kenneth and Donna’s partnership in providing the students of BCPS with high-quality, local produce in school meals is a strong example of how the right products and the right farm to school opportunity can benefit farmers, schools, children, and communities. “There’s a lot more demand than I can handle,” said Kenneth, who after 40 years of farming is content with his sales. Many schools continue to be eager to have farm to school partnerships like Kenneth and Donna’s, and the time is right for more farmers and producers to seek out these partnership opportunities.

**Local Products Sourced by Burke County Public Schools**

Burke County Public Schools typically purchases around \$100,000 per year in local products from Georgia farmers and producers. This includes items such as the following:



Kenneth shows a processed and packaged bag of white peas. A bag like this will be frozen and stored until ready for school delivery. Credit: Donna Martin, Burke County Public Schools

- Collards
- Peas
- Potatoes
- Cabbage
- Cherry Tomatoes
- Beefsteak Tomatoes
- Butter Beans
- Corn
- Lettuce
- Whole-Wheat Flour
- Whole-Grain Grits
- Watermelon
- Cantaloupe
- Sweet Potatoes
- Black-Eyed Peas
- White Acre Peas
- Squash
- Broccoli
- Apples
- And more!