

## **Farm To School For Farmers: Get Involved!**

**By Marlie Wilson, Illinois Farm to School Network Coordinator**

Are you a specialty grower interested in selling food to schools or daycare centers? Are you curious about being a guest-speaker in a local classroom or inviting students to take a field trip on your farm? Become a member of the Illinois Farm to School Network to learn more and get involved!

Farm to school is a people-powered movement that seeks to strengthen the connection communities have with fresh, healthy food, and local food producers. There are three basic elements to farm to school:

1. Procurement: Local foods are purchased, promoted, and served in the cafeteria or as a snack or taste-test;
2. Education: Students participate in educational activities related to agriculture, food, health or nutrition;
3. School gardens: Students engage in hands-on learning through gardening.

Farm to school empowers children and their families to make informed food choices while strengthening the local economy and contributing to vibrant communities. For farmers, farm to school is an especially good opportunity for those who are already selling wholesale, or who are interested in scaling up their operations and supplementing their existing direct-to-consumer sales.

While schools and early care centers have limited food budgets, many are still committed to supporting local growers with a fair price. Foodservice directors highly value the quality of local products and the educational impact that farm to school has on students, which often results in less food waste created in the cafeteria. They are especially motivated to buy from local farms because of the positive feedback they receive from parents and the greater school community.

Starting to sell food to schools can feel daunting, especially because it is not always clear who to talk to or what regulations need to be followed. It does not have to be so hard! There are many people involved in the Illinois Farm to School Network who are here to help you connect with schools, understand their procurement policies, and find the right resources to prepare you for farm to school.

If you are interested in getting started, contact the Illinois Farm to School Network—they will share advice on how to build relationships with foodservice directors, set appropriate prices, navigate school nutrition programs, and more. They may also have existing relationships with school districts or daycare centers in your area that they can put you in touch with. To contact them, email [farmtoschool@sevendgenerationsahead.org](mailto:farmtoschool@sevendgenerationsahead.org) or call 708-628-4503.

They also recommend reaching out to your local University of Illinois Extension office, which will have specialists in both local agriculture as well as nutrition education in schools. Extension staff may be able to help you identify school districts in your area that are excited about local food sourcing and farm to school activities. They can also help you with developing a food safety plan that will meet institutional market standards. Visit <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/> to locate your closest office and find their contact information.

Not quite ready to start forging relationships with school nutrition authorities, but want to stay in touch? Sign the Illinois Farm to School Network's pledge to become a member and receive monthly newsletters on upcoming events, new resources, and funding opportunities. Visit <http://illinoisfarmtoschool.org/about/join/> to become a member today.