



Growing for Schools

A Farmer's Guide for Exploring New Markets



CENTER FOR
ECOLITERACY

CALIFORNIA FOOD
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Published by Learning in the Real World

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Center for Ecoliteracy
David Brower Center
2150 Allston Way, Suite 270
Berkeley, CA 94704-1377

For more information visit ecoliteracy.org.

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Cultivando para las escuelas: Una guía para agricultores sobre cómo explorar nuevos mercados también está disponible en español aquí: ecoliteracy.org/growing-for-schools

Introduction

When a student learns that the lettuce on their tray came from a farm down the road, it sparks curiosity, pride, and often a willingness to try something new. Few things encourage healthy eating more than offering students fresh and seasonal produce grown just miles from their cafeteria. Selling your produce to nearby schools can be a meaningful and profitable endeavor and we hope this guide helps you explore the possibilities.

Working with school nutrition programs is a little different from selling to restaurants or at farmers markets. But it is a partnership with a purpose: **getting good food to kids**. Schools follow purchasing rules set by federal, state, and local agencies, and they must also meet district policies. These rules can feel confusing at first, but once you understand them, they simply become another part of doing business.

One benefit many farmers don't expect when selling fresh fruits and vegetables to schools is the steady demand schools have. While restaurants or farmers markets may slow down in the winter, schools continue to serve meals throughout the year, often including summer months. That makes them a reliable customer and ongoing source of consistent revenue. In California, school districts are projected to serve more than a billion school meals in the 2025–26 school year—meals that will require billions of dollars' worth of food. Beyond the financial value, there is the deep reward of knowing your food is feeding the minds and bodies of students who will shape our future.

This guide offers a clear overview of how school nutrition programs work along with practical tips to help you confidently begin selling your produce to schools. Let's get started!



School Nutrition Programs: An Overview

School nutrition programs operate at the school district level with their own structure, leadership, and staff. School nutrition programs provide students with different meal offerings throughout the day. At a basic level, schools provide breakfast (School Breakfast Program) and lunch (National School Lunch Program). Depending on program needs and capacity, schools may also provide fresh fruit and vegetable snacks to students (Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program) or offer an afterschool snack or supper (Child and Adult Care Food Program). Each of these meals and snacks require different eating times and have different rules for what can be served (called “meal patterns”). School districts have the ability to offer Summer Meals during the lengthy school closure over the summer to ensure students can continue to access healthy food.

The programs that underwrite these meals are funded through federal and state sources and must follow the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) meal pattern guidelines. Meal pattern requirements are made up of the food components and vary depending on the specific program and the age group being served. Some foods fall under more than one category, but can only be counted once toward a given meal’s component requirements (for example, lentils could count toward a meal’s meat/meat alternative requirement or its vegetable requirement, but not both).

These are the meal components and some common examples:

Meat/Meat Alternatives

Beans, Beef, Chicken, Fish, Lentils, Tofu

Grains

Breads, Oats, Pasta, Rice

Milk

White or Flavored

Fruits

Apples, Berries, Citrus, Melons, Peaches, Pomegranates

Fruit can be offered as fresh, frozen, dried, canned, or 100% fruit juice.

Vegetables

Beans, Broccoli, Carrots, Celery, Corn

The vegetable component is further divided into subgroups to ensure a variety of nutrients:

Dark Green

Broccoli, Kale, Spinach

Red/Orange

Carrots, Squash, Sweet Potatoes

Starchy

Corn, Green Peas, Potatoes

Beans/Legumes

Black Beans, Lentils, Pinto Beans

Other

Artichoke, Celery, Zucchini

When thinking about what you might sell to schools, filtering your products through these categories is a helpful way to start to understand how schools think about meal planning. More details on serving sizes and category specifics can be found in the [USDA Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs](#).

While school meals in California are at no cost to the students, they are of course not free to source, prepare, and serve. Schools receive reimbursements from a mix of federal and state funds for every meal they serve. These reimbursement rates vary based on a number of factors and are determined by both federal and state guidelines. School nutrition programs must be creative in what they purchase and serve in their meal programs as they typically aim to offer all five meal components at a cost of approximately \$1.25 to \$1.75 per serving, which includes their costs of labor. Additionally, many schools purchase food at scale and consider variety of different strategies of sourcing, preparing, and serving school meals.



How School Nutrition Programs Make Purchases

There are a lot of rules that school nutrition programs must follow when they are making purchases. Most, for instance, are unable to pay a farmer's invoice directly without first having them approved as a vendor, which means getting approval from their department, their school district, and sometimes even their county Office of Education. Becoming an "approved vendor" can sometimes be a lengthy process of several months, and payments can often take several additional weeks to process even after approval is secured. Approvals may need to be granted from Chief Business Operators, Superintendents, Board Members, and the County Office of Education. As a farmer, it's important to understand the different ways that school nutrition programs can purchase from you and the different requirements, limitations, and timelines associated with each method so that you can plan accordingly and build healthy, long-term relationships with local schools.

Micropurchase



Between \$0-\$14,999 or \$49,999 if self-certified

Noncompetitive, annual purchase threshold



Simple Acquisition



Up to \$349,999

Requires quotes from at least three vendors



Formal Purchase



\$350,000+

Public and lengthy RFP process with competitive bids

Micropurchases

A school nutrition program may buy food through a micropurchase, which is a method designed for small-scale procurement as defined by federal, state, and local regulations. As the name suggests, micropurchases are intended for smaller transactions with minimal documentation needed. Although the specific limit can vary year to year, the current federal micropurchase limit is \$50,000 annually per vendor for school nutrition programs that self-certify, which many do. Self-certification allows a school district to confirm that they are a low risk for financial and audit issues. Through completing the process, the district states that they have appropriate controls in place and have no known significant audit findings.

Micropurchases are a great way to get started selling to a school nutrition program. They enable you to try out the partnership and test pickup or delivery times, schedules, locations, and student acceptability.

Simple Acquisition

Once the micropurchase limit has been reached for the year and you choose to continue selling to the school, the purchase moves into the simple acquisition category. This category covers purchases up to \$350,000. At this level, the school nutrition program will outline the specifications of the desired product and solicit bids from at least three vendors. As long as all vendors meet the stated specifications, the school must select the vendor offering the lowest price. Although contracts are not required at this level, they are strongly recommended.

Formal Purchases: Requests for Proposals and Becoming a Contracted Vendor

Once the simple acquisition limit has been reached for the year, if the farmer and the school district wish to continue doing business together, the school nutrition program is required to put the product or service out to bid to ensure fair and open competition. This process typically involves publishing a detailed Request for Proposal (RFP), inviting vendors to submit bids for consideration.

Submitted bids are evaluated using a scoring matrix and the contract is awarded based on the criteria outlined in the RFP. It is important to know that in this scenario a school nutrition program is not required to award the contract to the lowest bidder. Each school district can define its own scoring criteria, such as product quality, delivery, and location. In some cases, factors like supporting local agriculture may carry more weight than price alone.

There are existing RFPs specifically designed to support local purchasing, and these can serve as valuable models or best practices for farmers who want to become contracted vendors, obtaining their own Farm to School contract. By becoming familiar with these kinds of RFPs, farmers can structure their processes to prioritize selling products to local schools. As a contracted vendor, you are allowed to set the price limits of your operation and set the terms of your contract with the school nutrition department. Becoming a contracted vendor with a school district is an excellent method of selling to schools long term.

Formal Purchases: Requests for Proposals and Becoming a Contracted Vendor *(continued)*

Piggyback Provisions

School nutrition programs may choose to include a clause in their RFPs that allows school nutrition programs from different school districts to “piggyback” or utilize the same RFP. This provision must be clearly written into the RFP and should specify limitations, such as the number of school districts permitted to piggyback and the maximum financial amount allowed. School districts may only officially piggyback on the RFP if these conditions are met and the original School Nutrition Director provides a written letter to the school district interested in piggybacking. This is a helpful method to be aware of when exploring contract opportunities with a school district that is not yet experienced at putting out their own RFPs.

Grants and Unrestricted Funds

There are a number of grant programs, like the [USDA Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program](#) and [California Department of Food and Agriculture Grants](#), that are less restricted and allow funds to be spent on things like farm field trips, nutrition education, and promotional activities such as farmers markets at school sites. These grant programs also allow for specialty purchases for school nutrition programs, such as avocados. Specialty offerings are a great way to try out a new relationship with a school nutrition program. These funds are limited and can be difficult to scale after the grant ends. While grant funding and other unrestricted funds are limited and can be difficult to scale, it’s useful to know that such funds may exist when building a new relationship

Food Safety Plans and Insurance

A food safety plan is strongly recommended when supplying products to school districts. A good food safety plan should outline the flow of food from production through delivery, with monitoring procedures, corrective actions, and recordkeeping at each step. Identifying and managing potential contamination risks such as water use, worker hygiene, and equipment cleanliness is essential. The [USDA Good Agricultural Practices \(GAP\)](#) is a widely recognized model for creating such a plan and is often preferred or required by schools.

In addition, general liability insurance is mandatory for vendors. This protects both the farm and the school district in case of any food safety incidents or other liabilities. Coverage requirements may vary, so farms should verify local school district policies, and be aware of this requirement before responding to RFPs.



Recordkeeping

Regardless of scale, recordkeeping is essential to the success of any Farm to School partnership. Accurate records help track sales, demonstrate program impact, ensure food safety compliance, and maintain transparency with school and community partners. Records such as these may be subject to public record requests and used as documentation in administrative reviews that school nutrition programs are required to undergo.

Key data points such as what was grown, where it was grown, and when it was delivered are critical to show a compelling Farm to School partnership. This information not only supports reporting and evaluation but also highlights the value of local, high-quality food in increasing student meal participation.

To align with school district standards, be sure to retain all records for at least three years after the end of the school year.

Delivering to Schools

While some school districts are able and willing to pick up, many lack the staff and infrastructure to pick up products directly from the farm. If you are able to provide delivery directly to school districts, this can give you a competitive edge. Coordinate closely with school nutrition service staff to confirm delivery times and locations to ensure a smooth process for both parties. Most school nutrition operations are open weekdays from 5:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., so plan for scheduling deliveries within this general window.

Processing Ingredients

There are additional revenue opportunities in value-added processing of ingredients, such as chopping lettuce or cabbage and dicing potatoes or squash. These processed items save time for school kitchens, making them ideal for salad bars or ready-to-bake meals. While this service may require more resources from you, it can distinguish your farm from competitors and help you better compete with larger distributors selling to schools.

Building Capacity

Building a robust Farm to School partnership takes time and careful planning. However, there are many resources available that can help you scale more effectively. Grant funding opportunities are available to support a wide range of activities, including building facilities for value-added processing to scale your operations.

As your program grows and you demonstrate success, you may consider expanding your role by helping other farms access school markets. This could involve becoming an aggregator or establishing a food hub, which requires skills in marketing, distribution, and building strong relationships between farmers and schools.

Connecting with School Nutrition Programs

There are multiple ways to connect with your local school nutrition programs and become actively involved in Farm to School efforts. Participating in national and statewide events is a great place to start. Annual celebrations such as Farm to School Month (October), National Crunch Day, National School Breakfast Week, National School Lunch Week, and Farm to Summer Week offer built-in opportunities for promotional events that encourage school nutrition programs to partner with local farmers. These events often include taste tests, farm visits, and school-wide celebrations that highlight fresh, local foods.

In addition to participating in special events, you can create opportunities to engage directly with students and educators by hosting field trips, offering on-farm learning experiences, or leading nutrition and agriculture lessons in the classroom. These hands-on activities not only generate excitement about local food but also help build strong relationships with schools and support the development of long-term partnerships.

Many of these activities align with goals outlined in a school district's Wellness Policy, which often emphasizes nutrition education, physical activity, and connections to local food systems.

You can also tap into support networks such as the Center for Ecoliteracy's California Food for California Kids Network, the National Farm to School Network, the California Farm to School Network, and other local Farm to School coalitions. These groups often include school nutrition professionals, educators, nonprofit leaders, and community members who are passionate about integrating local agriculture into school food systems.

California Department of Food and Agriculture regional leads are an excellent resource for connecting farmers with school districts that are ready to purchase directly from farmers. These regional leads track which districts have been awarded grants and how they plan to expand their farm to school programs. An introduction to a school nutrition program that is facilitated by a regional lead helps establish credibility and significantly speeds up the trust-building process.

Nonprofits like the Center for Ecoliteracy offer valuable resources and curricula to help students understand where food comes from and why healthy, sustainable food matters. Partnering with nonprofits such as ours can amplify your impact and open doors to more school connections.

By actively participating in these initiatives and connecting with existing networks, farmers can play a vital role in shaping healthy school food environments while expanding their market opportunities.



Ready to Begin?

The Center for Ecoliteracy has been building connections between schools and farmers for more than a decade through our California Food for California Kids initiative.

Step 1: Gather Your Business Documents

Put together your insurance and tax information, food safety plan, and planting schedule or availability list. Clearly outline what you have to offer: the crops you grow, expected harvest dates, anticipated quantities, delivery options, and processing capabilities.

Be sure to highlight anything that sets you apart. Are you an organic grower? Is your child enrolled in a district school? Do you have a long history in farming or a passion for nourishing kids? These personal touches can help strengthen your connection with the district and make your offerings stand out.

The official school year often starts on July 1 and ends on June 30 of the following year. Schools may select vendors as early as February of the previous school year.

Step 2: Research What School Districts Are Nearby

Identify the school districts within your geographic region and gather information about their food service programs. Review nearby district websites to learn about their school meal menus, procurement guidelines, and wellness policies. Check their social media accounts to understand current priorities such as local purchasing, strategic plans, Farm to School initiatives, featured local farms, nutrition education, or community events. Sometimes school nutrition programs have social media handles separate from the main district handle.

As you research, note which districts demonstrate interest in fresh or local foods, highlight partnerships with farms, or promote scratch cooking. These will help you tailor your outreach, understand potential demand, and determine where your products may be the best fit.

The best contacts for next steps are typically School Nutrition Directors, Food Service Directors, Menu Planners, or Purchasing Managers. Their contact information is often listed on the district's website. Because districts vary in size and organizational structure, the appropriate point of contact may differ from one district to another.

Step 3: Contact Your Local California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) Regional Lead

CDFA regional leads have valuable insight into which school districts are good candidates for farm to school partnerships and where each district is in the development process. They can often identify districts that currently hold federal, state, or local farm to school grants and can share information about the goals and activities outlined in those grant proposals. Their contact information can be found on the [CDFA website](#).

Regional leads are also familiar with a district's readiness, potential challenges, and long-term plans, making them an excellent resource for understanding opportunities, timelines, and the level of support schools may need as they expand or strengthen their farm to school efforts.

Step 4: Establish and Refine Your Partnership

During the initial micropurchase phase of the partnership, you can establish a consistent delivery schedule, clarify menu needs, and assess student acceptability. This phase also allows you to become familiar with the purchasing and invoicing cycle. In addition, it's an excellent opportunity to test additional services such as taste tests, farmers markets, and field trips to your farm.

Get to know the yearly purchasing cycle for school districts. Take note of the school calendar, when there are breaks, and when classes are in session. Even if summer meals are offered, they are at a lower quantity than when school is in session.

Step 5: Simple Acquisition and Formal Purchases

Once your procurement activity approaches the micropurchase threshold, you will need to transition into the next phase of the purchasing process. This phase includes both simple acquisition and Formal Purchases, each with its own requirements and documentation standards described above. As you prepare for this transition, reach out to the recommended partners listed in the Appendix to ensure you meet all guidelines necessary to qualify for these types of purchases.

Step 6: Other Options

Food hubs or local distributors offer access to an already-established system of school networks, delivery routes, invoicing processes, and marketing support. Partnering with them can help you scale your procurement activities quickly and efficiently, since much of the logistical infrastructure is already in place. However, it's important to note that these services may come with a different pricing structure, so be sure to factor those costs into your overall business strategy.

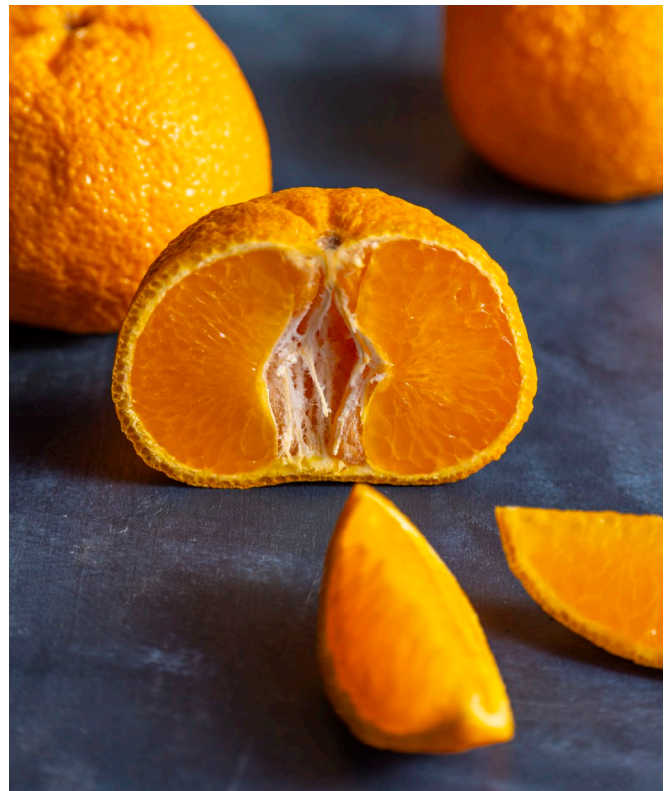
About

The Center for Ecoliteracy is reimagining school food as a pathway for learning and change.

For 30 years, we've transformed education in classrooms, cafeterias, and gardens—partnering with hundreds of school districts, supporting thousands of educators, and ensuring millions of children have access to nutritious meals at school.

Our core initiative, California Food for California Kids™, inspires schools to serve fresh, locally-sourced meals and engage students in the connections between food, culture, health, and the environment.

Together, we can build a healthier, more hopeful future for our children.



Appendix

USDA Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs

Details about school lunch requirements and meal components.

foodbuyingguide.fns.usda.gov

USDA Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program

Federal funds that are granted to school districts to support farm to school programming.

fns.usda.gov/f2s/grant

California Department of Food and Agriculture Grants

State funds that are granted to school districts to support farm to school programming.

cdfa.ca.gov/grants

USDA Good Agricultural Practices (GAP)

A factsheet on safe food handling of fruits and vegetables for child nutrition programs.

fns.usda.gov/f2s/overview-good-agricultural-practices

California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) Regional Lead Contact Information

Contact information for CDFA regional leads to support school district connections.

cafarmtofork.cdfa.ca.gov/farm_to_fork/about/staff.html

Community Alliance with Family Farms (CAFF)

An organization that supports farms overall with staff dedicated to supporting sales to school districts.

caff.org

Shared Plate Strategies

An organization that supports farms with selling to school districts.

sharedplatestrategies.com

Funding for Growing for Schools: A Farmer's Guide for Exploring New Markets is made possible by a grant from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the USDA.



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