

State Farm-to-School Policies

By Douglas Shinkle

Good nutrition is linked to student achievement.

Farm-to-school programs benefit many economic sectors.

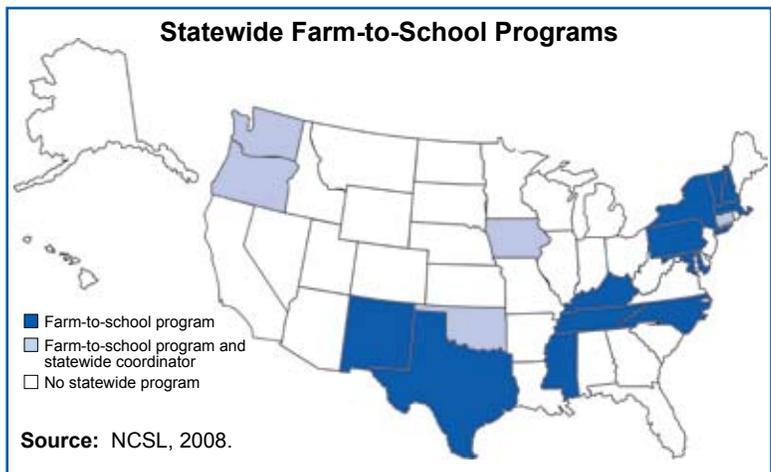
State farm-to-school programs operate in 17 states.

Evidence links good nutrition to student achievement—well-nourished students do better in school. Concern about school nutrition, childhood obesity and local farm economies have led legislators to develop statewide farm-to-school programs. The programs combine two popular ideas: Providing students with fresh, healthy food while increasing their knowledge of nutrition and agriculture; and bolstering local agricultural economies with new markets.

Partners in developing farm-to-school programs include farmers who need new markets, school health advocates who are concerned about children's nutritional needs, and environmental groups that are concerned about the effects of large-scale agriculture and food transportation. The opportunity for farm-to-school initiatives to strengthen community economies also is compelling. Farm-to-school programs create stronger local food systems and support producers and the many industries they rely upon, such as equipment, maintenance and seed businesses and transportation and processing networks.

Most of the statewide farm-to-school programs in 17 states were created legislatively with overwhelming bipartisan support. In addition, more than 2,000 local farm-to-school programs operate in 39 states. In 2008, 13 states introduced farm-to-school legislation.

State Action In March 2008, Washington passed an ambitious farm-to-school bill with nearly unanimous support. The legislation links farmers and schools, identifies curricula, establishes a fresh fruit and vegetable grant program, requires revision of food procurement laws to ease purchasing of local food, and aids other sectors of the local food economy, such as food processors.



The first steps in building a farm-to-school program include connecting growers and schools, matching schools' needs with local produce availability, and addressing logistical issues such as purchasing, transporting and processing. State websites are valuable tools to connect farms and schools. For example, New York's database allows school food service directors to search for specific products and the local farmers who supply them.

Benefits of Farm-to-School Policies. Studies show that children are more likely to eat fresh fruits and vegetables when they learn about them in the classroom and when they have a connection to the farmer. U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) case studies of farm-to-school programs show that using local fresh foods increases school meal participation and consumption of salads and other vegetables. Higher meal participation can significantly increase federal reimbursement to states for school meals. Farm-to-school programs also foster a connection to fresh food and its source through farm visits and school gardens that can stimulate student interest in proper nutrition, agriculture and environmental stewardship.

Federal law requires local school districts that participate in federal school meal programs (about 99 percent of schools) to adopt local wellness policies for food served in schools and set nutrition guidelines. Local produce may help schools meet goals for healthy foods and nutrition education.

Strategies to Address Potential Barriers. Farm-to-school programs can face numerous structural impediments. Barriers for producers include a lack of processing facilities and distribution networks. School kitchens lack space, manpower, training and equipment to prepare fresh food. Five states have created statewide farm-to-school coordinators to help producers and schools develop solutions to these issues.

Producers and schools also can be baffled by complex procurement requirements. State legislators can help simplify the process and increase competitiveness for local bidders with certain strategies. One is to raise the minimum amount schools can bid for food. Higher bid thresholds can give food service directors more latitude to choose local food based on factors other than price. The Michigan Legislature currently is considering a bill to simplify school purchases of local food under \$100,000. Another strategy is to create price preferences and practices that favor local food purchases.

Seasonal challenges occur because the prime growing season in most states coincides with school summer vacations. Creative processing and freezing can remedy some of these problems. State economic development support may be needed, however, to bolster the availability of food processing facilities for smaller farmers.

Federal Action Federal programs also support school purchase of fresh produce. Most states participate in the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetables Program through the USDA, using commodity entitlement funds to purchase a variety of produce. The 2008 Farm Bill significantly increases funding for the program and clarifies language to allow states and school districts to use geographical preferences to encourage local food purchases. The legislation also expands the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, which will be funded at \$1 billion to provide fruit and vegetable snacks to low-income elementary students in all 50 states.

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NCSL Access to Healthy Food webpage
www.ncsl.org/programs/health/publichealth/foodaccess/index.htm

NCSL Healthy Community Design and Access
to Healthy Food database
www.ncsl.org/programs/envirom/healthyCommunity/healthycommunitydb.htm

NCSL Healthy Food, Physical Activity and
Food Systems to Support Healthy
Communities webpage
www.ncsl.org/programs/health/KelloggHealthOverview.htm

Some barriers hinder farm-to-school programs.

The 2008 Farm Bill increases funding for farm-to-school programs.