



**MSNA**  
MN School Nutrition Association

Hunger ends on our watch



# Farm to School in Minnesota

A Survey of School Foodservice Leaders

By Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy and  
the Minnesota School Nutrition Association

March 2010

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Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. IATP's Local Foods program works to build thriving local food systems by strengthening small- and medium-scale sustainable farming, expanding market opportunities for locally produced foods and advancing supportive policy change. More information can be found at [www.iatp.org/localfoods](http://www.iatp.org/localfoods).

IATP's work on expanding farm to school initiatives is funded in part by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota's Prevention Minnesota Initiative, which works to improve the health of Minnesotans by combating the root causes of cancer and heart disease, of which unhealthy eating is a leading factor.

The Minnesota School Nutrition Association (MSNA) is a nonprofit, state-wide professional association working to ensure that all children have access to healthy meals and nutrition education in Minnesota. Founded in 1956, MSNA has over 2,800 members, primarily foodservice professionals working in K-12 schools. More information can be found at [www.mnsna.org](http://www.mnsna.org).

## About this survey

The Minnesota School Nutrition Association (MSNA) and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) work together to support the adoption and expansion of farm to school initiatives across the state of Minnesota through staff training, technical assistance, networking, student education, communications support and related strategies. In January 2010, a survey was conducted to gauge interest and activity in farm to school among Minnesota school foodservice professionals. Targeted to MSNA members, the survey was sent to foodservice directors and managers in 97 public school districts across the state serving approximately 550,000 students. Responses were received from 82 districts.

The survey addressed calendar year 2009. Although some districts consider neighboring states as part of their farm to school program, the survey focused on food that is grown or raised in Minnesota to ensure consistency of the data. This report provides a summary of the survey results. The figures shown below are based on the number of respondents to each given question.

A comparable survey was conducted in November 2008 and is available at <http://www.agobservatory.org/library.cfm?refID=105219>.

## Key Highlights

- Respondents from 69 Minnesota school districts reported that they purchased Minnesota-grown foods in 2009. This is up from approximately 30 districts when the initial survey was conducted in November 2008.
- Nearly 44 percent of all respondents say they purchased Minnesota-grown foods directly from a farmer or farm co-op in 2009. When asked to rate this experience on a scale of 1 (Trouble-free) to 7 (Very problematic), 75 percent of respondents gave a rating of either 1 or 2.
- Seventy-four percent of all respondents purchased Minnesota-grown foods through a prime vendor or produce distributor. When asked to rate their experience on a scale of 1 (Trouble-free) to 7 (Very problematic), 70 percent of respondents gave a rating of either 1 or 2. (Note that some districts purchased Minnesota-grown foods both from a farmer/co-op and through a prime vendor/distributor).
- Thirty-five percent of respondents reported purchasing food from Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota and/or South Dakota, most commonly Wisconsin.

- The most commonly used local foods were apples, potatoes, peppers, winter squash, sweet corn and tomatoes. The majority of respondents (ranging from 67 percent of respondents for winter squash to 94 percent for sweetcorn) rated their experience with these foods as “very successful.”
- Among districts engaged in farm to school, 71 percent reported purchasing between \$1 and \$10,000 of Minnesota-grown foods during 2009.
- The top barriers to using more local foods were “extra labor/prep time,” “pricing/fitting local food into budgets,” and “difficulty finding farmers to purchase from directly.”
- Among districts currently engaged in farm to school, 76 percent expect to expand their farm to school programs in the 2010/11. None indicated that they plan to reduce their farm to school activities in the upcoming school year.
- Considerable interest was expressed in increasing farm to school educational efforts and growing food at schools.
- Respondents placed a high priority on expanding efforts to engage farmers/distributors, school administrators/boards, students, parents and teachers in farm to school initiatives.

# Survey Questions & Responses

## 1. Basic information (name, title, school district, etc.)

## 2. Which prime vendor do you currently use?

- 31.7 percent use Apperts
- 20.7 percent use Upper Lakes Foods, Inc.
- 18.3 percent use US Foodservice
- 15.9 percent use Reinhart (LaCrosse, Wis. or Rogers, Minn.)
- The remaining respondents reported using either Hawkeye Foodservice Distribution, Foodservices of America, Indianhead, SYSCO or Martin Brothers.

## 3. Do you buy produce primarily from your prime vendor?

- 58.5 percent responded yes
- 41.5 percent responded no

## 4. How effectively has your prime vendor partnered with you in obtaining local produce?

Of those who have asked their prime vendor about obtaining local produce:

- 75.0 percent responded “Somewhat responsive”
- 19.4 percent responded “Highly responsive”

## 5. Which produce distributors do you buy fresh produce from?

- 41.5 percent responded “I don’t buy from a produce distributor”
- 43.9 percent purchase from Bix Produce
- 6.1 percent purchase from Bergin Fruit & Nut Company
- Other companies identified by 1-2 respondents each include Cre8it, Russ Davis, Winona Fruit Company and Salad Makers

## 6. Does the vendor or distributor you buy most of your produce from offer Minnesota-grown produce in season?

- 69.1 percent responded yes
- 6.2 percent responded no
- 24.7 percent responded “not sure”

## 7. Did you purchase any Minnesota-grown food through a prime vendor or produce distributor during the 2009 calendar year?

- 74.1 percent responded yes
- 25.9 percent responded no

## 8. How would you rate the experience of purchasing Minnesota-grown food through a prime vendor/produce distributor during the 2009 calendar year?

1 = Trouble-free, 4 = Somewhat problematic, 7 = Very problematic

- Of those who responded that they purchased Minnesota-grown food through a prime vendor or produce distributor during the 2009 calendar year, the average rating was 2.07, with 70 percent of respondents giving a rating of either 1 or 2.

## 9. Did you purchase any Minnesota-grown food directly from a farmer or farm co-op during the 2009 calendar year?

- 43.9 percent responded yes
- 56.1 percent responded no

## 10. How would you rate the experience of purchasing Minnesota-grown food directly from a farmer or farm co-op during the 2009 calendar year?

1 = Trouble-free, 4 = Somewhat problematic, 7 = Very problematic

- Of those who responded that they purchased Minnesota-grown food directly from a Farmer or Farm Co-op, the average rating was 1.92 with 75 percent of respondents giving a rating of either 1 or 2

**11.–13. Which Minnesota-grown food items did you use during the 2009 calendar Year? Please rate the overall level of success you experienced with that food item.**

The following items were used by 10 or more districts participating in the survey:

Food item	Number of districts using item	Very Successful %	Somewhat Successful %	Not Successful %
Apples	67	80.6	16.4	0.0
Potatoes	25	76.0	12.0	0.0
Peppers	22	81.8	4.5	0.0
Winter squash	17	66.7	16.7	11.1
Sweet corn	17	94.1	5.9	0.0
Tomatoes	17	82.4	5.9	0.0
Carrots	15	86.7	0.0	0.0
Watermelon	15	53.3	40.0	0.0
Cantaloupe	14	42.9	42.9	0.0
Cabbage	11	83.3	8.3	0.0
Onions	12	66.7	16.7	0.0
Salad greens	10	90.0	0.0	0.0

Note: Figures do not sum to 100 percent where respondents indicated that they used a given item but did not rate the success level.

Use of Minnesota-grown beets, broccoli, green beans, herbs, pumpkins, zucchini, bison, wild rice, cheese, dried beans and grains were reported by nine or fewer districts each.

**14. How much Minnesota-grown product did you purchase in calendar year 2009?**

- Among districts engaged in Farm to School, 71 percent reported purchasing between \$1 and \$10,000. (Total farm to school purchases will be larger when purchases from Wisconsin, Iowa and the Dakotas are factored in).

**15. Did you purchase foods from neighboring states during calendar year 2009?**

- 35.3 percent of respondents reported purchasing from Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota and/or South Dakota, with Wisconsin being the state most frequently cited.

**16. In your opinion, how aware of your Farm to School activities are:**

Option	Very aware %	Somewhat aware %	Not at all aware %
Your own staff	45.6	49.4	5.1
Students	11.7	57.1	31.2
Parents	7.8	61.0	31.2
Teachers/ Administrators	13.0	62.3	24.7
Your community	6.7	56.0	37.3

**17. Looking ahead to the 2010/11 school year, my district expects to: (Check one)**

Option	%
Expand our Farm to School program	62.0
Keep our F2S effort about the same level as last year	19.0
Reduce F2S activities	0.0
Pursue F2S for the first time	15.2
We haven't engaged in F2S so far and don't expect to start	3.8

Note: The first three categories above reflect districts currently engaged in farm to school initiatives. Of those, 76.5 percent selected "Expand our Farm to School program."

**18. All else being equal, what Minnesota-grown foods might you be interested in purchasing in the future? (Check all that apply)**

- Vegetables: 97.4 percent
- Fruit: 94.8 percent
- Bread/grains: 62.3 percent
- Dairy: 55.8 percent
- Meat: 49.4 percent
- Dried Beans: 37.7 percent

**19. How important is it to you that fresh produce is delivered to you in "ready to use" form (e.g., cleaned and chopped)? (Select one)**

- 12.8 percent selected "We can only work with ready to use produce"
- 52.6 percent selected "We have a strong preference for ready to use produce"
- 26.9 percent selected "We can work with uncut produce on an occasional basis"
- 7.7 percent selected "We are very comfortable handling uncut produce"

**20. From your perspective, what are the biggest barriers to using more local foods (Choose up to three)**

Option	%
Extra labor/prep time for local product	57.0
Pricing/fitting local food into my budget	53.2
Difficulty finding farmers to purchase from directly	46.8
Liability/concerns about food safety and food handling standards	43.0
Timing and frequency of backdoor deliveries	27.8
Prime Vendor/produce distributor doesn't offer the local products we want	26.6
Don't have the equipment, facilities or staff skills that we need	16.5
Multiple orders and invoices	13.9
Poor product quality	5.1

**21. What additional facilities or equipment would make the most difference in helping you increase your use of fresh local foods in the futures? (Please choose up the three)**

Option	%
We generally have the equipment and facilities that we need	37.7
More refrigeration space	41.6
Additional small equipment (e.g., knives, peelers, slicers, food processors, wedgers)	35.1
More prep space	24.7
Industrial chopping equipment	16.9
Steamers	11.7
Ovens (combi- or other)	7.8
More dry storage space	6.5
Other (please specify)	9.1

**22. What kinds of staff training would help your schools do more with Farm to School? (Choose up to three)**

Option	%
Hands-on training for cooks and foodservice staff	51.9
Engaging teachers, students, administrators, parents, community	45.5
Introductory "Farm to School 101"	42.9
Procurement (working with farmers and distributors)	40.3
F2S promotion and student education	36.4
Food safety issues	32.5
Menu planning (e.g. selecting recipes, menu costing)	27.3
Other (please specify)	3.9
No training needed	2.6

**23. What other types of Farm to School activities are happening or anticipated in your district? (Please check all that apply)**

Activity	Currently happening %	Anticipated for 2010/11 school year %
Farm to School promotions (e.g., info in foodservice newsletter, signage in the cafeteria)	32.9	36.6
Farm to School education (e.g., smart board videos on F2S, farm visits, classroom activities)	11.0	25.6
Food production (e.g., school gardens, greenhouses, growing in the classroom)	9.8	18.3

**24. Have you used the Minnesota Farm to School toolkit website ([www.mn-farmtoschool.umn.edu](http://www.mn-farmtoschool.umn.edu))?**

- 45.6 percent responded yes
- 54.4 percent responded no

**Respondents who had used the Farm to School Web site were asked questions 25–27.**

**25. Please rate the overall usefulness of the Minnesota Farm to School toolkit website to you: How interested would you be in the following local food tools?**

1 = Extremely useful, 5 = Somewhat useful, 7 = Not at all useful

- The average rating was 2.28, with 58.4 percent giving a rating of either 1 or 2.

**26. What aspects of the web site have you found most helpful?**

- Recipes featuring local food items was the most common response. Farmer contacts, educational and promotional materials, and information about what other school districts are doing were also mentioned.

**27. How could the web site be improved?  
(Please choose up to three)**

Option	%
More farmers listed	43.3
More recipes	40.0
More F2S promotional and communication tools	40.0
More tools for educating students about F2S	40.0
More food safety information	40.0
Menu costing information	33.3
A way to pose questions	30.0
More local food items covered	13.3
Easier to navigate	6.7
Other	0.0

**28. In addition to staff training and web-based information, what other Farm to School tools and support would be most helpful to you?**

- Frequently cited ideas included ways to connect with nearby farmers and entities that can provide pre-cut produce, education materials, promotion and communications tools and support, and more information about food safety and liability issues.

**29. MSNA's Farm to School efforts so far have focused primarily on engaging foodservice staff. As Farm to School gains momentum, how do you think we should prioritize efforts to engage and communicate with other stakeholders?**

Stakeholder	High Priority %	Medium Priority %	Low Priority %	Don't Know
Students	53.9	38.2	5.3	2.6
Teachers	50.0	39.2	8.1	2.7
Parents	52.8	38.9	4.2	4.2
School administrators/board	59.2	35.5	5.3	2.6
Farmers/distributors	80.0	18.7	1.3	0.0
Potential community partners	41.7	54.2	4.2	0.0
Legislators/public officials	47.9	40.8	5.6	5.6
General public	32.9	54.3	8.6	4.3

**30. Do you have Farm to School recipes, promotional materials or other tools to share with others? If so, please indicate:**

- Several respondents offered recipes, factsheets and other promotional and educational tools.

**31. Please provide any other thoughts you'd like here. We welcome your input, ideas and stories!**

**Representative comments include:**

- "We were featured in our local paper, and that got the word out to parents and the community. Our school board members read it, and sent us 'great job' notes."
- "I really want to support farm to school and think our districts need to keep moving forward in this exciting venture!"
- "I have stated this but costs are one of my biggest concerns when it comes to locally grown."
- "We actually arranged to have purple carrots planted for our Fall menu, and the kids loved them. It started a lot of conversations around food."
- "It is a great thing to support our own farmers in our community or surrounding. The only catch is how to get it from the fields to the buyer."
- "We have had only success with what we have tried however the students are in an 'oh-well' mode. We do need more media exposure in local areas—perhaps more info for communications."
- "I am new to the district and need to work on having the time to implement more farm to school options. The process needs to be very simple to have access to local products."