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School

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Nutrition

Going Green. Is That Still the Goal?





EARTH-FRIENDLY EATING

BY CECILY WALTERS

FROM YOUR OWN KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE—not to mention the coverage in this special annual issue of *School Nutrition*—you are already aware that “going green” can mean many different strategies. The most common involve energy conservation and methods for managing, reducing and disposing of waste. But today’s green movement also focuses on *what we eat* and where it comes from.

Thus, when it comes to school nutrition menu planning and procurement, going green involves three concepts: *organic*; *locally grown, sourced and produced*; and *sustainable*. While you are likely to hear these three terms together, don’t make the mistake of thinking of them as synonymous. Indeed, they are very different, and depending on your geographic location, suppliers, budget and customers, they may not all be achievable approaches for your operation. Let’s take a look at the three concepts, one by one, and understand what they mean—and what they don’t.

ORGANIC

ORGANIC ORIGINS

The word “organic” is used to describe a particular method for growing or processing an agricultural product. It was first defined by British agriculturist Walter James, who, in his 1940 book *Look to the Land*, described organic farming as a holistic, ecologically balanced approach, based on his idea of “the farm as organism.” He contrasted this method with chemical farming, which he explained as a practice that relied on “imported fertility” and thus could not be self-sufficient.

School Nutrition’s guide will help you make sense of **organic**, **local** and **sustainable foods** to determine how they might fit within your operation.

SNAPSHOT

- There is no scientific evidence that proves that organic and locally sourced foods offer better nutrition.
- With no agreed-upon definitions for "local" or "sustainable," districts must set their own specification parameters for procurement.
- Work with various stakeholders to understand and manage customer expectations.





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RANDOM FACTS

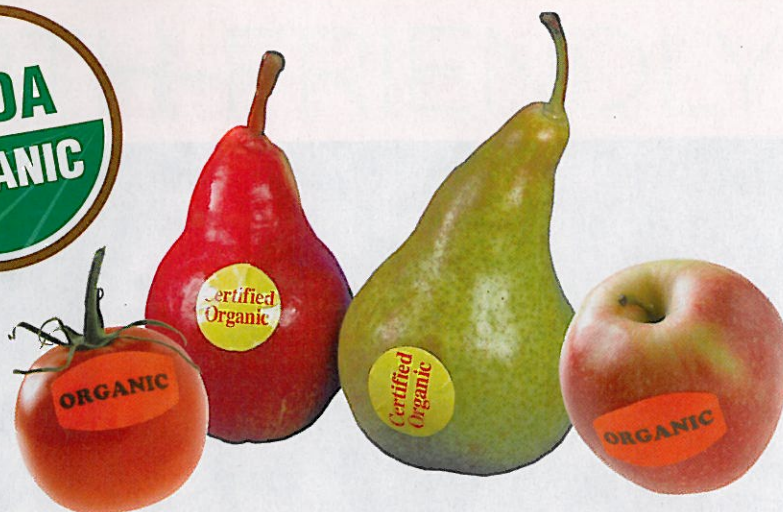
- When the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 was passed by Congress, the United States had less than a million acres of certified organic farmland. But by the time USDA implemented national organic standards in 2002, such farmland had doubled—doubling again between 2002 and 2005, says USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS). Organic livestock production has grown even faster, the agency notes.

- USDA actually has four classifications for organic foods: "100% organic" (100% organic ingredients); "Organic" (must contain at least 95% organic ingredients); "Made of organic ingredients" (must contain at least 70% organic ingredients); "Have some organic ingredients" (may contain less than 70% organic ingredients).

- Wal-Mart, the nation's largest retailer, is on record defining "local" as anything grown in the same state it's sold. Whole Foods, which corners the market on natural and organic foods, reportedly considers "local" to be anything produced within seven hours of one of its stores.

- Many of the fierce advocates of the locally grown movement call themselves "locavores."

- A 2003 study published by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture found that the average grocery store's produce travels nearly 1,500 miles between the farm where it was grown and your refrigerator.



Today, many advocates have taken this idea further, using growing techniques and approaches that are arguably more "pure." For example, most organic references indicate that crops have not been genetically modified and have been kept separate from conventional products. Organic farmers are prohibited from using synthetic pesticides or petroleum- and sewage-based fertilizers. Organic livestock must have access to the outdoors and be fed organic feed; they may not be given antibiotics, growth hormones or any animal by-products. Foods claiming to be organic should be free of artificial additives and processed with fewer artificial methods, avoiding chemical ripening and food irradiation.

The Organic Trade Association, which represents companies in the United States and Canada, promotes a definition passed by the National Organic Standards Board in 1995, which notes, in part, that organic agriculture is based on "management practices that restore, maintain and enhance ecological harmony." The primary goal of organic agriculture, says the organization, is "to optimize the health and productivity of interdependent communities of soil life, plants, animals and people."

LABELS DON'T LIE

So, who is enforcing these practices? The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Organic Program (NOP) is the federal regulatory framework that estab-

lishes standards and practices for organic foods and farming in this country, in accordance with the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990. NOP is administered by USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service.

The Act covered all details pertaining to the production, processing, delivery and retail sale of organic foods. Farmers, ranchers and food processors who wish to use the word "organic" on product labels or in describing their businesses and practices must go through a certification process to ensure that they do, in fact, meet all established standards. (Producers with annual sales not exceeding \$5,000 are exempted from the certification requirement, although they must still follow NOP standards and cannot use the term "certified organic.")

As part of the certification process, producers must complete an application, develop an organic system plan and undergo an annual quality inspection. Certification is performed in the United States by 56 USDA-accredited certification agencies. Products that have at least 95% organic ingredients can carry the USDA Organic seal on their labels.

ORGANIC IN ACTION

Now that you're up to speed on what it takes for a food item to earn the right to call itself organic, let's look at some of the related benefits and detriments of this food product category. First, there is general consensus from research findings in numerous areas

that the production of organic foods yields both short- and long-term benefits to the planet—and to the long-term future of agriculture itself. According to USDA's Economic Research Service, the environmental benefits of organic production include reduced nutrient pollution, improved soil matter, lower energy use, reduced pesticide residues in food and water and enhanced biodiversity.

But such benefits come at a literal price. Organic products cost consumers—and school nutrition operations—more than their conventionally grown/processed counterparts. There are consequences to avoiding synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, growth hormones, antibiotics and so on: inconsistent quality and sometimes lower product yields. (After all, there is a reason behind the rise in the use of chemicals and additives in modern agriculture.) Less-harmful alternatives may be less effective—or may cost more until demand for them rises. Also, the time and effort required to complete the organic certification process and to consistently meet the government's standards for organic production incur additional costs. All of these are passed down the line, and can be downright prohibitive to low-income families and budget-minded school nutrition operations.

Also, many organic producers are smaller in scope than their non-organic competitors. This means they tend to distribute their food in smaller quantities and/or may be located far away from your community. And because organic standards prohibit most processes that prolong freshness, higher transportation costs may be incurred to ensure that products reach the store before they spoil. In addition, if an organic alternative must travel a further distance from the farm to your table than a conventionally produced item, do the related carbon emissions negate the positive environmental effects of organic farming? As with many "going green" strategies, there are no clear and easy answers.

BETTER FOR YOU?

Another consideration regarding organic foods is that researchers have not achieved consensus on the potential nutritional advantages of organic foods versus conventional items, according to the American Dietetic Association's Hunger and Environmental Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group. Some studies suggest that, on average, organically grown produce contains slightly higher levels of a few nutrients. But other studies have seen no nutritional differences.

Still, many advocates insist that the *absence* of detrimental substances (pesticides, additives, hormones, antibiotics, etc.) means that organic foods are better for us over the long haul. And, arguably, organic foods (especially locally grown) are fresher and more flavorful, which may help to increase their consumption, especially among children.

LOCAL

VOCAL ABOUT LOCAL

Let's move on to understanding what it means for a food to be classified as "local." *The Changing Vocabulary of Food Purchasing: A Guide for Foodservice Professionals*, a resource prepared by the Sustainable Food Lab, defines a "local food" as an item that "is produced and/or processed as close as possible to where it was consumed."


That is a pretty broad definition and for good reason. There simply is no agreed-upon standard distance that defines "local." Some prefer to establish a mileage parameter, while others consider local foods to be anything produced in a particular region. And, when you factor in the location of farmland and the length of growing seasons, "local" measurements can vary from 50 to 300 miles—or more, depending on the specific product.

Some define the area as within a day's driving—about 400 miles—considering that a reasonable distance to transport goods and services. Others think that simple distance itself is an

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unreasonable measurement. For example, you may have heard of a “food mile,” which is a concept that originated in Europe. This measurement is the overall carbon footprint created from the energy involved in a specific item’s production. Total food miles are calculated by converting the amount of greenhouse gas emissions resulting from a wide variety of links in the supply chain that take a food from seed to table: tractors, pesticides, fertilizers, refrigeration, packaging and transportation. As you can imagine, this calculation can be difficult to develop accurately and apply consistently.

Another way to map “local” boundaries is to use the “foodshed” concept, in which food production is considered from the perspective of a basic ecological unit defined by its climate, soil, water, species and agrisystems. The size of the foodshed varies depending on the year-round availability of foods and the variety of foods grown and processed in the area. Of course, some argue that with the globalization of agriculture, many foodsheds wind up encompassing the entire world!

BEYOND FIELDS AND ORCHARDS

The types of foods available in most foodsheds or any geographic area are rarely limited to fresh produce, which is what likely comes to mind for most people when they think of foods sold by a nearby farm or at a farmer’s market. So, it’s important to remember that “locally grown” references can be applied to a wide range of products, such as, but not limited to, livestock, flour, fish, honey and milk.

Another important fact to keep in mind is that local characterizations aren’t restricted to raw and unprocessed foods. Some food purveyors expand their definition of “local” to support all area businesses in the agriculture supply chain, including local processors that turn bulk items into finished products, such as tomato sauce or chicken nuggets.

And while you might hear terminology linking local foods and farm-to-school programs, a school nutrition operation can menu numerous local items *without* taking part in a farm-to-school program. A district may choose to specify and procure locally produced foods without entering into direct agreements with specific farmers.

Of course, whether your operation opts to serve local foods as part of a farm-to-school program or as part of a separate agreement, you and your student



customers will enjoy a number of real benefits. Buying local produce, for example, allows you to menu fresh items at their peak, ensuring better flavor and lessening your reliance on processing. It also may provide you with more variety than if you had to transport items from a greater distance. Plus, you have the opportunity to support area businesses and the local economy.

And by reducing the distance from farm to fork, you reduce the harmful effects of food distribution on the planet. This, in turn, can lead to some great education opportunities. “For example, talking about the impact of local foods teaches kids about greenhouse gases in a real-life situation,” notes Susan Sweitzer, a program officer with the Sustainable Food Lab. In addition, many children (and their parents) have no real understanding of food origins—connecting foods on the plate no further than the grocery store or a television advertisement.



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LOCAL LIMITATIONS?

School nutrition operations may encounter some challenges in meeting mandates regarding locally grown menu items. For example,

- While local farms may be able to document good agricultural practices (GAPs) to ensure food safety (see “Mind the GAP,” June/July 2010), they may not carry sufficient liability insurance or afford to conduct independent food-safety audits that might be required by a state or local authority of vendors serving school districts.
- Incorporating the limitations of regional growing seasons might be prohibitive for operations without the expertise or manpower to make continual menu adjustments throughout the year.
- Larger districts may not be able to attain the product volume their operation requires from local vendors.
- The sheer number of agreements involved to procure some items locally and others regionally or nationally may be an impediment to those districts accustomed to prime vendor relationships. Multiple purchasing agreements also could reduce the purchasing power for lower prices a district might have when awarding a single bid.
- And, as with organic foods, eating local foods has not been scientifically proven to be any healthier than foods that have not been produced locally, concedes Sweitzer. So, it could be important to thoughtfully manage the expectations of your customers—students and parents.

SUSTAINABLE

SUSTAINABLE SUSTENANCE

So, now you know more about organic and local foods, but where do sustainable foods fit into the mix? If you're like more than 63% of the participants in a recent United Soybean Board study on consumer attitudes, you might not be entirely sure of

what “sustainable farming” means! But don't get down on yourself—the concept of sustainability can be hard to explain, because a clear-cut, enforceable definition simply does not exist.

“‘Sustainability’ has also been used interchangeably with green and eco, which appear to be equally vague terms, open to interpretations that range from the superficial to the deep and systemic,” says Lisa Bennett, communications director for the Center for Ecoliteracy. The organization defines “sustainability” as cooperating with the ways in which nature sustains life. Of course, Bennett adds, few of us understand such an inherently complex concept as “the ways in which nature sustains life”!

Along similar lines, Sustainable Table.org notes that this variety of interpretations has led “sustainability” to be known as more of a philosophy or way of life than a label that can be applied easily to a product or business. Nonetheless, the website gives it a try, defining a “sustainable food product” as one whose production process ensures that the resources used to produce a food will still be available for future generations. To expand on this idea, a sustainable product is one that can be created multiple times, without resulting in negative environmental effects, without causing waste products to accumulate as pollution and without negatively impacting the well-being of workers or communities.

Other advocates draw similar parallels to standards for organic foods. Sustainable agriculture can involve food production approaches that not only don't harm the environment but also respect workers, are humane to animals, provide fair wages to farmers and workers and help create the long-term support of farming communities.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

While “sustainable” can't be defined in a single, black-and-white manner, it doesn't mean that your school nutrition operation



GREEN EATING GUIDE

The following websites may be useful for learning more about the concepts explored in this article.

Organic

- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service
www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/nop
- American Dietetic Association, Hunger and Environmental Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group
www.eatright.org/About/Content.aspx?id=6812

Local

- Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy
www.iatp.org/localFoods

Sustainable

- Center for Ecoliteracy
www.ecoliteracy.org/downloads/rethinking-school-lunch-guide

General Glossary

- Sustainable Food Lab: The Changing Vocabulary of Food Purchasing: A Guide for Food-service Professionals
www.mn-farmtoschool.umn.edu/GuideforFoodServiceProf.pdf
- Sustainable Table
www.sustainabletable.org/intro/dictionary/index.html

can't explore partnerships with suppliers who purport to produce sustainable foods. When evaluating potential vendors, David Binkle, deputy director of food services for the Los Angeles Unified School District and a consultant for the



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Center for Ecoliteracy, recommends a three-step approach.

First, he says, spread the message about your goals to serve sustainable foods. Share what you are trying to do as a school district in this area and precisely how you and your district define sustainable in terms of products and practices. Binkle credits his district's superintendent and school board for their "progressive leadership" as it relates to sustainability. He holds an annual vendor summit with current and potential vendors, using the event to spell out his procurement needs and wants.

It's important that you and your customers realize that the terms are not interchangeable. Local foods that are not pesticide-free are not organic. Organic foods on your supermarket shelf might have been grown in China, making them far from locally sourced or sustainable.

Also essential, says Binkle, is for school nutrition operators to understand the measurements they will use in determining the acceptability of a sustainable item. For example, he says, if you want all of the milk for your district to come from the same herd of cows, you need to specify this to potential dairy partners. Or, include in your bids a request for a sustainable supply chain that provides elements that add value and eliminates those that do not. As an example, a dairy could print nutrition education facts about milk on milk cartons rather than promoting its name, especially if the district has prohibitions regarding product branding. As with all school nutrition procurement, it's important to put all your specifications in writing—it will be easier for everyone involved to understand the priorities and then determine what is achievable, Binkle cautions.

Finally, he advises, work continually with all your customers and partners—students, parents, members of your community, USDA and state agency staff—to understand and manage customer expectations, especially in this era of increased scrutiny of school nutrition programs. As with local foods, sustainable foods provide valuable opportunities for nutrition education, he offers, noting, "Things are moving rapidly in the area of sustainability. What we say is sustainable today could change within 12 to 24

months" and the next challenge will be ongoing education to help define organic, local and sustainable foods for consumers. (Looks like *School Nutrition* is helping to put you ahead of that curve!)

BE PREPARED, BE AWARE

The information in this article should help you make some sense of the complex jargon associated with green eating, so that you can dispel misunderstandings and manage community expectations. It's important that you and your customers realize that the terms are not interchangeable. Local foods that are not

pesticide-free are not organic. Organic foods on your supermarket shelf might have been grown in China, making them far from locally sourced or sustainable.

Determine the priorities for your operation. Develop practical procurement criteria in this area. Can supply meet demand?

Can you ensure food safety? What can you afford? What are the pros and cons? Don't take promotional language and literature at face value; challenge your current and potential vendors with detailed questions: "What is the name and address of the farm where this product is grown?" "What type of feed do you give your cattle?" "What pesticides are used with this crop?"

Remember, starting small is an eminently sensible approach. If you've determined that you want to make procuring locally sourced foods a priority, don't attempt to revamp your entire menu next month! Start with one product category—say, your dairy. Add one or two locally grown produce items, especially those with built-in appeal, such as apples or potatoes. Be responsible. As you encourage and support "green eating," do so in ways that don't compromise the fundamental sustainability of your school nutrition operation! **SN**

Cecily Walters is assistant editor of *School Nutrition*. Photography and illustration by **Zemdega, Thornberry, infoinages, jonya and turkkol/istockphoto.com**.

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