

Local Food Procurement in Greater Cincinnati: Barriers and Solutions for K-12 Schools

Farm to School Cafeteria

Local food procurement is a core component of farm to school programming, along with food and agriculture education and school gardens. Institutional purchasing of local food supports local growers and contributes to a resilient local food system. It also provides K-12 students with fresh, seasonal, and nutritious food to promote positive educational and health outcomes.

This brief report outlines barriers to local food procurement among K-12 schools in the Greater Cincinnati region, as well as solutions that have been proposed or successfully implemented. The information for this report was gathered through partner schools' baseline F2S reports to the USDA in FA 2019, the GCRFPC's F2S planning team meetings and experience with F2S procurement, and data from the GU LFPP Food Hub Project, and conversations with other OH F2S Network members, and on-line research into other F2S programs.

KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Food service directors
Food service staff
Students
Teachers
Growers
Food hubs
Processors
Distributors
Buying coops
USDA
OH Department of Education
KY Department of Education
OH Department of Agriculture
KY Department of Agriculture
Health departments

Barriers and Solutions for Local Food Procurement

LACK OF A STANDARD DEFINITION FOR “LOCAL FOOD”

Definitions of “local food” vary considerably across different regions in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana and across different institutions within the Greater Cincinnati region. This variation creates challenges for coordinating demand for locally grown food at a regional or state level. A lack of shared measures also makes it difficult to track changes in local food purchasing over time.

The schools working on farm to school planning in partnership with Green Umbrella (GU) use a variety of definitions as of SY 2019-2020:

DISTRICT	Within County or Adjacent County	Within 100 Miles	Within 250 Miles	Within State	Within Surrounding States
Campbell County Schools		X		X	X
Cincinnati Public Schools			X		
Kenton County Schools		X			
Little Miami Schools	X	X		X	
Mt. Healthy City Schools			X	X	X
West Clermont Local Schools		X			

Encouraging a more common definition of local food (such as a geographic preference), setting measurable goals, and tracking changes in local food purchasing can help schools identify targets and assess progress over time. This would help better develop the supply chain by creating coordinated demand among schools and ability to track common metrics. Green Umbrella is in the process of securing grant funding to replicate Cuyahoga County’s Feed Our Future initiative (see “Ohio Models” below) in Greater Cincinnati, which will include common metrics to track and compare progress on a wider scale.

SUPPLY & LOGISTICS

School food service regulations, the scale of food service operations in large districts, the challenge of coordinating across multiple buildings, and other logistical challenges can all present barriers to increasing local food procurement. For schools to purchase local foods, the supply chains have to be in place to meet their specific requirements.

Regional demand planning can help facilitate local food procurement by coordinating supply and demand for local food and ensuring that the serving size, packaging, and other characteristics of locally sourced foods are aligned with schools' needs and processing capacity.

Working with a local food hub that has established relationships with local growers and distributors can make it easier for schools to source food locally. In this region, Green Umbrella partnered with Local Food Connection and Our Harvest Cooperative to facilitate 15 new school districts purchasing local produce in school year 2018-2019. In 2019, Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) expanded support for F2S by releasing a fresh produce RFP that prioritized specialty crops grown within 250 miles of CPS and required that all specialty crops meet its food safety standards and processing needs and be consolidated via a distributor that could deliver to 60+ school locations. As of spring 2020, CPS was on track to source nearly 40% of its fresh produce from growers within 250 miles through a contract with What Chefs Want/Local Food Connection (LFC).

Buying cooperatives also have an important role to play in increasing local food procurement in K-12 schools. In April 2020, as a result of Green Umbrella's regional F2S planning process, a local buying coop (UPC) released a bid for local produce that replicates the FOF local food bid with Ohio Schools Council (OSC). This will impact three of the five school districts currently working with Green Umbrella:

DISTRICT	PROCUREMENT PROCESS
Campbell County Schools	"3 Bids and a Buy" (KPC Buying Coop)
Cincinnati Public Schools	Included Geographic Preference in 2 YR District Produce Bid
Little Miami Schools	UPC or EPC Buying Coop
Mt. Healthy City Schools	UPC Buying Coop
West Clermont Local Schools	UPC Buying Coop

Green Umbrella's pilot of Feed Our Future in Greater Cincinnati will include activities focused on increasing training for bidding to coops and school food service directors.

Processing and Storage Capacity

Limited processing and storage capacity may also be a significant barrier to increasing local food procurement. Strategic investments in processing and storage infrastructure could increase capacity for local food procurement among K-12 schools in the region. For example, investing in IQF equipment would facilitate serving locally grown produce beyond the usual harvest period but may also require additional cold storage infrastructure for the IQF facility. A more comprehensive demand and feasibility study of an IQF facility.

Seasonality

Imperfect alignment of local growing seasons with the traditional school year can present a challenge for serving a variety of fresh, local produce throughout the school year. In the Greater Cincinnati region, menu planning assistance from Green Umbrella, Local Food Connection, and other partners can help schools address this barrier. Strategies include but are not limited to (1) substituting local food into existing menus during the seasons it is available, while continuing to rely on national supply chains during the off-season, (2) developing seasonal menu items that are offered specifically during a crop's seasonal availability and (3) increasing menu offerings that use storage crops and year-round available produce. If awarded, Green Umbrella has applied for funding to replicate the FOF program from Cuyahoga which provides resources on these types of issues.

Food Safety Requirements

Food safety requirements for school food purchasing can also create a barrier. If local growers lack the knowledge, resources, or support to meet specific food safety requirements, this poses a challenge for supplying food to schools. For example, CPS requires all growers to obtain USDA Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification. With funding from the Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP), Green Umbrella has been providing producer food safety certification training through UK Extension in Kentucky and Savour Food Safety in Ohio. As of December 31, 2019, 14 growers or producers have obtained GAP certification as a direct result of the training.

Other food safety training resources for farmers in Greater Cincinnati include Ohio State University Extension, the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, and the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA).

Food safety requirements are also a barrier to serving produce grown in school gardens in the cafeteria, which is often a goal of school garden F2S curriculums. Mary Dudley, with Gamble Montessori High School, is exploring how to get the Gamble gardens GAP certified. There is potential to learn from this process and scale it to other school garden curriculums if this model is successful.

COST & BUDGETING

Locally grown foods sometimes cost more than the same foods grown elsewhere. This can be a barrier for districts operating within the constraints of a limited food service budget.

Below is an overview of how local food purchasing fit into local districts' food service budgets during the 2018-2019 school year:

DISTRICT	2018-2019 Total Food Budget	2018-2019 Local Including Fluid Milk	2018-2019 Local Not Including Fluid Milk	% Local Not Including Fluid Milk of Total Food Budget
Campbell County Schools	\$211,260	\$69,000	\$9,000	4.26%
Cincinnati Public Schools	\$8,212,914	\$2,126,746	\$872,258	10.62%
Mt. Healthy City Schools	\$699,359	\$95,464	\$21,106	3.02%
West Clermont Local Schools	\$742,067	\$139,655	\$15,780	2.13%

School districts that are members of a buying cooperative can leverage the buying cooperative to purchase more local foods at a better price point, for instance by including language about geographic preferences in bids (as discussed above under Supply and Logistics).

In order to operate within limited food service budgets, food service directors often need to maximize use of their USDA entitlement, but this presents certain limitations. For example, this entitlement can only be applied to produce purchased from a single approved distributor, which is not always the freshest, most local, or most affordable option.

Allowing school districts to receive all or a portion of their USDA entitlement in cash (as some states and districts currently do) would provide more flexibility to purchase local food, sometimes at a lower cost than commodity products.

Local school districts have varying levels of flexibility for allocating funds to local food purchasing, which depend on how they manage their commodity dollars and other revenue sources. There are a variety of strategies that food service directors can use to achieve spending flexibility. The Ohio SNA could be leveraged to provide more training and technical resources to food service directors in our region.

Introducing new local foods in school cafeterias can lead to increased costly food waste if students and food service staff are not familiar with these foods. For example, locally grown produce sometimes looks different than produce consumers find in grocery stores and may be perceived as “bad” or unappealing.

Providing education and training about local produce to food service staff, students, and families can help increase participation and decrease food waste, making it more feasible to continue purchasing local food. Because students are often more willing to try new foods that they helped grow in a school garden, this can include school garden-based education.

Additionally, auditing food waste in the school cafeteria and implementing strategies to reduce wasted food can help create more room in the food service budget to purchase locally grown foods. Existing resources for reducing school food waste include educational programming from Keep Cincinnati Beautiful and the Hamilton County Recycling and Solid Waste District (HCRSWD) and WWF’s Food Waste Warrior toolkit. HCRSWD also provides grants and technical assistance to support schools’ efforts to reduce wasted food, including food waste audits, share tables, and composting.

MODELS

To address local food procurement barriers in our region, there is a need for more comprehensive integration of F2S programs across the cafeteria, classroom, and community. Below is an overview of existing programs in Ohio and Kentucky that provide models for achieving this integration. All are led by local health departments, which have access to resources and clout to help coordinate demand and support school districts in fostering community buy-in and achieving health outcomes. Health departments can be key partners for maximizing the success of local food procurement and consumption in K-12 schools.

Feed Our Future

Feed Our Future (FOF) in Cuyahoga County is a successful model for farm to school programming, including local food procurement. Key components of FOF include comprehensive and cohesive marketing materials for telling the story of farm to school in cafeterias, classrooms, and to the broader community; technical assistance to schools and food buying coops to increase the purchasing and serving of local produce in school meals; and shared metrics for tracking progress. Each of these components will be replicated in Greater Cincinnati as part of Green Umbrella’s FOF pilot.

Ohio Days

Schools can increase local food purchasing in a targeted way by serving one meal per week or one meal per month that features local food. [Ohio Days: My Plate, My State](#)—a

farm to school program coordinated by Franklin County Public Health in Columbus, OH—offers a good model for districts considering this approach.

Eat Healthy Northern Kentucky

Eat Healthy NKY is a collaborative led by the Northern KY Health Department that provides farm to school training and resources to educators and food service personnel at local school districts. Each year, Eat Healthy NKY coordinates a healthy eating challenge in the spring and a farm to school challenge in the fall to encourage and incentivize schools to incorporate more healthy, local food into their cafeterias and classrooms.

Additional resources on local food procurement can be found on the USDA website:
<https://www.fns.usda.gov/cfs/procuring-local-foods>