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Farm-to-School Initiatives Gaining Ground in New York State

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Farm-to-School Initiatives

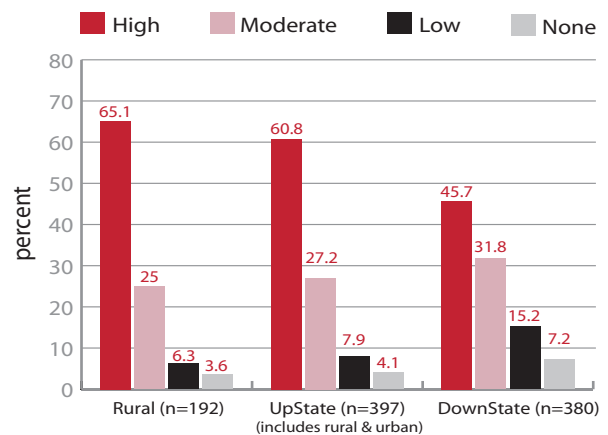
Farm-to-school initiatives are part of a growing trend in national, state and local policies designed to encourage public institutions to purchase fresh and processed foods from farmers in their home state. Farm-to-school programs across the U.S. (including NYS) have grown considerably since 2000, motivated, in part, by the desire to improve diets and address obesity rates among children by providing schools with fresh, healthy food, and to create new local markets for growers.

The National Farm to School Program (NFTS) maintains a network of over 30 organizations nationwide (including the Cornell Farm to School Program <http://farmtoschool.cce.cornell.edu/>). More than fifteen school districts in NYS have initiated farm-to-school programs (www.farmtoschool.org), which, according to the NFTS website, “feature farm fresh foods such as fruits and vegetables, eggs, honey, meat, and beans on their menus; incorporate nutrition-based curriculum; and provide students experiential learning opportunities through farm visits, gardening and recycling programs. Farmers have access to a new market through schools and connect to their community through participation in programs designed to educate kids about local food and sustainable agriculture.”

Are New Yorkers Interested in Having Local Food in Public School Cafeterias?

According to data from the 2005 Empire State Poll, an annual opinion survey conducted by Cornell University, NYS residents express strong interest in having local foods served in school cafeterias (see Figure 1). Even though rural and upstate (includes both rural and urban) NY

Figure 1: New York State Residents' Level of Interest in Having Local Foods in School Cafeterias, by Region.



Source: Hilchey & Francis, Empire State Poll 2005.

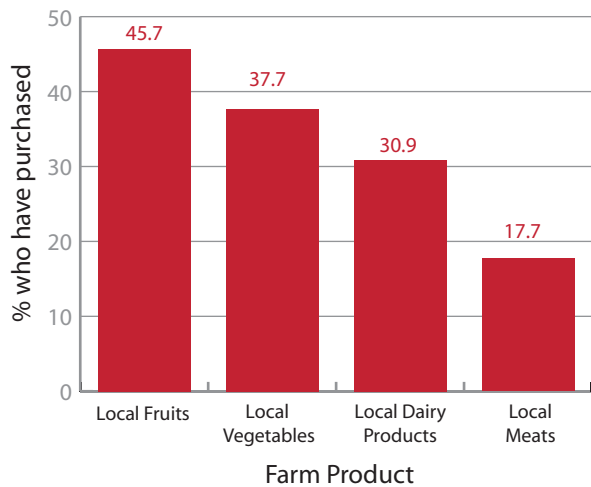
residents indicate more interest in having local foods in school cafeterias than do downstate residents, the School FoodPlus Initiative is making farm to school connections in the New York City school system, the largest school district in the country. (<http://www.foodchange.org/nutrition/schoolfood.html>)

Do Public School Food Service Directors Buy Local Foods?

In collaboration with the New York School Nutrition Association, the Cornell Farm to School Program recently conducted an on-line survey of K-12 public school food service directors to assess their experience or interest in purchasing local foods. Fifty-five percent of respondents reported purchasing local foods (see Figure 2). Fruits were the most common products purchased from farmers, and

apples were twice as likely to be purchased as any other fruit or vegetable. Among vegetables, tomatoes, potatoes and squashes (both summer and winter) were the most likely to be purchased from local farmers.

Figure 2. NYS Public School Food Service Directors Reporting the Purchase of Various Farm Products.



Source: Wilkins, J., Cornell Farm-to-School Program, 2007.

Among respondents who had not purchased local food, the top reasons reported included “unreliable supply” (for fruits and vegetables), “local meat is too expensive,” and “local dairy products are too much effort.” A smaller percentage of directors reported not having the equipment or trained food service workers to handle raw farm products from local sources.

What are the Public Policy Responses?

There are many challenges public schools face when adapting their procurement programs to utilize farm fresh products. These include: seasonal variability of supply, infrastructure at the school level, food costs, additional administration, food preparation, variable quality, reliability of delivery, and federal and state reimbursement. In order to remove some of the barriers to buying local food, NYS enacted a law in 1986 to allow schools to purchase food directly from farmers or associations of farmers without bidding requirements. The law’s goals are to provide fresh, nutritious local foods to children and to help support farming in NYS. New provisions were added in 2004 to strengthen and clarify the original law, including, among

other things, clarification on farmer eligibility, the maximum amount schools can spend on direct purchases, public local procurement notification, purchasing criteria, and paperwork reduction.

Another statute, the New York State Farm to School Law, passed in 2002, encourages cooperation, coordination and communication between the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets and the NYS Department of Education in ways that will lead to increased public institutional procurement of NYS farm products. This legislation also directs the Departments of Agriculture and Markets and Education to work with school food service, health and nutrition, farm, and educational organizations to establish a New York Harvest for New York Kids week. Held annually in the fall, the event promotes New York agricultural products to children through school meal programs, classroom instruction, and visits to farms and farmers’ markets.

New legislation has been proposed to bolster these current laws. The new Act would establish a fresh fruits and vegetable program under the Department of Education aimed at providing “schools with payments for the purchase of fresh or minimally processed fruits and vegetables.” (New York State Assembly Website: <http://assembly.state.ny.us/leg/?bn=A01943>)

Conclusion

Farm-to-school initiatives can have a positive impact at the local level, both for the physical health of school children consuming local foods, and for the economic health of local farmers who sell their products directly to the school. While many public school food service directors already purchase some local food, particularly fruits and vegetables, research suggests that significant barriers still exist. Recent farm-to-school legislation in NYS is a step in the right direction to removing several of these barriers. Incentives like those proposed above are needed to encourage public schools to more fully take advantage of local food supplies, to help develop and expand local options, and to ensure profitability of the farmers they do business with. ♦

For information on the Cornell Farm-to-School Program, the Farm to School Policy Tools and other resources, please visit the CaRDI website (cardi.cornell.edu) and click on the Agriculture, Food & Community Development Section.

