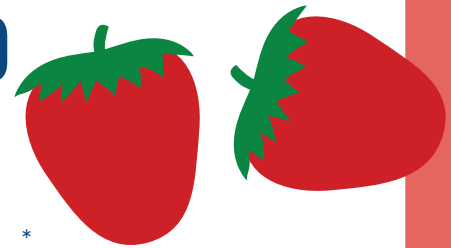




# INTEGRATING LOCAL FOODS INTO CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS



\* \* \* \* \*

**FRUITS AND VEGETABLES**, milk and cheese, whole grain breads and pastas, beans, meats, seafood, and poultry; the opportunities for serving local foods in child nutrition programs are abundant. Not only can local foods span the plate, program operators can serve local foods in all types of programs – summer meal programs (Summer Food Service Program and Seamless Summer Option), afterschool and early childhood settings (Child and Adult Care Food Program), snack programs (Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program), and school meal programs (National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program). From childcare to afterschool settings, through the school year and during summer months, the following steps will help program operators find, buy, and incorporate local foods into any child nutrition programs.

## Defining Local

It is up to you to define what local means for your program, and there are many options! Local for one program operator might mean within the county, while local for another might include the entire State and even adjacent States. Definitions of local can vary depending on the season, type of product, and may change by program or event.

## Getting Started

When planning how to integrate local items into meals, start by reviewing your menus to see what local foods you are already serving. Talking with suppliers and checking packaging and invoices for the city or State of origin may reveal that some menu items are already local. The next step is to determine how to feature additional local products. Here are several ideas for incorporating local items:

**USDA Department of Defense (DoD) Fresh Program:** Did you know all USDA DoD Fresh Program vendors label product grown within your State and grown locally (product grown within a State and bordering States)? Check with your local USDA DoD Fresh Program vendor or the web-based Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Order/ Receipt System (FFAVORS) to learn more about local products available to you.

**Seasonal cycle menus:** Plan what to serve based on the season as an excellent way to keep menus fresh and to find local foods at an affordable price.

**New recipe development:** Create recipes based on what is in season for a fun way to integrate new foods. For recipe ideas, check out the Institute for Child Nutrition’s Child Nutrition Recipe Box ([www.theicn.org/icn-resources-a-z/usda-standardized-recipes](http://www.theicn.org/icn-resources-a-z/usda-standardized-recipes)).

**Ingredient substitution:** Look for ways to trade out items in recipes to highlight local foods when they are available in your area.

**Gardens:** Harvest foods from school, day care, or community gardens and feature them in the meals you serve or coordinate garden crops with what you are serving to help introduce children to new foods and understand where their food comes from. Check out a list of school garden resources on USDA’s Farm to School Program website ([www.fns.usda.gov/f2s/farm-school-resources](http://www.fns.usda.gov/f2s/farm-school-resources)).

**Salad bar:** Kids love to help themselves! Feature local foods on salad bars in order to highlight local produce and allow kids to choose new foods on their own.

**Themed menus for special events:** Celebrate the season! Include local items to compliment special events, such as summer kick-offs, back to school BBQs, holiday harvest meals, or spring flings.

**Harvest of the Month program:** Pick one seasonal item to highlight each month. Feature special menu items, taste tests, or educational activities to showcase local products.

### Learn More:

A list of helpful menu planning and recipe resources can be found on the Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program website ([www.fns.usda.gov/f2s/farm-school-resources](http://www.fns.usda.gov/f2s/farm-school-resources)).





## Developing a Plan

Once you have determined what is available in your area and how you want to offer and feature local foods, it is time to plan how to purchase them. You can plan for buying local items the same way you would any other foods, considering your budget and forecasting what you will need. Think through these important considerations as you develop your plan:

**(1) Consider capacity:** Review your budget (e.g., labor, equipment, preparation needs), in addition to storage and distribution requirements before reaching out to producers, suppliers, and distributors.

**(2) Think about scope:** Consider the child nutrition programs you operate, and how the timeframe for those programs aligns with seasonal availability, or could be extended through methods such as canning or purchasing product from producers using season extension techniques like hoop houses in your area.

**(3) Make the purchase (using the proper procurement method):** You can seek local items from a variety of food suppliers including distributors, food service management companies, processors, producers, food hubs, gardens, and USDA Foods. Proper procurement methods must be followed whether you are buying direct from a farmer or through a distributor. Deciding which procurement method is right for you will depend on a variety of factors; see the **Decision Tree** ([www.fns.usda.gov/f2s/local-procurement-decision-tree](http://www.fns.usda.gov/f2s/local-procurement-decision-tree)) and the **Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Programs guide** (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/f2s/procuring-local-foods>) for more information.

## Tips From the Field

**Start small:** Find out what grows in your area. Identify one or two local items that will fit into your menus. This will encourage early buy-in among staff, producers, and partners, and help propel your program forward.

**Market and promote your efforts:** From signs on the serving line to features on the school menu, parent newsletters, district websites, and fun items like farmer trading cards, getting the word out on what is local on the menu is a key step to building and sustaining the program.

**Track your purchases:** Keeping tabs on the total dollars spent and pounds purchased is a good indicator of progress, shows economic impact, and is a great tool to illustrate success to your staff and the community at large.

## Top Menu Planning Challenges - SOLVED

### (1) Hard to find products that are available year round in the volume I need

An item does not have to be fresh to count as local. Freezing, dehydrating, or processing local foods for use later in the year are great ways to offer local items. Serving value-added items, such as salsa or applesauce, made from local produce are additional ways to offer items year round and support local businesses. Consider foods that may be available year round such as grains, meats, and dairy. Explore what local products have been on neighboring school districts' menus, at the grocery store or farmers' market, or contact your State department of agriculture to learn more about the products available in your State. Small volumes of local food can still make a large impact on your program and can be integrated in many creative ways for certain portions of your programming like the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program or for taste tests and special events.

### (2) Local items are not available from primary vendors

Request that vendors identify local items on invoices or provide lists of products they know are being produced in the State; list source of origin labeling as a vendor requirement in solicitations for goods and services. USDA DoD Fresh Program vendors already label products in FFAVORS with the State of origin or Locally Grown, as applicable. Use geographic preference when procuring unprocessed agricultural products to encourage distributors to carry more local items.

### (3) Local foods cost more

If procured competitively and at the right time of the growing season, local foods are often comparable in price to out-of-state counterparts. Forecasting needs in advance for all child nutrition programs will help leverage your buying power and entice vendors to offer competitive pricing.

\* \* \* \* \*

For more information and to sign up for The Dirt, the e-letter from the Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program, visit [www.fns.usda.gov/f2s/e-letter-archive](http://www.fns.usda.gov/f2s/e-letter-archive).

Questions? Email us at [SM.FN.FarmToSchool@usda.gov](mailto:SM.FN.FarmToSchool@usda.gov).