



Minneapolis Public Schools Farm to School Toolkit

A case study of how Minneapolis Public Schools
buys fresh, sustainably-grown produce from small
and medium-sized local farmers.



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Finally, we sincerely thank the farmers who grow our food. Much of the process described in this toolkit is a direct reflection of conversations with you and suggestions from you. We couldn't do it without you - *literally*!

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About this Toolkit

Welcome to the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) Farm to School toolkit!

Since 2011, MPS has been proudly sourcing fresh produce, meats, baked goods, and other products from local farmers and manufacturers for the meals we provide to the 35,500 students in the district. It's a win-win – we support our neighboring farmers and food economies, and kids love the fresh, flavorful food! This toolkit is designed to describe MPS' farm to school program and share the many useful tools, resources and documents that have been developed since its inception. Readers will get an overview of how MPS purchases and serves fresh produce from small and mid-sized, sustainable farmers in the region.

The primary audience for this toolkit is food service directors and staff at schools or other institutions who wish to serve locally grown foods, as well as partners who serve to support or fund farm to school programs. Anyone interested in farm to school will learn something from this tangible example of how a school district serves farm-fresh produce in school meals. We wanted to capture the essence of MPS's farm to school program and deliver it in an easy-to-read version for busy professionals, rather than publish a lengthy, all-inclusive report.

Please visit our website at nutritionservices.mpls.k12.mn.us for more information, or reach out to us with further questions.

Author Andrea Northup, Farm to School Coordinator, Minneapolis Public Schools

Contact andrea.northup@mpls.k12.mn.us or 612-668-2854

Graphic Design & Layout Kollin Leisinger, Graphic Artist, Minneapolis Public Schools

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ONE Farmer Selection

MPS uses a competitive bid process to select small and mid-sized growers who are committed to sustainable practices to participate in its farm to school program.

FARM TO SCHOOL FEEDBACK

MPS starts the process by gathering feedback from staff on the farm to school program.

Link: [Farm to School Feedback Survey](#)

FARMER INFORMATION MEETING

MPS spreads the word about a farmer information meeting.

Partners help spread the word about the farmer information meeting through newsletters, email lists, and conversations with farmers.

- Minnesota Department of Agriculture
- University of Minnesota
- Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture
- Sustainable Farming Association
- Land Stewardship Project
- Farming/Food conference contacts
- Farmer contacts
- Farmers market contacts
- True Food Chef Council

MPS hosts the farmer information meeting. (December)

Link: [Handout](#) | [Presentation](#)

TIPS & HINTS

Word of mouth is the most important way to spread the word and find new farmers, especially when farmers who've participate in the program can speak highly of it to neighbors and friends.



Farmer Information Meeting Topics

A brief history & overview of MPS' Culinary & Nutrition Services

A description of the MPS farm to school program & process

Testimonials from current-year farmer participants

A question & answer session

Gather farmers' contact information and ask them to spread the word to other interested farmers

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

MPS crafts and disseminates a farm to school Request for Proposals (RFP), a competitive bid document for seasonal, fresh produce that complies with USDA National School Lunch Program requirements and the district's procurement rules. (December/January)


Link: [Request for Proposals](#)

The RFP includes:

- General information about MPS
- Goals of farm to school program
- Description of the selection process
- Farmer requirements (food safety plan, liability insurance, water test)
- Ordering, delivery, and invoicing logistics
- Product specifications and pack sizes
- Customer service expectations
- Response form where farmers fill out information about their farms
- Pricing & availability form for farmers to indicate volumes and pricing of specific items they can provide
- Benchmark pricing from similar buyers and past-year pricing information

Farmers submit RFP responses online in conjunction with a hard copy. (January/February)

"When I first looked at the RFP it seemed a little intimidating. However, as soon as I dove into it I realized it was pretty quick and simple. MPS has a really well organized, clear and concise process in place that makes filling out the RFP a lot easier than I thought it would be." - MPS Farmer Partner



MPS analyzes farmer responses to RFP. A set of values-based criteria are assigned weight and are used to select farm to school farmer partners. When making product selections, each farmer is assigned a ranking that is considered alongside the quoted price per pound for specific produce. (February)

Links: [Selection Criteria](#) | [Selection Rubric](#)

MPS hosts a RFP question & answer conference call for farmers.

Link: [Q&A Summary](#)

MPS farm to school selection committee (Farm to School Coordinator, Executive Chef, Business Manager, Menu Planner, Buyer) analyzes farmer responses and compares to historical pricing information, taking into account yields and processing/delivery fees.

- MPS notifies top-ranked farmers for each product. Farmers may decline products if desired so as to fit farm capacity and sales goals.
- MPS inserts farm to school language into competitively bid contract with a produce distributor. This requires the produce company to source from the specific farm to school farmers identified through the RFP process.

LESSONS LEARNED

It pays to communicate with farmers about product specifications that can get you the best value. For example, extra-large butternut squash will give schools a better yield and save time during the harvest process on the farm.

While we expected farmers to be wary of “committing” to volumes for MPS, they actually like to know in advance what they’ll be growing. Commitments from MPS helps with farm planning, minimizes marketing costs, reduces the anxiety of not knowing if a product will sell, and leverages additional large buyers.

TIPS & HINTS

You can use a variety of values-based criteria to select farmer partners, rather than just price. For example, a farm’s commitment to sustainable growing practices has substantial weight in MPS’s selection process.



On-Farm Food Safety Workshop Topics

Food safety basics, employee training, safe manure use, water testing, sanitation, post-harvest handling to minimize microbial contaminants

TWO Farmer Onboarding Process

Farmers go through a process whereby they are set up as “vendors” and brought into the fold of MPS’ procurement system.

INSTITUTIONAL SALES WORKSHOP *Early Spring*

A four hour workshop is hosted at the produce company’s facility.

- Workshop is required for farm to school farmers, and open to any interested farmers.
- New waxed produce boxes are purchased in bulk and distributed to farmers at cost as a courtesy from the produce company.
- Farmers tour the produce company so they can see how their products will flow through the facility.
- Farmers see sample cases of each farm to school item so they get a feel for product specifications and pack sizes.
- All participants eat lunch at an MPS school and engage with site staff and students.

Links: [Agenda](#) | [Presentation](#) | [Product Specifications](#)

FOOD SAFETY WORKSHOP *Early Spring*

A four hour long meeting at MPS Culinary Center hosted by MPS and University of Minnesota On-Farm Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) Education Program staff.

Review Site Visit Checklist used during upcoming farm visits by MPS and UMN.

University of Minnesota Staff provide assistance with food safety plans and policies as needed.

Links: [Agenda](#) | [Presentation](#) | [GAPS Presentation](#)



Farmer visit to MPS Culinary Center



FARMERS SEND REQUIRED DOCUMENTS TO MPS *June 1*

Food safety plan (or GAP audit certification if applicable).

Proof of \$1 million dollar product liability insurance coverage.

Results of current water test – required to test for nitrites, nitrates, total coliforms and quantified E. coli.

FARMER-TO-FARM MENTORSHIP *Ongoing*

Experienced farmers are matched with farmers new to the program to share information about selling to wholesale markets, varieties, yields, food safety questions, etc. Phone calls and site visits as needed.

FOOD SAFETY EDUCATION AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE *Ongoing*

UMN On-Farm GAPs Education Program staff are available to answer farmers' questions and provide assistance about on-farm food safety and food safety plans. Emails, phone calls, visits as needed.

SITE VISITS *July*

MPS Farm to School Coordinator, UMN staff, and produce company staff visit all participating farms to build relationships and review on-farm food safety practices.

A site visit checklist is reviewed for each farm covering on-farm food safety practices. Farm practices are ranked as excellent, acceptable, action recommended, corrective action required, or major corrective action required.

Link: [Site Visit Checklist](#)

***The workshops are hands-on with slides, videos and demonstrations.
The site visits address exactly what I need to do or not do.”***
- MPS Farmer Partner



Hmong American Farmers Association



Seed to Seed Farm

SITE VISIT FOLLOW UP August

Farmers are given specific descriptions of practices that need to be changed or adopted before purchasing begins.

MPS Farm to School Coordinator & UMN staff follow up with farmers to assist in finding solutions, help with food safety plans, and to answer questions.

Depending on the food safety risk, a second site visit may be required in order to confirm that the corrective action was made. Or, a farm might be asked to provide photo evidence of the changed practice before the farm supplies produce to MPS.

LESSONS LEARNED

Don't try to do it all! Partners can be particularly helpful with certain farm to school components, such as on-farm food safety training.

Farmers like to understand the big picture of how their food is incorporated into school meals. For example, they like seeing how their fruits and vegetables are processed at our produce company.

Visiting farmers on their farms is invaluable. The conversations and interactions on these visits help clarify questions, brainstorm creative solutions, and build trust.

“The on-farm food safety information we’ve gotten through the MPS Farm to School program has been helpful because it is tailored to my farming operation. They give me, the grower, a specific and highly personalized action plan.” - MPS Farmer Partner



THREE Recipe & Menu Planning

Farm to school produce is featured on menus through synchronization of menu planning, recipe development and procurement efforts.

RECIPE DEVELOPMENT

MPS Executive Chef develops and tests recipes featuring seasonal produce items on an ongoing basis.

MENU PLANNING

MPS Farm to School Coordinator works with MPS Menu Planner to make sure that appropriate quantities of farm to school items are incorporated in the cycle menus.

MPS Cycle Menu

MPS uses a menu cycle consisting of a 4-week rotation of entrees and sides. One cycle covers September through February, and a second cycle covers March through the first month of the following school year (September).

Link: [October Menu](#) | [February Menu](#)



MENU PLANNING (continued)

Each month, MPS' Farm to School Coordinator and Menu Planner meet to adjust the cycle menu to feature seasonal farm to school items.

- Incorporate farm to school products and quantities promised to farmers to make sure commitments are met as defined by the RFP process.
- Example: September menu might incorporate green beans, corn on the cob, yellow squash and other “summer” produce. The January menu might incorporate storage crops like carrots, beets, potatoes, and winter squash.

Menu Item Category	Farm to School Example
Hot vegetable sides	Roasted, cubed butternut squash
Cold sides	Broccoli Salad with dried cranberries
Entrée ingredients	Potatoes in Curried Chicken Bowl
Condiments	Diced jalapenos
Bean & grain salad ingredients	Red pepper in My Rockin' Bean Salad
Lettuce blend	Kale (10%) in all salad bar lettuce blends
Salad bar fresh produce	Watermelon wedges

Farm to school items are incorporated as:

- **Regular menu items:** cost-effective, high volume menu items used on a weekly basis, typically storage crops (*Example: roasted diced red potatoes*)
- **Special feature items:** typically more expensive, low volume menu items for a special event or one-time feature (*Example: beauty heart radish slices*)
- **Trial run:** small batch of a menu item for a targeted audience, with a process to gather feedback to test student acceptance and feasibility (*Example: roasted Brussels sprouts*)





MINNESOTA THURSDAYS

A menu featuring all locally-grown & produced items is served the first Thursday of each month.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Any special events are taken into account. Examples include Earth Day, Native American Family Involvement Day, the School Food FOCUS Midwest Menu, and partnerships with other departments, community organizations or national initiatives.

FRESH FRUIT & VEGETABLE PROGRAM (FFVP)

Participating school sites receive individually-wrapped fresh fruits and vegetable snacks daily in their classrooms.

Farm to school items are featured on the FFVP menu once or twice per month.

Proposals for the FFVP menu are evaluated monthly from two competing produce companies using Geographic Preference to favor local suppliers.

Links: [Vendor Quote Form](#) | [FFVP Menu](#) | [Quote Letter](#) | [Quote Evaluation Calculator](#)



What is Geographic Preference?

Geographic preference is when a school district applies a preference for fresh produce and other products that are locally-grown when evaluating vendor quotes, bids or proposals. For more information, see the [USDA Geographic Preference Overview](#)





IW FRUIT & VEGETABLE ROTATION

School sites without salad bars receive Individually Wrapped (IW) fruits and vegetables for students at lunch. Proposals for the IW fruit and vegetable rotation are evaluated monthly from two competing produce companies using Geographic Preference to favor local suppliers.

Link: [IW Rotation Bid Document](#)

STAFF TRAINING

Staff training includes information about farm to school program logistics, special farm to school instructions regarding menus and ordering, and chances for staff to meet the farmers who grow our food!

LESSONS LEARNED

Roasted diced storage crops are a great place to start! They allow for large amounts of cosmetic imperfection (which means cheaper produce), last long into the winter months, require a simple cooking process, and taste much better than frozen veggies!

Keeping a “cheat sheet” of produce promised to each farmer allows you to continuously make sure the menu accommodates the quantities and varieties farmers are growing.

Serving both special features and regular menu items is a critical balancing act. Special features take a lot of time and energy, whereas ongoing menu items become routine for staff.



Roasted carrots



FOUR Farmer Orders & Deliveries

Farmers receive orders and make deliveries to MPS' produce company.

FAMERS BECOME PRODUCE COMPANY VENDORS August 1

Farmers send additional paperwork and remittance information to the produce company.

MPS PLACES FARMER ORDERS Ongoing

Farm to School Coordinator:

- Reviews inventory report detailing the quantities and varieties of farm to school items on hand at the produce company.
- Forecasts usage of farm to school items for the upcoming week's produce deliveries based on menus and past usage.
- Checks in with farmers to see if they have enough product to meet demand for the coming week.
- Sends desired farm quantities and delivery dates to produce company.
- Produce company issues purchase orders to farmers.

Farmers make deliveries and send their invoices directly to the produce company.

Produce company pays farmers within 30 days, just as they would any other vendor.

LESSONS LEARNED

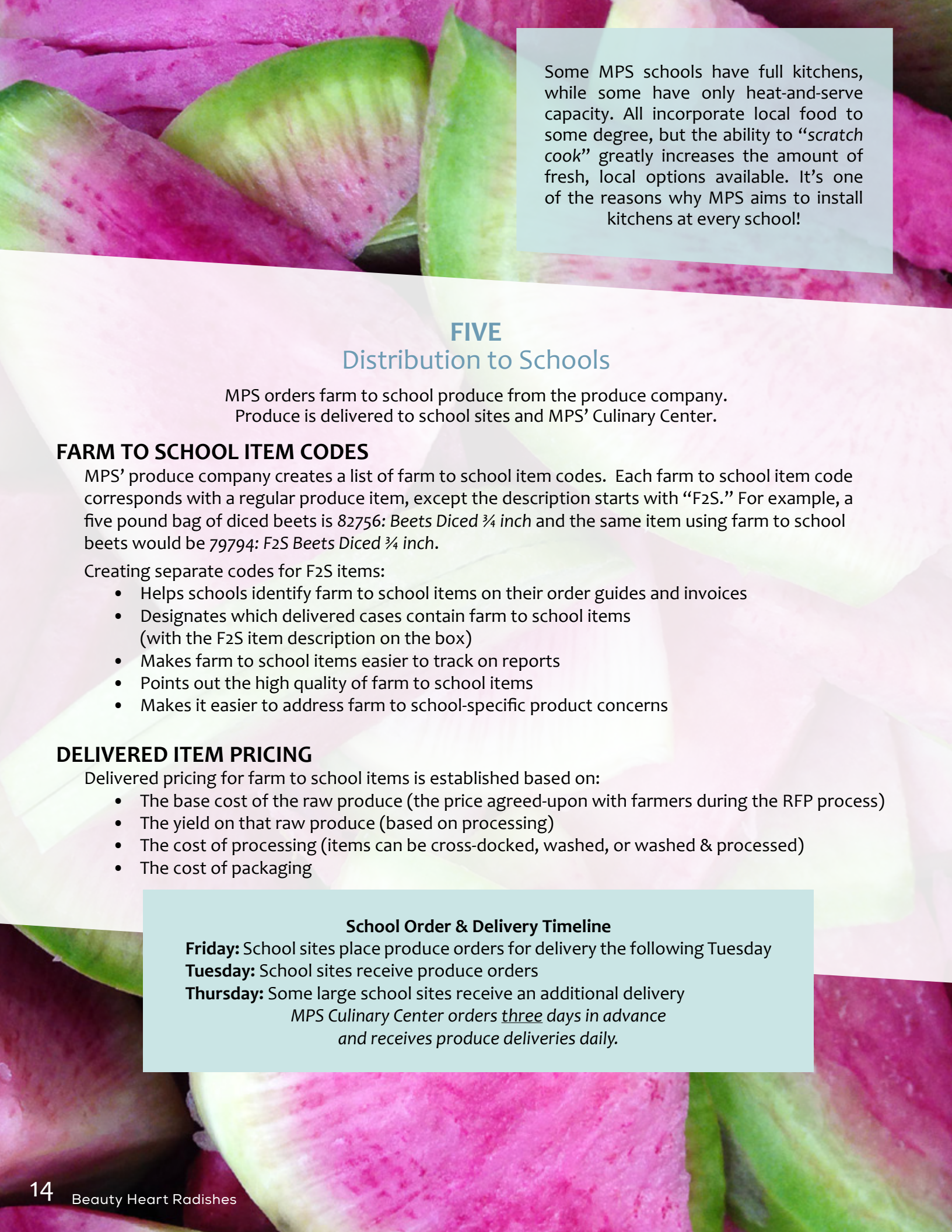
General check ins with farmers each month give farmers a “heads up” about important features or big purchases coming up (in addition to weekly ordering communication).

Farmers have different communication preference (call vs. text vs. email). Learn which works best so that you can efficiently review availability and place orders each week.

TIPS & HINTS

Take into account the following when placing weekly orders with farmers: Is product perishable? If so, which delivery date maximizes farmer efficiency? When is the best time to menu a perishable product?

Orders are placed with farmers a week in advance. Since school sites order produce three days before it's delivered, we forecast volumes for farmer orders so they have enough time to respond and prepare orders. You may be able to skip the forecasting process if schools order with enough advance notice to give farmers exact quantities needed.



Some MPS schools have full kitchens, while some have only heat-and-serve capacity. All incorporate local food to some degree, but the ability to “scratch cook” greatly increases the amount of fresh, local options available. It’s one of the reasons why MPS aims to install kitchens at every school!

FIVE

Distribution to Schools

MPS orders farm to school produce from the produce company. Produce is delivered to school sites and MPS’ Culinary Center.

FARM TO SCHOOL ITEM CODES

MPS’ produce company creates a list of farm to school item codes. Each farm to school item code corresponds with a regular produce item, except the description starts with “F2S.” For example, a five pound bag of diced beets is 82756: *Beets Diced ¾ inch* and the same item using farm to school beets would be 79794: *F2S Beets Diced ¾ inch*.

Creating separate codes for F2S items:

- Helps schools identify farm to school items on their order guides and invoices
- Designates which delivered cases contain farm to school items (with the F2S item description on the box)
- Makes farm to school items easier to track on reports
- Points out the high quality of farm to school items
- Makes it easier to address farm to school-specific product concerns

DELIVERED ITEM PRICING

Delivered pricing for farm to school items is established based on:

- The base cost of the raw produce (the price agreed-upon with farmers during the RFP process)
- The yield on that raw produce (based on processing)
- The cost of processing (items can be cross-docked, washed, or washed & processed)
- The cost of packaging

School Order & Delivery Timeline

Friday: School sites place produce orders for delivery the following Tuesday

Tuesday: School sites receive produce orders

Thursday: Some large school sites receive an additional delivery

MPS Culinary Center orders three days in advance and receives produce deliveries daily.



SCHOOL ORDER GUIDES

MPS Farm to School Coordinator and Buyer update school order guides each week to reflect current availability. Regular product codes are replaced with F2S codes when items come into season, and are reset to regular item codes when local availability dries up.

For example, non-local red potatoes are on the order guides when school begins in late August. F2S potatoes are placed on the order guides when supply is available, typically in mid-September, and then removed in April when the F2S supply is depleted.

PRODUCE ORDERS

Schools place produce orders with the produce company according to their menus and delivery schedules. The MPS Culinary Center places produce orders for centrally-produced bulk items.

Seasonally available farm to school items are indicated with F2S codes on the order guides.

MPS Farm to School Coordinator and Buyer review all school orders weekly to assure that ordered quantities match available farm to school supply. Adjustments to orders are made as needed.

Schools receive deliveries with farm to school items indicated by F2S item codes on receiving slips and directly on each case.

Produce company invoices MPS for F2S produce and regular produce according to final delivered quantities.

Link: [Sample School Order](#)

LESSONS LEARNED

It helps to have a system established ahead of time for determining which item(s) should be substituted in the event that an expected farm to school item is unavailable.

We review all produce orders weekly (not just farm to school purchases) in a report so we can make accurate volume estimates, identify items that could be farm to school in the future, and keep good records of how our farm to school volumes compare to our produce orders in general.

TIPS & HINTS

If your order guides are flexible from week to week, you can be as accurate as possible as you incorporate local products when their availability changes.

SIX Marketing & Education

MPS serves the farm to school produce, and educates students, staff and families about our farm to school program.

FARM TO SCHOOL

Farm to school items are indicated with a tractor symbol on print and online menus (*see below*).

The [farm to school section](#) of the MPS Culinary & Nutrition Services website has an overview of the program including:

- History and description of the program
- Map of farmers and items they provide
- Information about how farmers are selected
- Farmer profile videos
- Other local products
- School garden information and map



MINNESOTA THURSDAYS

A locally sourced meal the first Thursday of every month, with themed educational & marketing materials.

- Poster showing a picture of the meal and map of farm or product sources
- Outreach language for newsletters or loudspeaker announcements
- Worksheet of educational activities that align with the Minnesota Thursday menu
- Photo of the meal at Point of Service
- Branded t-shirts for all staff, interns and volunteers

Links: [Poster](#) | [Outreach Language](#) | [Worksheet](#)



Minnesota Thursdays Meal



FARMER PROFILE VIDEOS

Brief videos about MPS partner farms are promoted leading up to meals featuring their produce.

Link: [Farmer Profile Videos](#)

FARMER TRADING CARDS

These are distributed to students and promoted leading up to meals featuring a specific farmer's produce.

Link: [Farmer Trading Cards](#)

FARMER VISITS

MPS invites farmers into schools to talk with classes or assemblies of students. Farmers talk about how they grow food for students and answer their questions about farming. Farmers join students for lunch.

TRUE FOOD NEWS

This is a weekly email to all Culinary & Nutrition Services staff outlining Farm to School items and updates. We also send out a monthly email to partners with Farm to School updates and ways to get involved.

Support

Funding for MPS' educational efforts is largely through grants and sponsorships.



Open Hands Farm visits a MPS classroom



Chef Council member and parent at Taste Test



Chef Council member and students at Taste Test

TRUE FOOD TASTE TESTS

MPS conducts taste tests in all elementary and middle school lunchrooms three times each year. The taste tests aim to generate excitement around trying new flavors. They encourage students to think critically about their food and where it comes from. We conduct a contest to re-name the taste test recipes, which encourages students to get involved. We spread the word through:

- Promotional poster leading up to the taste test
- Save the date cards in teacher mailboxes
- Outreach language for newsletters or loudspeaker announcements
- Mini lessons with math, science, English and history topics aligned with the taste test
- Recipe cards to recreate the taste test item at home

Links: [Poster](#) | [Save the Date](#) | [Outreach](#) | [Mini Lessons](#) | [Need To Know](#) | [Recipe Card](#)



FRESH FRUIT & VEGETABLE PROGRAM (FFVP)

Daily snacks featuring small tastes of locally-grown produce items served in the classroom, along with education and outreach.

Try-it Tuesday newsletter with fun facts about the local or unique fruits & veggies served each week.

Link: [Newsletter](#)

Mini Lessons are 10-minute sensory tasting lessons focused on critical tasting and where food comes from (taught by Culinary & Nutrition Services GreenCorps member or interns).

TIPS & HINTS

Allow students to re-name taste test items through a New Name Contest! It's fun to feature the new names on menus, for example: **Ginger Apple Delight** (Apple Kohlrabi Slaw), **UnBEETable Hummus** (Beet Hummus) and **Green Lava Kale Salad** (Apple Kale Salad).



FARM TO SCHOOL COMMUNITY BBQ

A fun, fall event that brings families, farmers, community leaders and partners together to share great food, meet farmers and learn about where food comes from.

- Includes a free, locally-sourced meal featuring local recipes from MPS' menus.
- Corn shucking contest with partners, community leaders and MPS students.
- Community partners coordinate "activity stations" so families can engage in hands-on activities related to food, nutrition and farming.
- Farmers and True Food Chef Council members are available for families to meet & engage.

Links: [Poster](#) | [Event Program](#)

JUNIOR IRON CHEF COMPETITION

A fun, media-friendly competition each spring where teams of middle school students and True Food Chef Council chefs compete to prepare locally-sourced, tasty dishes for a team of judges.

Link: [Event Program](#)

LESSONS LEARNED

Students can help make sure marketing materials are impactful! For example, we re-designed our Minnesota Thursdays poster to include a large picture of the upcoming meal in response to student feedback.

Partners are invaluable at spreading the word about farm to school. Every time we tell our farm to school story to parents, local chefs, business leaders, or politicians, we spread awareness of our program and therefore drive increases in program participation.

Students seem to respond better to farmers visiting their classrooms rather than their lunchrooms. Perhaps it's the more structured, respectful, learning-oriented nature of the classroom, but students are very excited to talk with farmers in the classroom and tend to ignore them in the lunchroom.

TIPS & HINTS

Farmers are more available to visit classrooms in the winter months, when they're not busy in the field!

A vintage Case tractor is shown in a field, with its front wheel and engine visible. The tractor is white with red accents and has the word "CASE" on its side. It is parked on a grassy area with trees in the background.

CONTACT

Andrea Northup
Farm to School Coordinator, Minneapolis Public Schools
Email: andrea.northup@mpls.k12.mn.us
Phone: 612-668-2854

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Minneapolis Public Schools Culinary & Nutrition Services
nutritionservices.mpls.k12.mn.us

USDA Farm to School Program, Office of Community Food Systems
www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool

National Farm to School Network
www.farmtoschool.org

University of Minnesota Extension Farm to School
www.extension.umn.edu/food/farm-to-school

PHOTO CREDITS

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MINNEAPOLIS
PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Culinary and Nutrition Services

