

Cape Girardeau (Missouri) School District's Experience with Missouri Foods

Based on questions and answers with Lisa Elfrink, Nutrition Services Coordinator and experiences with other food service coordinators.

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Q: What is your experience with using Missouri foods?

A. We have not had much experience with using lots of local foods at this point. The only product we are definitely using [right now] is beef from Fruitland Dressed Meats. But that is only if we do not have commodity beef available. We do have access to Missouri apples -- from Kohl Wholesale [a distributor based out of Quincy, Illinois] but timing of deliveries was a problem the past school year. We also use some Ott's Dressing products [a Southwest Missouri manufacturer] through the commodity Conversion Program.

Q. What kinds of products do you try to source from Missouri?

A. We are willing to try to use more Missouri products but delivery has always been our biggest problem.

Q. I understand you work with Fruitland Meats. What do you like about working with a farmer group? What has worked well for you there? Are there any special challenges?

A. Fruitland is the only group we have ever worked with. They are willing to deliver to the schools or to our warehouse. [However] delivery to the needed locations is the greatest challenge.

Q. What works well for you in terms of using Missouri products?

A. That the products are available when we need them and are delivered where we need them.

Q. Why did you start sourcing local food products?

A. We were approached by the Ag Department in an effort to try to expand the use of Missouri products. If a product/company presents itself we will try to use Missouri products but many do not come in for a presentation.

Q. What are the advantages of local food products?

A. That we are supporting local!

Q. Have you had an issue with pricing of local food products?

A. No not on the limited items we used.

Key Messages:

- Delivery is the key to making farm to school a seamless process. This represents the most challenging aspect of farm to school programs for both the farmer and the food service coordinator. Whatever we can do to make deliveries easy for food service personnel – deliveries that are timely, that contain the promised quality and quantity, that have an invoice system – is vital to making farm to school programming work.
- You don't get sales without asking! Many school food service coordinators may be willing to try something new and different if farmers simply ask – and follow through with sales and service. Of course, farmers and distributors need to be prepared for the questions that will arise when making a sales call:
 - Safety: "Are your products as safe as what we get from a broadline distributor?" "What is your food safety plan?" (See Kansas Food-A-Syst in Section 5 of the manual.)
 - Quality and quantity: "How will you deliver the quality we need and the quantity we need?" "What are we going to do when you're not producing?"
 - Pricing: "Why should we use this product when it's not as competitive as what we're already using?"
- Promotions can be important to farm to institution success. Many school food services are keen to support their local communities and to build good farm to community connections. Helping the food service promote their use of local products can help build solid relationships and ensure repeat business.