

Making the Farm / School Connection:

Opportunities and Barriers to Greater Use of Locally-grown Produce in Public Schools

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Executive Summary

There appears to be significant openness among the school foodservice directors who participated in this research to expanding the use of fresh, Minnesota-grown fruits and vegetables in school lunch offerings. Motivating factors include:

- Raising children's awareness and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables
- Inculcating better eating habits among children
- Educating children about where food comes from and how it is grown
- Supporting the local economy

However, barriers to expanding use of local produce are numerous. For instance, many districts are able to spend \$0.15 or less for each serving of fruit and vegetables. A district like Hopkins, MN has considerably more financial latitude, but even a well-staffed and highly motivated district like Hopkins has been challenged to build supply relationships with local produce farmers.

Many of the foodservice directors who were interviewed had some experience purchasing directly from farmers, but typically their experience was limited to one or two products (most often local apples). As a result, it is likely that efforts to link directly with local farmers has influenced less than 1% of the fruit and vegetables they offer during the school year.

Most districts purchase their produce from one or two large distributors. Such distributors offer a very standardized, streamlined procurement environment that is suited to the risk-averse and cost-conscious environment of most school districts. When school foodservice directors were asked what conditions would best enable them to use more locally-grown produce, four key needs emerged:

- Access to locally-grown produce through distributors
- Risk management strategies to assure the quantity and quality of local produce, reliable delivery, and liability protection
- Costs for local produce that are compatible with districts' financial realities and make local sourcing financially sustainable
- Access to local fruits and vegetables that have been further processed.

When the existing distribution environment was compared to these conditions, some favorable signs emerged:

- A relatively small number of produce distributors and "broad line" distributors (who offer a wide range of processed meats, dairy, produce and other items) appear to service the majority of Minnesota school districts. This suggests that efforts to partner with a limited number of distributors could address a significant number of districts in the state.
- Some produce distributors already offer local, processed produce in-season. Other distributors have narrower selections of local produce, may offer it only sporadically, and/or offer it whole by-the-case rather than further processed.

- Many broad line distributors also handle some local produce in-season. Broad line distributors generally buy their produce through produce wholesalers, processors or brokers. Most produce wholesalers who were interviewed thought it would be possible to “pull local produce through the system” from farm to wholesaler to broad line distributor to a school district if the district specifically asked for it. However, other than apples, virtually no cases of this happening were identified.
- Distributors’ prices for local product are often comparable to non-local (most commonly California) produce. In some cases, processing of local product may be slightly more expensive, but this is sometimes offset by lower transportation costs.
- Despite very tight funding for school lunch programs at the state and federal level, there may be some latitude for existing state-run USDA commodity procurement programs to channel locally-grown produce to Minnesota schools.

Despite these favorable signs:

- Many school foodservice directors are unaware of what local produce their distributors currently offer. Several distributors said they get few requests for local produce and therefore do not make it a priority to purchase locally or make local products visible in their marketing materials. Improving communications between school districts and their distributors is critical.
- For most interested schools, the desire to buy locally-grown is not only about the food, but about educational opportunities for kids. One risk of sourcing through distributors is that a connection with individual farmers and a “sense of place” may be lost as the organizational layers between the farmer and the lunch table increase. One key to a successful distributor-based sourcing model will be making it a “both/and” proposition -- rather than “either/or” -- where connection with the farmer and experiential educational opportunities are concerned.
- Relatively little comprehensive, state-wide data is available about school districts’ interest in and potential to incorporate more fresh, local produce in their food stream. A state-wide survey could expand available data on the issue and potentially position interested districts to more clearly voice their demand for local produce.
- Few examples were found of school districts in Minnesota (or elsewhere) working through distributors to purchase local produce on a significant scale. A key next step will be to facilitate partnerships between interested districts and their distributors so that a distributor-based model can be tested on the ground.

I. Introduction

This report explores the feasibility of expanding use of fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables in Minnesota's public K-12 schools. The core questions addressed in this study are "What would it take to make locally grown, fresh fruits and vegetables a mainstream element of a school district's food supply within the prevailing budgetary environment? What are the opportunities and barriers to using fresh, local food in significant volumes, on a sustained basis, and without additional outside subsidies?" This is part of a broader effort by University of Minnesota researchers, focused on the Hopkins, MN school district, to explore links between childhood obesity and the federal school lunch program.

This feasibility study on local produce began in the spring of 2005 with an effort led by Jim Ennis of Food Alliance Midwest to connect Hopkins foodservice staff with Minnesota-based produce growers. Hopkins would then work to develop new purchasing relationships with these farmers and the author would gauge how Hopkins sourcing practices had shifted as a result. The prospects for greater use of fresh, local produce by a large urban district (specifically St. Paul, MN) and a rural Minnesota district would also be explored.

Ultimately, the number of school districts that contributed to this research expanded well beyond Hopkins and St. Paul. Eight other school districts in the western suburbs of Minneapolis contributed their perspectives, as did foodservice staff at the rural districts of Willmar, Alexandria, and Little Falls. School foodservice directors' hopes, concerns and past experiences with fresh, locally grown were also elicited at two workshops during the 2005 Annual Minnesota School Foodservice Annual Conference. Roughly 80 school foodservice staff attended. The author also spoke with many of the distributors that supply fruits and vegetables to Minnesota's school districts.

The research was designed to capture the perspectives of school foodservice staff – those most directly responsible for the food that crosses the lunchroom table – and the distributors that supply them. The situation at Hopkins is also compared and contrasted with the circumstances of other participating districts.

Nevertheless, readers should not conclude that these findings can necessarily be generalized to public school districts across Minnesota. The research effort was challenged by limited state-wide data on produce purchasing practices, and more extensive research involving many more districts would be required to make such a claim. However, the study paints a preliminary picture of the dynamics that influence the potential for greater use of fresh, local fruits and vegetables.

For the purposes of this research, "local" produce is defined as fruits and vegetables grown within the state of Minnesota. However, depending on their location within Minnesota, individual districts may have a different sense of what "local" means to them. For instance, "local" could mean a particular region within Minnesota or an area that stretches beyond the state's borders to Western Wisconsin, Northern Iowa, or the Dakotas. In any event, this study explores opportunities for school districts to purchase produce that is grown closer to home, that

retains a connection to place, and that offers the freshness made possible when the “farm and fork” are in close proximity.

This report has the following key components:

- II. Setting the Table
- III. Past Experiences with Purchasing Locally-grown
- IV. The Hopkins’ Effort: Initial Lessons Learned
- V. Through the Eyes of School Foodservice Directors: Strategies for making local produce “work”
- VI. The Distribution Side: Prospects for Expanding Access
- VII. Next Steps

The author would like to recognize Hopkins foodservice staff Bertrand Weber and Michele Wignall for their efforts to incorporate local produce into Hopkins foodservice offerings. Jim Ennis of Food Alliance Midwest also played a central role in identifying farmers approved under the Food Alliance certification program who could be potential suppliers to Hopkins. Foodservice staff at the St. Paul, Hopkins and Willmar school districts, Nathan Sorensen of the MN Department of Education, Mike Hamm at Michigan State University, and local foods consultant Lynn Mader are also thanked for their thoughtful review of earlier drafts of this report. A full list of research participants and contact information for the author are provided in Attachment A.

Other components of the broader UM research effort address:

- The public finance of school lunch programs as they pertain to the Hopkins School District
- Public policy factors that influence the Hopkins school lunch environment
- Changes in student consumption resulting from Hopkins’ new nutritional guidelines

The information in this study is intended to complement rather than overlap with these other bodies of research. Interested readers are referred to them for additional information. This “Making the Farm / School Connection” research was made possible by a grant from the McKnight Foundation to the Center for International Food and Agricultural Policy in the Department of Applied Economics, University of Minnesota.

II. Setting the table

We start by highlighting key elements of the school lunch environment that influence what fruits and vegetables make it into the lunch line. In particular:

- What are the key budget drivers affecting school lunch programs?
- What goes into the cost of a typical school lunch?
- How much do school districts currently spend on fruits and vegetables?
- How do school districts currently obtain the food used in school lunches?

What are the key budget drivers affecting school lunch programs?

School foodservice revenues are influenced by a variety of intertwined factors including the following:

- **Federal and state reimbursements:** Districts receive reimbursements from state and federal sources for each school lunch they serve. Different reimbursement levels are provided for free, reduced and full price lunches, and may not cover the full cost of the lunch being served. For instance, at the elementary level, districts receive reimbursements of \$2.44, \$2.04 and \$0.34 per free, reduced and full price lunch, respectively. The state state-wide average for Free & Reduced participation was 29.15%¹ during the 2004-05 school year. By comparison, the rate at Hopkins is about 22%, while it is 69% for St. Paul.
- **Participation in the school lunch program:** The percentage of students who participate in the school lunch program is also a factor in foodservice finances. At Hopkins, about 67% of the students participate. At St. Paul, the figure averages 80%. Generally speaking, districts are more financially challenged when participation is lower. “Open campus” policies that allow students to eat off-campus and a larger number of students who bring their lunch from home are among the factors that can reduce participation rates.
- **School lunch prices:** The price charged per school lunch also influences a foodservice program’s finances. The prices charged per lunch are generally set at the district level with approval of the local school board, and can vary significantly from one district to another. For instance, Hopkins charges \$2.25 at the elementary level, \$2.50 at middle schools and \$2.75 at the high school. By contrast, St. Paul charges \$1.50 at the elementary level and \$1.75 at the middle and high school levels (figures that are at the low-end for districts in the Metro area).

¹ Minnesota Department of Education

- **A la carte sales:** Districts may also offer “a la carte” items. These are foods that students may purchase instead of or in addition to the formal school lunch program. For some districts, higher margin a la carte foods are a way to generate surpluses that can bolster the overall foodservice budget. Hopkins generated about \$1.2 million in a la carte revenues in the 2003-04 school year whereas St. Paul’s a la carte revenues are proportionately much smaller at about \$500,000 per year. A la carte sales may be lower in districts where participation in the school lunch program is higher. The nature of a district’s a la carte offerings has an impact as well. Some districts focus on a la carte offerings designed to complement the school lunch program, while others include more entrees and other items that can substitute for the school lunch program.

Other factors:

- **Concessions and vending:** Typically, revenues generated from concessions and vending are not considered part of a foodservice program’s budget. More commonly such revenues accrue to athletics programs, booster clubs and the like. Even in the case of Hopkins – where foodservice staff manage the district’s concession and vending activity – any net revenue that is generated benefits programs other than foodservice.
- **Catering and related enterprises:** Some districts have catering programs that provide food for school and community-based events. But many of the participating foodservice directors view the potential for greater revenue generation as limited. By contrast, Hopkins has launched a variety of foodservice enterprises designed to generate a net surplus that can bolster their foodservice finances. This includes the Wetlands Café, a small café that is open to the community and district staff and offers upscale sandwiches, salads, and pizzas. While these new enterprises have not yet begun to turn a profit, staff are optimistic that they will do so within two years.

What goes into the cost of a typical school lunch?

The cost of a school lunch generally reflects three key components: The value of the food itself, labor and overhead. Not uncommonly food value is about 35% - 45% of the total cost, labor constitutes 40% - 50%, and overhead makes up the balance. Thus for a \$2.00 high school lunch, the food value is likely to be in the neighborhood of \$0.70 to \$0.90 (including the value of USDA commodities). For that modest amount, the district is required to offer a minimum of two ounces of protein, a grain or bread serving, two servings of fruit and/or vegetable, and milk.

A district like Hopkins strives to keep overall food costs to about 40% of total cost, or about \$1.15 per meal at the high school, \$1.05 for middle schools and \$0.90 per elementary school lunch. This enables Hopkins to spend about \$0.20 per serving of vegetables and \$0.25 per serving of fruit. This stands in contrast to districts like St. Paul where figures of \$0.10 - \$0.12 for each serving of fruit or vegetables prevail.

How much do school districts currently spend on purchased fruits and vegetables?

St. Paul, with 41,000 students, spends roughly \$400,000 on purchased fresh and processed fruits and vegetables each year, or roughly 10% of their budget for purchased foods. About 90% of the fruits and vegetables purchased by St. Paul are “further processed”, such as diced tomatoes and shredded lettuce. Hopkins, a district with 9,000 students, reports that it also spends about 10% of their food purchase budget, or \$165,000 per year, specifically on fresh fruits and vegetables.

How do school districts currently obtain the food used in school lunches?

A majority of food being served by Minnesota public schools (roughly 85% - 90%) is purchased commercially. The remaining 10% - 15% is typically covered by USDA commodities. In the case of St. Paul, the district has an annual food budget of roughly \$5.5 million, of which about 80% is for purchased food. Minnesota districts reported total food purchases in 2004-05 of \$124 million².

Commodities are received through the USDA Food Distribution Program, which is administered by the State of Minnesota. It includes “USDA Regular Packaged” meats, poultry, fruits and vegetables (commonly known as “Brown Box” commodities) and processed foods that districts can obtain at a subsidized rate (the Minnesota “Pilot” program). Currently 13 Minnesota districts also participate in the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and receive funding to purchase small quantities of fresh fruits and vegetables through their preferred distributor³.

School districts typically purchase processed foods like pizza, chicken tenders, soups and salad dressings from one or two broad line distributors. Pre-cut or whole fruits and vegetables can be purchased from a broad line distributor or a distributor more specifically focused on produce. Many school districts also have separate purchase contracts for dairy, meat or other products. Some districts contract with a foodservice management company to provide school meals rather than operating the meal program themselves.

Relationships with distributors tend to provide school districts with access to a large and varied supply of whole and further processed produce (such as pre-cut and bagged sliced carrots, coleslaw and stir fry vegetables). They also offer standardized delivery systems, streamlined ordering and billing, and mitigation of various quality control and liability concerns. The existing procurement environment is very standardized and tends to minimize uncertainty – a key factor in institutional settings like schools where the room for surprises tends to be very limited.

It is in comparison to this purchasing environment that most foodservice directors look at “Farm to School” efforts.

² Personal communications, Nathan Sorensen, Minnesota Department of Education

³ Personal communications, Nathan Sorensen, Minnesota Department of Education

How much is known by school foodservice staff about the origins of the fruits and vegetables provided by distributors?

Most foodservice directors who participated in this research said they were uncertain about whether their distributors offer Minnesota-grown products. Most said the availability of local product was not indicated on the marketing materials they receive. One exception is Bix Produce. Some directors who work with Bix were aware that Bix offers local apples in-season (and some have purchased them), but few knew the range of local products that are available. While Bix issues weekly product listings that highlight local items, awareness remains limited.

“Our broad line distributor has only a few local products. They only go by price and Washington apples are cheaper. They are not very open to sourcing local product because it’s more expensive and the season is short, so they told us to go to the grocery store. They said they’d work with me next year, but I’m not all that optimistic. I know they are also concerned about liability issues.”

School Foodservice Director

Most foodservice directors were also uncertain of the geographic origins of the food they actually receive from their distributors. Many noted that product packaging and invoices don’t consistently indicate products’ geographic origin, particularly with processed items. As a result, most of the produce passing through Minnesota school districts arrives devoid of any geographic identity or connection to the people who grew the food.

III. Past experiences with buying locally-grown fruits and vegetables

Any effort to expand use of fresh, locally grown foods must be grounded in the realities of local school districts and those individuals most directly responsible for “putting food on the table” – typically each district’s foodservice director. To explore how local food issues look from their perspective, the author elicited input from foodservice staff from Hopkins, St. Paul, Willmar, Little Falls, Alexandria and eight districts in suburban Minneapolis.

These districts range in size from 3,000 students to 41,000 students. Some directors had experience purchasing fresh, Minnesota-grown fruits and vegetables, while others had never explored it. The summary below reflects the experiences and concerns of only a fraction of Minnesota’s school foodservice directors. A state-wide survey is needed to gather input from many more directors and yield data that is more readily quantifiable.

The foodservice directors who participated in this research expressed a variety of interest levels and motivation where locally grown fruits and vegetables are concerned. The majority expressed interest in using fresher, local produce, citing a range of motivations:

- Offering fresher, more nutritious product that is consumed shortly after it is harvested
- Raising awareness of fresh fruits and vegetables among children and increasing consumption
- Inculcating better eating habits among children
- Educating children about where food comes from and how it is grown
- Supporting the local economy
- Increasing local pride (particularly in rural agricultural areas) and/or
- Responding to parents’ requests for healthier, less processed foods.

Another factor is the federal requirement that all school districts that participate in the National School Lunch and/or Breakfast Program establish a “Local Wellness Policy” by the beginning of the 2006-07 school year. That policy requires school districts to set goals for nutrition education, physical activity, school campus food provision, and other school-based activities designed to promote student wellness⁴. Some districts, like Willmar, have chosen to write local sourcing efforts into their wellness policy.

At the other end of the spectrum, a small minority of foodservice directors expressed strong skepticism about use of local fruits and vegetables, suggesting that it was unrealistic or wouldn’t benefit their student population. Others are somewhere in the middle – intrigued but concerned about how to “make local food work” given the budgetary and time constraints they face.

⁴ United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service website

What experiences have participating school districts had with purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables from Minnesota farmers?

Roughly half of the foodservice directors interviewed said they had some experience purchasing produce directly from farmers in their area. They shared the following insights about their experiences with local produce:

- **Limited awareness of what’s available locally:** Foodservice directors expressed interest in a wide variety of products that they would like to obtain locally (including carrots, potatoes, winter squash, spring greens, apples, kohlrabi, various kinds of melons, berries, green and red peppers, cabbage, radishes, sweet corn, cucumbers and zucchini). However, many felt they had only limited awareness of what products are available locally and at what times of the year.
- **Most foodservice directors who have purchased directly from farmers have experience with one to two products.** Less perishable items like apples and winter squash seem to be the most common points of entry to direct sourcing of local food. Typically, a district (or a subset of its schools) had featured the local food item for a brief period in the fall or winter or as part of a special event. Such activities are likely to have influenced a very small percentage of the fruits and vegetables served (probably less than 1% per year in most cases).
- **The time required to connect with farmers is a significant barrier.** Many foodservice directors noted the difficulty they’ve had identifying farmers who have the product, price and delivery capacity that they need. The time needed to negotiate terms, coordinate deliveries and so on seems to discourage many directors from pursuing more than one or two local products (or from working with local farmers at all). The additional administrative work – of placing more orders and processing more invoices – was also noted by some, although typically local purchases had been limited enough that the added administrative time has been modest.
- **Directors report varying levels of satisfaction with their purchases of local produce.** Some who had purchased directly from individual farmers said they were quite pleased with the quality and price of the product received. However, a significant portion noted difficulties. Most common were quality control problems, product not being delivered on the date or time agreed, and products that did not meet specifications (e.g. receiving apples that

“How can we help districts do more than local apples? Local food programs need to be easy to implement, repeatable, sustainable. Even with the two local foods our district purchased from farmers and piloted this fall, I found it overwhelming! I grew up on dairy farm and understand farmers’ challenges, but working through distributors would be a wonderful alternative”.

School Foodservice Director

“Finding local farmers and dealing with delivery is like a part time job. Even calling our distributor to find out if they have local is hard to find time for. I really wish I had the time to focus on getting local vendors, I really do.”

School Foodservice Manager

were larger than agreed, which required kitchen staff to cut the apples to the appropriate portion size, increasing labor costs and food waste and creating unexpected scheduling issues and stress). In most such cases, the district was relying on only one farmer and didn't have a back-up plan if that farm's delivery fell through.

- **Handling whole, uncut produce is a barrier for many.** When reflecting on their past experiences buying directly from farmers, nearly all foodservice directors said that they had purchased whole, uncut produce items and that processed produce was not available from the farmers they knew. With items like apples that can be served whole, this didn't pose a problem, and some interviewees embrace the use of at least some un-cut product. Hopkins, for instance, has asserted that their shift to higher skill workers and the lower cost of unprocessed food enables them to use more uncut produce without a net increase in kitchen labor costs. However, many districts express strong concern about "buying local" on a significant scale if local equates to whole produce that requires higher labor costs, different types of staff, or altered kitchen facilities.
- **Delivery of local food can be a challenge.** Delivery concerns were most often a factor for foodservice directors who had worked with farmers lacking the capacity to deliver to multiple schools. In these cases, foodservice staff had to arrange separate transportation – in some cases, by driving the food to various schools themselves. This was less of a concern for districts that already have food transportation systems in place or that have a smaller number of less far-flung sites.

"Last year we bought direct from a local apple orchard and they were willing to match the price we'd paid before. This year the orchard didn't want to bother. They didn't have anyone to deliver the product and said we should get their apples at the local grocery store. But then we'd have to do our own delivery to various schools, which we don't have the labor to do."

School Foodservice Director

- **No clear pattern emerged about the price of local food purchases.** Some directors felt the cost of the local product they purchased was comparable to their non-local alternatives. Others thought they had paid somewhat more for product purchased directly from farmers, while others perceived the cost as slightly less.
- **Direct relationships with local farmers have enabled some districts to create new educational opportunities for school children.** For instance, in the fall of 2005, the Willmar school district in Western Minnesota featured locally grown apples, squash, turkey

and wild rice. Farmers visited kids in the school cafeterias and classrooms. Teachers were given information about the food so that they can re-enforce the message. Willmar's foodservice director points out that consumption of fruits and vegetables is increasing, at least in part because of the enthusiasm created by these educational efforts. Willmar's local food program has been aided by a grant-supported coordinator who identifies sources of produce from the Willmar area and handles related negotiations, planning, administration and educational efforts, as well as resource person to help with communications and outreach.

IV. The Hopkins effort to buy locally grown: Initial Lessons Learned

The Hopkins school district is now making a concerted effort to expand their use of locally grown produce. Given this commitment, what can be learned from Hopkins' experience?

“Hopkins Royal Cuisine”, as the district’s foodservice program is known, provides food for ten district schools and eleven other schools in the area. Hopkins has gained increasing recognition for instituting innovative nutritional standards and expanding its use of scratch-cooking. Their Director of Foodservice Operations, Bertrand Weber, is a Swiss-born chef with extensive experience in hotel and restaurant management. Following Weber’s arrival in 2003, and enabled by a supportive administration and school board, the district re-vamped its nutrition goals and foodservice offerings. Hopkins’ new nutritional guidelines state that,

*As a nurturing culinary team, we are committed to providing
healthy and diverse choices within USDA guidelines.*

Offering foods that are fresh, of high quality and minimally processed.

*Increasing natural fibers and other natural nutrients while decreasing caloric intakes, saturated
and trans fatty acids, added sugars and starchy vegetables.*

*Teaching lifelong proper eating habit, that reinforces the belief of moderated consumption in all
food groups.*

Weber asserts that, “it’s not just about feeding kids; it’s about teaching them a healthy eating philosophy. We want to create a connection to the local farm community as a learning environment for kids, to help them develop an understanding of sustainable agriculture. It’s as much about learning opportunities as the food. And we believe fresh food that is grown close by and hasn’t traveled across the country offers the best nutrition for our kids”.

The district’s primary broad line distributor is US Foodservice and over the years, Hopkins has purchased most of its fresh fruits and vegetables from a variety of Minnesota-based produce distributors.

At the time this feasibility study began (in the Spring of 2005), Hopkins’ experience with local produce purchasing was limited to apples purchased from an orchard in Western Wisconsin. Hopkins had earlier launched a “fruit and vegetable of the month program” and sought to feature several local products in the program. They also wanted to incorporate other local produce into the food stream as much as possible. However, the district was unsure how to identify additional sources of local produce.

In May 2005, Jim Ennis of Food Alliance Midwest met with Hopkins foodservice staff to identify potential linkages between the district and Food Alliance-approved farmers in Minnesota. The Food Alliance explored Hopkins’ fruit and vegetable needs, cost parameters, and delivery requirements. District staff was enthusiastic about sourcing directly from farmers, and felt that the related negotiating, contracting, delivery, and billing issues would be

manageable. They also noted that direct sourcing would enable closer relationships with individual farmers and avoid the fees charged by distributors.

From its roster of Food Alliance-certified farms, Food Alliance staff identified about 20 farmers that seemed best positioned to provide the quantity, quality control and other capacities needed to service an institutional buyer like Hopkins. Hopkins planned to contact the farmers and establish purchasing relationships for the fall of 2005.

Highlights from Hopkins' experience

By the winter of 2005/06 a number of lessons emerged from Hopkins' attempt to source local food directly from Minnesota growers:

- **Having the well-informed “short list” of potential suppliers** provided by the Food Alliance Midwest was a big step forward. The Food Alliance's first-hand knowledge was essential in narrowing the list of farms to those most in synch with the district's particular needs.
- **The time required to contact individual farmers proved problematic.** Even with this “short list” in hand, a heavy summer workload and unexpected staff changes inhibited Hopkins' effort to develop relationships with local farmers. Ultimately, staff were able to initiate new relationships with two apple orchards, but was not able to contact the range of producers staff had originally targeted. It is noteworthy that, even with a highly-motivated district like Hopkins, the time needed to coordinate with individual farmers was a significant barrier to sourcing locally-grown.
- **Hopkins begins working through a produce distributor.** Given these challenges, staff elected in the Fall of 2005 to begin sourcing produce from Bix Produce. Based in St. Paul, Bix offers a wide range of produce items from national and international sources and works with roughly a dozen Minnesota fruit and vegetable producers (half of whom are Food Alliance-approved). Bix purchases a wide range of local produce in-season and has an extensive processing facility, allowing it to provide local produce that is further processed.
- **Local squash and cucumbers are purchased through Bix.** During the month of September 2005, Hopkins included Minnesota-grown cucumbers in the high school salad bar. These were purchased whole from Bix. Staff report that the price they paid was consistent with prices incurred for non-local cucumbers in the past. Hopkins also purchased acorn squash through Bix, offering it once per month at all schools. Staff noted that the kids loved it and that purchasing the squash pre-cut in wedges made it very easy to prepare and serve in ¼ cup portions. The cost was about 28 cents per portion, compared to a targeted cost of about 20 cents per serving of vegetables. These local products had no discernable impact on labor costs.
- **Apples purchased direct from three orchards.** Hopkins also purchased apples from two orchards in Minnesota and one in western Wisconsin. Hopkins generally budgets the fruit

portion of the school lunch at about 25 cents, but found that pricing dynamics varied considerably from one orchard and apple variety to the next. Prices paid for apples ranged from 20 cents per apple for 125 count Regent, Prairie Spy and Haralsons, to 24 cents for Cortlands and 38 cents for Food Alliance-certified Honeycrisps. While Hopkins had hoped to feature Honeycrisps for a full month, the higher cost led staff to feature them for two weeks and limit consumption to one apple per child.

- **More advance notice of “What’s available locally” is needed.** Hopkins staff now receives a list of local (and non-local) produce items that are available each week from Bix. Staff reports that the list is a big help in determining what local foods they can access. However, they find that trying to incorporate local product into menus on less than a week’s notice requires considerable flexibility. This is likely to be even more challenging for districts that use pre-determined menu cycles and/or are less well-positioned to accommodate last minute changes in their menus.

“We’d be more successful and better able to plan if we knew firmly what local product would be available when. A couple days notice is hardly enough. You really have to be flexible given the impact of the weather on local availability, but when you put something on the menu, you really have to have it.”

*Michele Wignall
Hopkins Royal Cuisine*

- **Hopkins would like to connect with farmers who can support their education goals.** Hopkins hopes to purchase from farmers who will visit their school or whose farms are close enough for field trips. That may mean developing direct relationships with farmers who don’t work with Hopkins’ produce distributor or partnering in new ways that would allow such farmers to move their supply through the distributor.

Upcoming Developments

Hopkins is experimenting with various strategies to make the “localness” of local food items move visible to students, staff and parents. For instance:

- Local food posters are displayed in cafeterias
- Foodservice staff periodically email families, teachers and staff indicating, for instance, that “the squash on this week’s menu is coming from this local farm” and featuring the State Department of Agriculture’s Minnesota Grown logo.
- Kitchen staff are encouraged to tell students about the origins of the food when coming through the lunch line.
- Information on local food is occasionally included in the newsletters that teachers send home with students.
- Local foods that are included in lunch menus are highlighted on their website (www.royal/cuisine.org).

In fall 2005, foodservice staff also led several hundred elementary age children through local produce tastings, highlighting where the food came from and sharing nutrition information. Staff hope to expand these outreach efforts, but see a need to put their energy first into obtaining local product and integrating it into their menus.

During the remainder of the 2005-06 school year, Hopkins intends to expand local sourcing as much as it can given availability of local product through its distributor. It may also add “Minnesota Grown” offerings to its catering menu. Staff will continue to explore new educational strategies and may organize visits to farms and/or visits by farms to their schools in the Spring.

St. Paul Public Schools

Foodservice staff at the St. Paul Public School (SPPS) district has also begun to expand their local sourcing efforts. In Fall 2005, the district featured apples grown by two Minnesota orchards at all sixty St. Paul schools. Purchased through one of SPPS's regular distributors, the local apples went over well with students and were featured on menus and on signs in cafeteria serving lines.

SPPS is also partnering with an innovative program at the University of Minnesota. A student program of the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, Cornercopia Student Organic Farm is a student-run farming project that grew over 100 varieties of different vegetables during the 2005 season. Cornercopia's summer harvest quickly sold out at a new farmers market on the Minneapolis campus, but St. Paul foodservice staff jumped at the opportunity to purchase Cornercopia's remaining supply of hard squashes in the fall. The squash was piloted at one St. Paul middle school in November 2005. SPPS staff characterizes the partnership with Cornercopia as "priceless" and hope to expand it next year. The district and Cornercopia organizer, Courtney Tchida, will be exploring prospects for the Farm to grow lettuce, radishes and other vegetables specifically for St. Paul schools in early 2006.

As SPPS Purchasing Analyst Jim Groskopf observed, "We look forward to expanding our offerings of local produce. In addition to our work with Cornercopia, we'll need close collaboration with our main produce distributors. We know they carry some local product in-season, but we would like to explore new partnerships where they would process product from a larger number of smaller farmers for us. That would allow us to work with more local farmers and perhaps benefit the local economy in more agricultural communities of our state.

We will also need clearer assurances about the origins of the produce we receive and don't know yet whether the local supply is there to meet the large quantities that we'd like obtain. We have some challenging issues to sort out, but we're optimistic that we can make it work. We also look forward to integrating traditional Hmong vegetables into our menu offerings and would love to purchase them from local suppliers."

V. Through the Eyes of School Foodservice Directors: Strategies for making local produce “work”

The experiences shared above reflect both the growing interest and very real challenges of using fresh, local produce in area school districts. Participating foodservice directors were then asked what conditions would make it most possible for them to expand use of Minnesota-grown produce. Four key “enablers” emerged: purchasing locally-grown produce through distributors, managing various types of risk, making local food efforts compatible with districts’ financial realities, and accessing processed product.

1) Making it easier to purchase locally grown fruits and vegetables by working through distributors.

The majority of participating directors felt strongly that purchasing local food would be most feasible if it could be done through existing distribution relationships. Many noted that the feasibility of local purchasing on a significant scale would increase greatly if the above-noted obstacles of identifying individual farmers, personally negotiating terms and contracts, and handling separate billing and delivery of local food could be avoided.⁵

“How can distributors better communicate with us and far enough in advance that we can menu local foods? We prepare our September menu in May. Some schools plan the whole year of menus in advance. Even getting a general list in May that shows what’s available the rest of the year would really help”.

School Foodservice Director

A minority of foodservice directors said they would be willing to purchase directly from a small number of farmers, particularly farmers who live close to their communities and could provide educational opportunities for students. However, it appears likely that many others will be deterred from purchasing more than one or two crops (or any local product at all) if it means creating a new procurement system that runs in parallel to existing practices and requires significant staff time to source relatively small quantities of food.

Overall, it appears that the prospects for widespread use of locally grown produce would be maximized if local food was accessible through distributors that already supply school districts in the state.

⁵ This preference for working through distributors is consistent with a survey conducted by Michigan State University in which 83% of responding school foodservice directors said they would prefer to access Michigan-grown product through their existing distributor. [Farm-to-School Opportunities in Michigan: What do Foodservice Directors Say?](#) Ola Rostant, Betty Izumi, Viki Lorraine, and Michael W. Hamm, C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at Michigan State University and Marla Moss, Michigan Department of Education (2004)

2) Managing risk: assuring reliable quantity, quality, delivery and liability protection.

Risk management is a significant concern among the foodservice directors. Many noted that they operate under intense time and budgetary pressure and have little room to accommodate surprises. Most place a high priority on obtaining their food through channels that can assure adequate volume, quality control, adherence to specifications, and timely, accurate deliveries.

Many foodservice directors also questioned the legality and liability risk of purchasing directly from farmers. Many have a perception that direct purchasing may be illegal or subject them to unacceptable liability risks. Working through a distributor was generally viewed as the best way to manage liability and other risks. Hopkins' perspective on this is somewhat different as staff have felt that the liability coverage already place at the district level makes it unnecessary for the farmers they buy from to have their own coverage.

“We’ve never heard that our broad line distributor has access to local. We know we need to tell them we want local. We haven’t asked because I didn’t know it was available and we’re just getting started. Many school foodservice directors think it’s not legal to buy from farmers. People have the image that Farm to School is about a guy passing through town with cantaloupes in his truck, but that’s not what it has to be.”

School Foodservice Director

3) Making fresh, local produce compatible with budget realities.

A majority of the foodservice directors interviewed expressed strong concerns about the financial feasibility and sustainability of sourcing local produce. While outside grants and other support may be accessible at least temporarily for a few districts, many directors felt that local food efforts need to be compatible with existing budget realities if they are to be credible and sustainable. This concern seems to have two components:

A. The cost of the food itself. The majority of participating foodservice directors believe that their capacity to pay more for local fruits and vegetables is very limited, citing years of belt-tightening in their districts, limited state and federal reimbursements, and the perception that their foodservice program has limited potential to raise additional operating revenues.

Some directors say they can accommodate slight price premiums if they affect a small number of local items or items used in small quantities on an occasional basis. However, if local produce is to be incorporated on a significant scale and on a sustained basis most say it would need to be priced competitively with other sourcing options. A district like Hopkins, with its more favorable financial environment, has additional latitude to incorporate costlier fruits and vegetables in the \$0.20 - \$0.25 per serving range. Absent new funding sources or expanded federal/state reimbursements, figures of \$0.10 - \$0.12 per serving will be more realistic for a larger number of Minnesota districts. (Again, a state-wide research could better hone these figures).

B. The cost of staff time. The added “people” cost of working directly with farmers is another factor. Districts like Willmar currently have the benefit of an outside coordinator to build supply relationships with farmers. But while grant-funded approaches have been successful in launching many “Farm to School” efforts across the country, directors voiced concern about how their district could sustain such activity given tight budgets and the vagaries of external fundraising. Buying local produce through distributors was widely viewed as the most attractive and effective way to make time requirements manageable.

4) Accessing locally grown produce that has been further processed.

The majority of those interviewed said that use of local fruits and vegetables would be greatly aided if they could purchase it further processed rather than whole by-the-case.

Some directors felt that whole items like apples and potatoes were workable and some districts currently use those items on a regular basis. However, districts’ capacity to handle other whole produce varies widely. Hopkins, for instance, indicates that about 75% of their offerings are made from “modified scratch” and they have adjusted their kitchen staffing and facilities to accommodate more labor-intensive foods. A district like St. Paul makes roughly 50% of its offerings from modified scratch, primarily in a central commissary. But other participating districts said that the share of modified scratch in their district was as low as 1%.

While many districts are expanding scratch cooking, access to local fruits and vegetables that have been further processed is likely to enable more districts to expand local sourcing.

Other factors affecting use of locally-grown:

While the four factors above were commonly viewed as the ones that would have the greatest impact in expanding use of local produce, several other considerations were also voiced.

- **Making menu planning compatible with the seasonal, and somewhat unpredictable, timing of local produce:** The harvest season for Minnesota produce overlaps with the school year primarily in May, early June, September and October. A smaller number of items are also available over the winter. Availability of any given local produce item may also shift by several weeks due to the weather. This makes menu planning a challenge.

Most foodservice directors said it would be feasible to menu items like a “seasonal salad” or “fall harvest vegetables” that can incorporate the items available at the time. Summer programs may also be a good opportunity. Some districts requested additional recipe ideas and practical strategies for making menu plans more flexible.

- **Geographic traceability:** If schools are to highlight local foods and use them as educational opportunities for their students, they need assurances that the food they are using is, in fact, locally grown. This is readily done when food is purchased directly from local farmers. But foodservice directors raised questions about the traceability of local food purchased through distributors.
- **Telling the story behind the food:** Most foodservice directors who are interested in local food want to find ways to tell the food's story to their students. They are interested in obtaining straightforward, feasible ways of educating children at the point of consumption and highlighting local offerings on their website and menus. Some are also interested in arranging farm visits or having farmers visit their schools. Others hope to see more food-related issues integrated into the classroom curriculum. There is a growing supply of educational tools to address these goals, but greater dissemination and development are needed to expand their use.

“Purchasing local food is a good start, but we need to create experiences for the kids so they learn where the food is from and how it was the grown. Local food without the experiential aspect isn’t enough. But that combination together can begin to shift how kids look at their food.”

*Lynn Mader,
Local Foods Coordinator
Willmar, MN*

VI. The Distribution side: Prospects for expanding access to fresh local produce

A majority of the participating school foodservice directors believe that obtaining locally grown produce through their existing distributors could address many concerns about using locally grown produce – if local produce was accessible through these channels. How does the current food distribution environment help or hinder that prospect?

To explore the feasibility of sourcing local produce through distributors, the author contacted a variety of the broad line and produce distributors that supply the school districts participating in this research. This yielded some encouraging signs. It also highlighted the opaque nature of communications about the demand, supply and geographic origins of the produce now crossing the lunch line. These dynamics and the prospects for districts to access local produce through existing procurement relationships are explored below.

- **A relatively small number of distributors appear to service the majority of Minnesota school districts.** Appert's, Foodservices of America, Reinhart Foods, Upper Lakes Food and US Foodservice were the broad line distributors most frequently mentioned by participating districts. Among the districts that purchase specifically from produce distributors, Bix Produce was most frequently mentioned. This suggests that efforts to partner with a relatively small number of distributors could address a significant number of districts in the state.
- **Some produce distributors already offer local, processed product in-season.** Distributors like Bix Produce already purchase from Minnesota growers and can offer a wide range of local items in-season that have been further processed. Other distributors have narrower selections of local produce, offer it sporadically, and/or only whole by-the-case.
- **Many broad line distributors also appear to handle some local product in-season.** Broad line distributors generally buy their produce through produce wholesalers, processors or brokers who, in turn, have direct relationships with individual farm operations, cooperatives and other vendors. Most produce wholesalers who were interviewed say they carry some Minnesota-grown product in season. Some supplement their national and international supply stream with a small quantity of local product, while others switch almost entirely to locally and regionally-purchased produce in-season.

“When local is in season, we carry 100% local produce because it’s reasonably priced and we save some on the transportation cost. Our advertising sheets sometimes say if the product is local, but broad line distributors don’t really care. But if they wanted local, we could provide it. We know which farmers we’re buying from at any given time so we can confirm the product’s origins”.

*Sales Rep for a produce wholesaler
that supplies a broad line distributor*

Most of the wholesalers interviewed thought it would be possible to “pull local produce through the system” from farmer to wholesaler to broad line distributor to a school district if the district specifically asked for it. However, other than apples, virtually no cases of this happening were identified.

- **Many factors influence distributors’ and wholesalers’ decisions about where to purchase their produce.** These factors include national and international market conditions and pre-existing contractual relationships. Low cost is perhaps the most fundamental determinant. Some interviewees said that a desire to minimize transportation costs was a major reason to buy locally, while a desire to support area farmers is a factor (more commonly for locally-owned distributors). Some interviewees thought that higher fuel prices would increase their interest in locally grown, although others said that costs for California product tend to be so much lower that higher fuel costs wouldn’t alter their purchasing practices. Insufficient local supply, Minnesota’s short growing season, price, quality control, liability issues, and a perceived lack of demand were the most commonly cited deterrents to purchasing Minnesota-grown.
- **The “available supply” of local produce is difficult to gauge.** Although many distributors already carry some local produce in-season, it is difficult to quantify the “available supply” of local product. Even a distributor like Bix, which is active with local farmers, is challenged to articulate how much local produce would be available at a given time at a given price if demand from school districts were to increase. However, several distributors noted that they get frequent calls from Minnesota farmers wanting to sell their product. Most of the distributors and wholesalers interviewed say they are confident they could obtain local produce if clients asked for it.
- **Distributors’ prices for local product are often comparable to non-local.** As one distributor put it, “generally speaking, local would not be more expensive to the school district than non-local. Typically we pay local producers commodity prices unless they have a specialty product or are offering something out of season. Minnesota producers know they need to set their price at California rates plus the cost of shipping from California to stay competitive. Prices for local apples and cabbage are often lower than product from elsewhere.” When pricing local product, some distributors also pass on a portion of the transportation savings to their customers.

“We buy produce from one local distributor and one national company, both of whom carry some Minnesota produce. We already provide local to college and corporate clients. We haven’t yet run into a situation where we have demand for Minnesota-grown produce that our distributors couldn’t find the supply for.”

*Purchasing agent,
Foodservice management
company*

One distributor with a large processing operation noted that the price for processed, local product may be slightly higher if the produce supplied by the farmer is not already trimmed and peeled. He noted that, “Our suppliers in California have the infrastructure to trim and peel the product before it gets to us. Most of the local growers don’t have that ability and

send us untrimmed carrots, for instance. We can work with that product, but the cost to the customer will probably be higher.”

- **Product specifications greatly influence price.** The recent experiences of Hopkins and St. Paul highlight the prospects for obtaining high quality produce that fits different budget parameters. For instance, St. Paul and Hopkins purchased some of their local apples from the same orchard. Hopkins was specifically interested in Honeycrisp apples and purchased a larger size (which is in demand in grocery settings and generally commands a higher price). They paid about \$0.38 per Honeycrisp.

St. Paul purchased apples from the same orchard through their distributors, with their bid specifically asking for Minnesota-grown, but not specifying a variety of apple. St. Paul chose a smaller apple that corresponded well to the standard ¼ cup portion size. By purchasing smaller apples, St. Paul was able to offer local, certified-sustainable apples that were within its more modest \$0.10 - \$0.12 per serving budget parameters.

“We buy our apples from wholesalers in the Twin Cities and we mostly stick with Washington apples. If there was enough demand for local apples maybe we’d pursue it, but I haven’t gotten a request for local apples in three years. One of our distributors buys some locally and we could probably get Minnesota-grown if there was a reason to. We just haven’t seen the demand.”

Produce buyer, foodservice company

- **Greater communication with farmers about districts’ product specifications is needed.**

As one produce buyer put it, “Local producers may not offer what schools want. For instance, schools want small apples that meet their portion requirements, like 150 or 175 count per case. But many local growers focus on the larger, 80 count size that grocery stores want. If local growers could produce more small, consistently sized apples that would make them more palatable to schools. Schools also need to state in their specs that they want 150 count Haralsons, not Red Delicious.” While schools may not be attractive customers for farmers who can sell their large apples into more lucrative retail markets, schools may be a very attractive market for other sizes and grades that would otherwise generate less value for the producer.

- **Weather and other factors make it difficult for distributors to guarantee the availability of local produce.** The local season for fruits and vegetables can swing several weeks in either direction or be cut short by the weather fluctuations. The weather and other factors beyond distributors’ control make it difficult for distributors to guarantee the supply and price of local product in advance. As a result, it may be better for purchasing contracts to stipulate that the distributor will provide local product when it is available within agreed specifications and that the order will be filled with non-local product should local supply become unavailable on acceptable terms. This may be a good risk management strategy for both school districts and distributors.
- **Access to distributors of processed, local produce varies across the state.** Districts’ access to distributors is influenced considerably by the geographic location of the district and the reach of distributors involved. Some distributors (like Bix) cover the entire state, while

others focus on particular regions within the state (for instance, within a 160 miles of St. Cloud).

Other factors include minimum order sizes and compatibility of the distributor's delivery cycle with the district's parameters. For instance, a distributor may be able to add a new client to an existing delivery run that passes through a particular district on Mondays and Wednesday between 4am and 5am, but have difficulty accommodating a different schedule. Thus the potential for a district to partner with any given distributor is quite dependent on the operating dynamics of the particular distributors and districts involved.

- **Summer programs are worth exploring.** Given that much of Minnesota's fresh produce is available during the summer months when school is not in session, the integration of local produce into schools' summer programs should also be explored. While this approach would not have the potential to reach as many children, it would allow a much greater variety of local product to be used.
- **Barriers to working through distributors are numerous for smaller and medium-sized farmers.** For instance:
 - Many small and medium size farmers are challenged to afford the \$1 million in liability coverage that is typically required. A growing number are unable to obtain such coverage.⁶
 - Distributors usually require produce vendors to have certain types of post-harvest handling capacity and adequate HACCP practices.
 - The commodity prices that distributors typically pay will also be a deterrent to some farmers, particularly those able to access higher-margin markets like white table cloth restaurants and natural food grocery cooperatives.
 - Distributors may prefer to work with a small number of larger producers / producer groups (for instance that sell by the pallet rather than by the case) given the added legwork of working with many producers providing small quantities.
 - Distributors typically have national supply contracts in place and may be reluctant to add local sources, particularly if they perceive demand for local to be limited.

However, distributors are already used by some larger conventional and certified-sustainable producers and producer groups that want higher volume markets, are comfortable with close-to-commodity pricing, and/or are interested in markets for products they otherwise find difficult to sell. Other interested farmers could potentially address some of the above barriers by consolidating their supply and expanding the volume and variety of product they have to offer. Also, if distributors see growing demand for local, some may be willing to consider

⁶ Personal communications with Pam Benike, Southeast Minnesota Food Network

new ways of working small- and medium-sized producers into their supply chain. This would, of course, require further exploration among interested farmers and distributors.

- **Ability to trace products' geographic origin varies from one distributor to another.** "Traceability" of produce items varies greatly depending upon the operating practices of the distributors involved. Some already track the state from which produce is obtained and a few said they could readily track most shipments back to the specific farm of origin. Others, particularly those that purchase simultaneously from multiple sources, noted a variety of internal barriers to providing assurances about the origins of any given delivery.

Traceability issues would need to be determined with individual distributors as they are highly dependent on each company's internal systems and practices. Interestingly, many of the broad line distributors who were interviewed expressed a reasonable degree of confidence that their wholesalers could document Minnesota-grown produce if there was a compelling reason to do so.

- **Concerns about bio-security and country-of-origin are growing for USDA⁷ and many distributors.** These issues, along with growing concern about food safety generally, are heightening attention to traceability and record keeping throughout the supply chain. Some distributors have responded by reducing the number of suppliers they work with, or are enforcing accountability requirements more rigorously. It is conceivable that these concerns will eventually spur greater interest in food that is grown closer to the point of consumption.
- **Some government programs could potentially be an avenue for local sourcing.** A growing number of Minnesota districts participate in the Department of Defense (DOD) Fruit & Vegetable Program. Under this program, a district requests that DOD provide certain produce items. DOD then places the order with an approved broad line distributor or produce vendor that services that particular district. Some of these approved entities already carry Minnesota-grown product in-season. According to Nathan Sorensen of the Minnesota Department of Education, it is possible that districts could specifically request Minnesota-grown produce when utilizing the DOD program. Sorensen was not aware of cases where this had been done, but thought it merited further exploration as funding and participation in the DOD program increases.

A second possibility may be commodities that are channeled through the State-administered USDA Food Distribution Program. As part of their agriculture price support role, USDA purchases selected commodities from the lowest bidder and buys by the truckload. This program enabled the Minnesota Department of Education to make four truckloads of free commodity whole fresh apples available to 351 public and private schools in 2005. These commodity apples had been purchased by USDA on the East and West coasts and were then trucked to Minnesota. While USDA's purchasing requirement (particularly the low bid requirement) present some barriers, it may be possible for Minnesota growers to bid on these USDA commodity contracts and perhaps benefit from their lower transportation costs.

⁷ Personal communications, Nathan Sorensen, Minnesota Department of Education

VI. Next Steps

School districts, distributors, governmental units, local food advocates and producers all have a role to play to expanding use of local produce in Minnesota schools. Suggested next steps are offered below:

- **Test a distribution-based sourcing model through new partnerships between distributors and school districts:** Few examples were found (either in Minnesota or nationally) of school districts purchasing local product through distributors on a significant and sustained basis. Doing so will require interested districts to more actively partner with their distributors in a joint effort to forge workable marriages between supply and demand. A key next step will be to facilitate several such partnerships so that the feasibility of sourcing fresh, local produce through distributors can be tested on the ground.
- **Conduct a state-wide survey:** Relatively little comprehensive, state-wide data is available concerning school districts' interest in purchasing fresh local produce, levels of current usage, and the specific financial, staffing, infrastructure and procurement realities that effect their capacity to add more fresh, local produce to their food stream. A state-wide survey of school districts could be very instrumental in bolstering available data on the issue and perhaps enabling a more collective effort to expand use of local produce.
- **Expand training and tools for school foodservice staff:** Training efforts should explore what local products are available when, how they can be obtained, and how they can be incorporated into menus. Tools for promoting local foods in schools and educational curricula are also needed. Sites visits to farms can also be a powerful way to expand awareness about local agriculture. There is a growing supply of such resources available from schools and local food advocates in Minnesota and across the country. A more strategic effort to disseminate these and adapt them to local conditions is needed.
- **Help districts get started:** Connecting interested districts with outside resource providers could help launch local food programs and cultivate the internal capacity needed to run them over time. If such an approach is pursued, care should be taken that it is designed to support a local foods business model that school districts can later sustain on their own.
- **Voice the demand for local produce:** School districts will need to clearly articulate their interest in local produce and communicate more proactively with distributors. Interested districts can support such an effort by approaching distributors collectively, pooling demand through joint bids, and stating their desire for local produce in bid specifications.
- **Cultivate connection and education:** For many interested schools, the desire to buy locally-grown is not only about the food, but about educational opportunities for kids. One risk of sourcing local product through distributors is that a connection with individual farmers and a sense of place may be lost as the organizational layers between the farmer and the lunch table increase. Districts working through large distributors will need to take special care that the experiential and educational opportunities of locally-grown food are not lost in the process.

- **Engage farmers in the process:** One way of fueling the educational side of local sourcing is to expand relationships with farmers who live in close geographic proximity to the particular districts involved. This may mean connecting with farmers who don't currently work with distributors. Creative, perhaps legislatively-based, strategies for managing liability risk, in particular, could enable more small and medium-sized farmers to work with schools. Helping interested farmers to consolidate their supply and form closer relationships with processors and distributors is also important.
- **Explore opportunities for local sourcing through USDA programs:** There may be room for existing USDA commodity procurement programs to channel locally-grown produce to Minnesota schools. Such options should be explored in partnership with the Minnesota Departments of Education, Agriculture and Health, USDA, school districts, farmers and distributors.

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Attachment A: Research Contacts

School District Foodservice Staff

- Hopkins: Bertrand Weber and Michele Wignall
- St. Paul: Jean Ronnei and Jim Groskopf
- Willmar: Annette Derouin (also immediate past State President of Minnesota School Nutrition Association)
- Alexandria: Barb Larson
- Little Falls: Tina Wheeler
- Chaska: Diane Timmers
- Eden Prairie: Roxann Roushar
- Minnetonka: Katherine Jorgenson
- Orono: Kris Diller
- Shakopee: Deborah Ross
- St Louis Park: Kathy Milbrath
- Wayzata: Mary Anderson
- Westonka: Patricia Berg

Distributors, Wholesalers and Foodservice Management Companies

- Reinhart Foodservice: Jon Loomis
- Sodexo: Lorel Snyder
- Appert's Foodservice: Keith Corver, Bob Henkemeyer (Produce Buyer)
- Foodservices of America: Bob Wesley (Produce Buyer)
- Sysco Foods: Jeff Larson
- Wholesale Produce Supply: Chad Karth (Sales Representative)
- H. Brooks & Company: Al Blanton (VP of Operations), Paul Lerom (Produce Buyer)
- Cre8it, Inc.: Dave Stahel (Sales Manager)
- Bix Produce: Barb Sletten and Cheryl Edward (Sales Reps), Jeff Severson (Buyer) and Duane Pfeleger (COO)
- Bergin Fruit Co, Inc.: Tom Bergin, Jr.

Other Contributors

- Jim Ennis, Food Alliance Midwest
- Nathan Sorenson, Principal State Program Administrator, Minnesota Department of Education
- Mike Hamm, Michigan State University
- Lynn Mader, Consultant to the Willmar School District
- Pam Benike, Southeast Minnesota Food Network

Contact information for the report's author is provided below. Questions and comments are welcome.

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