

TOPIC: HOW DO I ENSURE FOOD SAFETY OF LOCAL FOODS IN SCHOOLS?



Photograph by Morguefile

Now in its third year of supporting a Farm to School program, the Greeley-Evans school district sources 16 produce items from local farms, including romaine lettuce, peppers and cherry tomatoes.

The district is now looking to expand to source milk and proteins like grass-fed beef from Weld County. The expansion has been possible thanks to careful efforts to lay the groundwork for ensuring food safety, which remains a top priority for food from all sources. Jeremy West, the district's Nutrition Services Directors, explains how his district ensures food safety for local produce.

Are Any Local Foods Processed Before Delivery to Cafeterias?

Thanks to this district's centralized processing warehouse, local food is unprocessed when it arrives at the district's door. Most fresh, local produce is processed in the Greeley-Evan's own warehouse by a well-trained staff and sent out to schools on a daily basis. Upon arrival to the warehouse, the produce is assessed for proper safety procedures during delivery by warehouse staff before being processed and sent off to individual schools. The exception is romaine lettuce, which must be processed at each individual school to guarantee freshness and safety. To aid with the fresh romaine,

"Farm visits are a must-do. Visiting the farm lets me see how the farm is run and how the employees are trained. It provides an extra level of assurance."

-Jeremy West

Jeremy outfitted each of his kitchens with a salad spinner and provided video instruction on how to chop lettuce.

What Documentation Do You Require from Vendors Concerning Food Handling and Food Safety?

No matter what the source of the food, Jeremy believes in showing, not trusting, that the vendor is safe. That means using careful documentation that is the same for all vendors, verifying that the vendors have safety procedures in place, and asking to see vendors' own inspection records. For local farms, he goes one step further, by stepping foot onto the farms. "I think farm visits are a must-do," he says. "Visiting the farm lets me see how the farm is run and how the employees are trained. It provides an extra level of assurance."



Colorado School District Map



Are There Certifications or Official Standards to Guarantee Certain Requirements Are Met? If Not, How Do You Prioritize Safety Requirements?

Because standards and certification requirements are inconsistent, Jeremy has declared a “Standard Operating Procedure” that Farm to School produce should be treated just like any other produce and meet the same safety standards. To ensure that the necessary safety standards are met, Jeremy developed an easy to read, digestible HACCP form that is filled out by his local producers. After a bit of training and explanation, during which Jeremy explains to his smaller producers the key HACCP requirements and the general rules of school food safety, producers

complete the form, which is assessed by Jeremy and his staff. Larger producers are often HACCP or GAP certified, making this process much easier; Jeremy simply checks that their records are being updated and that food safety is treated as top priority by the producers. The USDA still allows schools to purchase from small farmers who may not be GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) or HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) certified. However, USDA also recommends that more stringent local, county or state rules may apply.

To help individual schools in his district learn to safely handle fresh produce, Jeremy assembled a six-step guide covering Farm to School and food safety procedures (see attached). He recommends checking local government regulations regarding HACCP and GHP to ensure safe handling procedures.”



Photograph by Kara Sample

Who Needs to be “On Board” to Ensure Safety of Locally Sourced Foods?

“Start with your local health department. They can advise you about USDA or state level requirements,” advised Jeremy. He also recommends bringing the local growing community to the table to discuss safety and expectations. And Jeremy recommends including food service employees and ensuring that they are properly trained to safely process fresh produce.



Photograph by Emily Wigginton

Do You Work with Local Producers to Help Them Compete?

The school district includes HACCP in the bid process, but didn't want to discourage small local vendors who may lack the sometimes costly certification. Jeremy walks farmers through the bid process and offers resources to help them get their HACCP certification. These include Servsafe classes through extension offices and major vendors like Sysco.



Photograph by Kara Sample

What Are Important Safety Issues for Districts to Keep in Mind When Sourcing Locally?

Buying from local vendors offers the advantage of being able to see the farm's systems in operation. Jeremy advises making sure the water sources are safe and adequate, looking at how the farm addresses pests, handles manure and other growing practices. And, he advises, check their documentation to see not just their safety plan, but how they actually implement the plan. "Check their records," he advised. ■

Written by Scott Gossett *Zephyr Winds Communications*

Interviews Conducted by Lauren Tatarsky *Colorado Farm to School Intern*

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**Weld County School District 6
Nutrition Services**



Photograph by Emily Wington

Models & Resources

Best Practices: Handling Fresh Produce in Schools

USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2010

http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns/safety/pdf/best_practices.pdf

Provides detailed advice on how to receive, wash, store, and prepare fresh produce in schools in accordance with nation-wide safety procedures.

Five Steps to Food Safe School Gardening

University of Connecticut: College of Agriculture and Natural Resources

<http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/LIB/sde/pdf/DEPS/Nutrition/OPmemos/10/5stepsOM1010.pdf>

Quick and easy-to-read guide for food safety in school gardens.

How to store fruit and vegetables

Growing for Market, 2009

<http://thefamilytablefarm.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Vegetable-Storage-Guidelines.pdf>

Designed for home kitchens but information is useful to anyone storing fresh fruit and vegetables.

Produce Safety

US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), 2010

<http://www.fda.gov/Food/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/ucm114299.htm>

FDA guidelines for selecting, handling, and storage as well as FAQs about fresh produce safety procedures.

A Checklist for Purchasing Local Produce

Iowa State University, 2005

<http://www.mifarmtoschool.msu.edu/assets/files/checklistforlocalproduce.pdf>

An excellent list of safety concerns to pay attention to, questions to ask of your local producers, and safety requirements to follow.

USDA Good Agricultural Practices and Good Handling Practices Audit Verification Checklist

USDA GAP and GHP Audit Program, 2009

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELPRDC5050869>

The checklist for GAP and GHP; this is a great tool for assessing the safety of a farm upon a farm visit. By going through this checklist, SFA can assess the safety practices of a local farm.

Weld County School District 6: HACCP Qualification Standards

Jeremy West, Nutrition Services Director, Greeley-Evans School District 6

www.coloradofarmtoschool.org. Go to Resources and scroll to Colorado Specific Resources

A sample questionnaire that can be presented to local farms to assure that the necessary safety requirements are being met by the producer.

Receiving Farm to School Produce- Warehouse

Jeremy West, Nutrition Services Director, Greeley-Evans School District 6, 2009

www.coloradofarmtoschool.org. Go to Resources and scroll to Colorado Specific Resources

This is an example of how one Colorado district receives and processes fresh, local food. It is a step-by-step process for receiving fresh fruits and vegetables at a central warehouse, including a checklist for assessing food safety upon delivery.

Farm to School and Food Safety- A School Foodservice Director's Guide

Jeremy West, Nutrition Services Director, Greeley-Evans School District 6, 2010

www.coloradofarmtoschool.org. Go to Resources and scroll to Colorado Specific Resources

A step-by-step list regarding food safety and Farm to School. This document provides guidance on the most important steps to take while developing your Farm to School program to ensure safety procedures are well established and consistently followed throughout the process.