

10 FACTS ABOUT LOCAL FOOD IN SCHOOL CAFETERIAS



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1. USDA supports and encourages the procurement of local foods.

In USDA’s vision, child nutrition programs can champion U.S. agriculture and proudly promote locally sourced foods.

2. The definition of “local” is different from district to district.

Definitions for local vary widely depending on the unique geography and climate where a school is located and on the abundance of local food producers and manufacturers. Many programs define local as within a certain number of miles from the school, within the county, or within the State. Alternatively, definitions might include more than one State (i.e., Georgia, Alabama, and Florida) or discrete parts of several States (i.e., specific counties in southwest Washington, northeast Oregon, and Idaho). In addition, some operators use different definitions of local depending on the product or season.

3. Many local products are easy to find and source.

Some products are more likely to be local than others. For example, fluid milk is produced in almost every State. Because milk is perishable and expensive to transport, milk is often local. Similarly, programs in California serving avocado are likely using local avocados, while schools in Florida probably serve local citrus. Local products that are unique and/or abundant in a region are generally easier to find and source.

4. Food distributors and food-service management companies can be great partners for local sourcing.

Increasingly, schools are including expectations regarding local sourcing in their contracts with food-service management companies and/or distributors. Even without contractual obligations regarding local, many distributors already offer local products, so an operator only needs to find out what items on the contracted list are local and order those products. This approach is a very easy way to bring local products into schools without creating separate distribution channels.

5. Locally sourced fruits and vegetables are available through the DoD Fresh Program.

Schools can elect to spend a portion of their USDA Foods entitlement money on fresh fruits and vegetables through the USDA DoD Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, operated by the U. S. Department of Defense (DoD). To supply fresh fruits and vegetables to schools, DoD contracts with over 45 produce vendors across the country. DoD Fresh vendors often have local products, and they identify them as such in the Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Order Receipt System (FFAVORS) catalog. Some vendors even list the State of origin.

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6. The small-purchase threshold determines whether to use a formal or informal procurement method and is key to understanding options for buying local.

The Federal threshold for small-purchases is \$250,000. However, State and local regulations often set lower small-purchase thresholds, and programs must follow the most restrictive threshold. If the value of a procurement is over the small-purchase threshold, schools must use one of the formal procurement methods (invitation for bid (IFB) or request for proposal (RFP)). If the value of the procurement falls below the small-purchase threshold, schools can use the informal procurement method when buying local products.

7. Program operators are free to choose from three or more local vendors in an informal procurement.

When the value of a purchase falls below the small-purchase threshold, schools can get quotes exclusively from local producers instead of issuing a formal IFB or RFP.

8. Certain product specifications can help when sourcing local foods.

Product specifications, either required or preferred, may be written for a wide variety of qualitative factors designed to complement a preference for local products. For example, including a specification that foods be fresh (harvested within a day or two of delivery) may increase the likelihood that a local vendor will win the contract. Similarly, specifications related to specific varieties can have the same effect. For example, schools can opt to purchase a type of seafood unique to the region or a variety of apple grown primarily by local farmers.

9. In any solicitation for unprocessed agricultural products, operators can indicate a preference for local foods.

Schools are allowed to indicate a preference for local products when procuring unprocessed locally grown or locally raised agricultural products. The Federal regulations do not prescribe the precise way that geographic preference should be applied, or how much preference can be given to local products. Many schools opt to assign extra points in the selection phase to vendors offering local products, making them more competitive.

10. Buying local foods is about more than fruits and vegetables.

Local offerings can span the school meal tray and include everything from the salad bar and fresh fruit and vegetable servings to the wheat in the pizza crust, beans in the chili, rice in the stir fry, turkey in the sandwiches, and cheese in the quesadillas. Local buying includes all types of producers, such as farmers, ranchers, and fishermen, as well as many types of food businesses, including food processors, manufacturers, distributors, and other value-added operations that enable school meals to showcase the full range of food products available in their respective regions.



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Questions? Email us at farmtoschool@fns.usda.gov.

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