

# Facts about Farm to School<sup>1</sup>

Samantha Ward, Lauren Headrick, and Karla Shelnett<sup>2</sup>

Farm to school is a nationwide program that was created to improve the supply of fresh, local produce to schools. The whole process is dependent upon building relationships between local farmers with schools with the aim of including fresh, local foods in cafeterias to increase healthy options for children. Over the past 20 years, school districts in all 50 states have joined the F2S program and are purchasing items from local farmers. While the first F2S program was started by a small group of farmers selling a few items to a handful of local schools, the current national F2S program includes 12,429 schools reaching almost six million school-aged children (National Farm to School Network, n.d.). Recent changes in the School Breakfast and National School Lunch Programs require more fruit and vegetable servings (for more information, please see the EDIS publication FY1396/FCS80030, *Understanding the New School Meal Standards* [<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy1396>]), which has made the F2S program more popular than ever. The University of Florida is committed to the Farm to School program and is working closely with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to connect farmers to schools.

## Farm to School Components

The main goal of F2S is to connect local farmers with schools. While specific objectives of the program can differ by state, the following sections discuss examples of current national F2S efforts.



Figure 1. School districts in all 50 states are purchasing from local farmers.  
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## Procurement

Buying local foods is a major focus of F2S. When school districts purchase local, fresh foods, it provides schools with healthy fresh food and supports the local economy. These items can include locally grown or produced meats, vegetables, fruits, and other items such as honey and eggs. For example, in Florida, a dairy farm currently supplies milk to several nearby schools.

Aside from adding local foods to the school cafeteria, many farmers also supply produce for the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable program, which provides fruits and vegetables as snacks to elementary age children during the school day (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2013). To make

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2. Samantha Ward, dietetic intern, Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition; Lauren Headrick, MS, RD, Farm to School statewide coordinator; and Karla Shelnett, PhD, RD, assistant professor, Department of Family, Youth, and Community Sciences; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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it easier to purchase local foods on a larger scale, many schools that take part in F2S are using a “common menuing” system, which means they are creating menus around the season and harvest timeline for their area. For example, in Florida, eggplant grows best in the colder months such as December, January, and February, which would make eggplant an appropriate seasonal menu item. This technique helps to ensure that the schools are serving the freshest local ingredients, and it creates a statewide demand for products that local farmers can provide. Please refer to the Florida school garden guide *Grow to Learn* for a harvest timeline and more information on when fruits and vegetables are available in your area (<http://farmtoschool.ifas.ufl.edu/docs/pdf/resource-guide-grow-to-learn-color.pdf>).

## Improved Nutrition

Addressing childhood obesity has become a top national priority highlighted by First Lady Michelle Obama’s *Let’s Move* campaign (Let’s Move, 2013). The availability of nutritious food is important when trying to get children to eat healthy foods and maintain a healthy weight. But simply providing more fruits and vegetables in the cafeteria does not necessarily mean the students will choose to eat them. To help increase the likelihood that students will eat the fruits and vegetables being added to the menu, some schools are changing the environment in their cafeterias. The Smarter Lunchrooms Movement is a program developed by Cornell University that helps schools make small, inexpensive changes to their cafeterias shown to “promote healthful eating” (Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Program, 2013).

An example of one of these research-based strategies is placing fruit in an attractive bowl near the cash register where the students can see the fruit for a longer amount of time. Placing bright colored signs in the lunch line with text reading “Did you grab your fruit for the day?” as well as displaying whole fruit has been proven to increase the amount of fruit chosen and eaten by students. Also, placing the most nutritious entrée first in line can make the students more likely to purchase it over other entrées being served.

Other placement and appearance techniques also are used with vegetables and dairy as a way to improve student nutrition. An example of this is giving the vegetables “cool” names. For younger students, names like “Super Strength Spinach,” instead of spinach, can grab their attention making it more likely that they will purchase these healthier items. As for older students, those catchy names might not

do the job. For these students, mouth-watering descriptions like “Succulent Summer Corn” may do the trick.

Once the local produce is purchased by school districts, it is important for the staff to know how to prepare the food and use it in tasty, healthy recipes. To address this need, one component of the *Let’s Move* campaign is the Chefs Move to Schools program, where trained chefs partner with schools to provide healthy recipes, train food service staff, and to educate children about food in the cafeteria and the classroom (Chef’s Move to Schools, 2012). With its very own F2S Chef, Florida is a great example of a state committed to this program. Chef David Bearl, one of the Florida F2S Chefs, has trained food service staff on knife and cooking skills, recipe development, and food presentation. Chef Bearl’s training sessions are providing these skills across the state, and the children are enjoying delicious new recipes as a result. Most importantly, Chef Bearl interacts with the children and allows them to taste and touch new fruits and vegetables (Figure 2). This type of exposure to new foods has been shown to increase the possibility that children will accept and be more likely to eat these items (Lakkakula et al., 2010).



Figure 2. Chef Bearl talks to students during a taste test of different fruits and vegetables.

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## Nutrition Education and School Gardens

Nutrition education and school gardens are a natural fit for the F2S program. Several curricula are used in the classroom to teach children about nutrition. The United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Team Nutrition curricula are available for free to teachers at their website (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/educators.html>) and cover topics from healthy eating and the basics of MyPlate to gardening. The gardening curricula are an excellent way to teach nutrition while planting and maintaining a school

garden. While farm visits are a part of F2S, school gardens give students an opportunity to have first-hand experience with where food comes from without having to travel to a farm. The children help plant and maintain the gardens, and may even see the foods they grow served in their school cafeteria. Many schools are also using the school garden to teach students core subjects such as math and science.

## Award for Healthy Schools

To honor schools that go above and beyond to create a healthy place for children to learn and play, the USDA created the HealthierUS Schools Challenge (HUSSC) award. This award celebrates schools that are meeting the meal pattern requirements, implementing the Smarter Lunchroom techniques, and providing students with nutrition education and daily physical activity. Participating in F2S, and taking part in the Chefs Move to Schools program are also encouraged as optional activities for schools applying for a HUSSC award. As of September 2014, there have been 6,703 schools nationwide honored with this award. These schools receive national recognition, as well as a cash award. For more information on the award criteria and for application information, please visit the USDA's HUSSC website at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/hussc/healthierus-school-challenge-smarter-lunchrooms>.



Figure 3. Schools applying for the HUSSC award are encouraged to engage in the Chefs Move to Schools program.

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## Summary

National and state F2S programs provide healthy foods, introduce new foods, and educate students in local schools. The F2S program is becoming more and more popular as a way to improve the diets of children throughout the country and to help support the local economies at the same time. Florida is a great example of a state committed to F2S. All 67 school districts and counties are currently

taking part in the F2S program. Schools throughout the state are working with local farmers to serve fresh food to children. The University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences are working together to schools start gardens, teach nutrition education, and train food service staff to prepare and cook fresh fruits and vegetables. Farmers also may participate in classroom education by discussing various aspects of agriculture like growing produce or raising farm animals. For a list of participating schools in Florida, please visit <http://www.florida-agriculture.com/business/fooddist/farmtoschool/schools.html>. Contact your local UF/IFAS Extension office for more information on Florida F2S in your county. If you are outside of Florida, visit <http://www.farmtoschool.org/> to find out more about F2S in your area.

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