



**INSTITUTE FOR AGRICULTURE AND TRADE POLICY**

# Grower Perspectives on Farm to School in Minnesota:

A Survey of Interested Farmers, Ranchers  
and Other Producers

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**Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy**

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The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. IATP's Local Foods program works to build thriving local food systems by strengthening small- and medium-scale sustainable farming, expanding market opportunities for locally produced food and improving access to healthy food choices. More information can be found at [www.iatp.org/localfoods](http://www.iatp.org/localfoods) and [www.farm2schoolmn.org](http://www.farm2schoolmn.org).

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## About this survey

As part of our work on Farm to School, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) conducted an electronic survey of growers interested in Farm to School in Spring 2011. The survey was designed to assess growers' perceptions of Farm to School, interest levels, challenges, aspirations and strategies that could enable growers to benefit more fully from this growing market.

A request to participate in the survey was issued through a variety of channels, including newsletters, emails and blogs from selected farm membership organizations in Minnesota, the Sustag Listserv and by email to a list of farmers that Minnesota school districts have identified as suppliers. This survey complements a similar survey that IATP conducts annually with Minnesota school foodservice leaders (Available at [www.iatp.org/localfoods](http://www.iatp.org/localfoods)). Our most recent foodservice survey found that the number of Minnesota public school districts engaged in Farm to School programs has grown from 10 in 2006 to 123 in 2010.

Sixty-seven individuals responded to the grower survey. Of these, 63 identified themselves as producers (e.g., farmers, ranchers, orchardists) while four represent multi-farm collaboratives or farmers markets. Nearly all respondents live in Minnesota. Approximately 80 percent report annual agriculture-related revenues of less than \$100,000 per year, with a majority under \$25,000. Respondents produce a wide range of farm products, with vegetables being the most common. The vast majority of respondents sell through multiple sales channels, with direct marketing being the most common.

## Key Highlights

- Sixty percent of all respondents indicated that they are “very interested” in selling to K-12 schools, while nearly 36 percent say that are “somewhat interested.”
- Ninety percent say they would be “very” or “somewhat interested” in growing products specifically for a given school or district if the school made a commitment to purchase the product in advance.
- The top three reasons that respondents gave for their interest in Farm to School were:
  - “Educate children about the food system and where food comes from.” (Selected by 90 percent of respondents.)
  - “Increase access to healthy, locally grown food.” (Selected by 86 percent of respondents.)
  - “New revenue source for my farm.” (Selected by 84 percent of respondents.)
- A majority of the respondents were interested in supporting Farm to School educational efforts by having school children visit their farm or through farmer participation in Farm to School activities at schools.
- Nearly 48 percent of the respondents indicated they have sold to K-12 schools in the past. Of those:
  - Fifty percent rated the experience as “very successful.” Thirty-eight percent gave a “somewhat successful” rating.
  - Eighty-three percent of respondents reported that prices received from their K-12 buyers are “about the same” as prices received from other wholesale accounts. All respondents indicated that they felt they received a fair price from their school buyers.
- All (100 percent) respondents indicated that they felt they were treated respectfully by the K-12 schools they have sold to.
- The dollar value of K-12 sales reported for 2010 ranged from a few dollars to \$10,000 per respondent.
- More than 70 percent of all respondents indicated that they typically have extra product available that they could potentially sell to schools. Strong interest was expressed in additional markets for products that growers view as “seconds.”
- The greatest challenges that growers identified included concerns about meeting schools' requirements for specific quantities, delivery dates and product specifications; a lack of interest from schools or insufficient relationships with school buyers; product delivery and distribution; and schools' volume needs either being too small or too large relative to the grower's available supply. The perceived need for better mechanisms for schools to purchase from local farmers, and more flexibility in menuing local farm products were also frequently cited.
- Asked what would help growers work more with K-12 schools, respondents expressed strongest interest in information about what specific products schools want and opportunities to get to know school foodservice staff.
- About 45 percent of the respondents indicated that they have a child or grandchild currently attending a public school district in Minnesota.

# Survey Questions & Responses

## A note to readers:

The percentage figures shown below are based on the number of respondents to each given question.

### 1–4. Basic information about all survey respondents

Sixty-seven producers responded to the survey. Of these, 64 live in Minnesota. Sixty-three operate a farm, ranch, orchard, or other food growing or producing operation. Four represent multi-farm collaboratives or farmers markets.

### 5. What products do you produce? Please check all that apply.

Product	% of respondents
Perishable vegetables	73.4
Storage vegetables	53.1
Fruit other than apples	37.5
Apples	34.4
Eggs	28.1
Honey	18.8
Chicken or turkey	17.2
Beef or pork	12.5
Dried beans	10.9

Smaller numbers of respondents indicated that they produce grains, maple syrup, wild rice, dairy products, bison, lamb, vinegar or jams/jellies.

### 6. How do you sell your product? Please check all that apply.

Sales channel	% of respondents
Direct marketing to consumers (e.g., farm-stand, CSA, farmers market)	94.0
Grocery stores/coops	55.2
K-12 schools	44.8
Restaurants	43.3
Other institutions (e.g., colleges, hospitals)	23.9
Produce distributor	6.0
I sell to a multi-farm collaborative	3.0
Broadline/prime distribution company	1.5

### 7. Have you sold any products directly to K-12 schools in the past?

- Yes: 47.8% (32 respondents answered Yes)
- No: 52.2%

### 8. How would you describe the relationship and activities you engaged in with your school customers?

The responses received were almost universally positive in tone. Representative replies included: “Very friendly people to work with,” “it was a very positive experience,” “the people are great to work with and the kids are surprising,” “warm, receptive, fantastic,” “excellent relationship” and “positive, but limited by a few factors.”

### 9. In your interaction with K-12 schools:

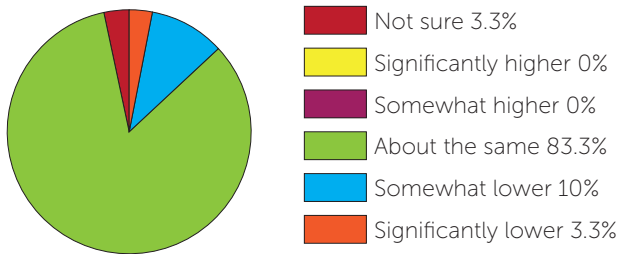
Question	Yes (%)	No (%)
Do you feel that you were treated respectfully?	100	0
Did you receive a fair price for your product?	100	0
Were the schools’ requirements sufficiently clear to you?	96.8	3.2
Was the school a reliable buyer to work with?	93.5	6.5
Were you paid promptly?	96.8	3.2

### 10. What was the dollar value of products you sold directly to schools or school districts in 2010?

\$ value of sales	% of respondents
Up to \$100	25.0
\$100–\$500	32.1
\$500–\$1,000	10.7
\$1,000–\$5,000	25.0
\$5,000–\$10,000	7.1

No respondents reported having K-12 sales over \$10,000 in 2010.

**11. In general, how do the prices you have received from K-12 schools compare to the price you receive from other wholesale or institutional accounts for comparable product?**



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**12. From your perspective, what challenges do you face in selling to schools? (Please check all that apply)**

Challenge	% of respondents
We have difficulty guaranteeing a specific quantity on a specific date	34.6
The schools I have approached in the past weren't interested	26.9
Delivering to schools can be problematic	26.9
Schools' volume needs are too small to be of interest	19.2
I don't have relationships with school food service staff	19.2
Schools' product specifications are hard for us to meet (e.g., products of a specific count size)	19.2
Schools' volume needs are too large for my operation	11.5

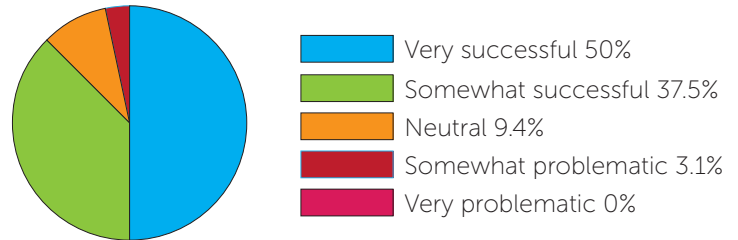
Fewer than 10 percent of respondents who have sold to schools in the past identified these issues as challenges: "difficulty cleaning the product adequately," "liability insurance requirements," "schools are unwilling to pay the price needed by the producer" or "too much paperwork."

Respondents also provided comments about the challenges of selling to schools including:

- "The biggest barrier is [...] procuring from enough farmers to increase the amount of food into the school district (where the district's needs are larger than individual farmers can supply)."
- "Delivering a few boxes to any one location is not very cost effective."
- "(Schools) don't have a process to buy from farms."
- "Schools knowing how to use our products."
- "Schools' limited ability to incorporate raw proteins. Too many kitchens require pre-cooked meats."
- "Reluctant kitchen staff."

- "Please set up a regional warehouse and request lists from schools, i.e., what do schools want, when and in what quantities (price too)."
- "Re volume: our crops end up in a la carte, which is low volume; if we found good crop matches (for larger volumes) that were on the main menu, we'd both be better off."

**13. Overall, how would you rate your experience selling to K-12 schools?**



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**14. What did and didn't work for you about selling to schools?**

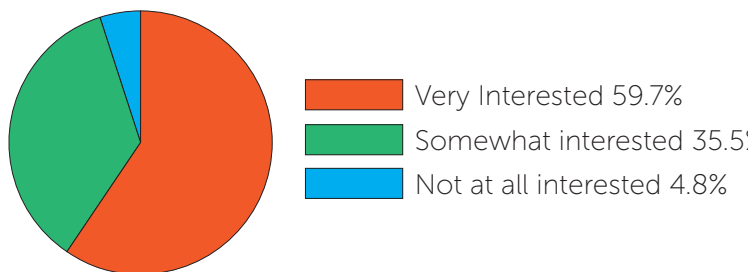
Feedback about "what worked" included various mentions of positive working relationships with school foodservice staff and the flexibility demonstrated by some schools in menuing locally grown foods. Challenges included the desire for more relationships with schools, better procurement mechanisms for local farm products, seasonality issues, concerns about quantities either being too large or small for particular farmers, challenges meeting product size requirements and the perceived need for more flexibility in menuing.

Comments included:

- "Establishing a relationship with the foodservice director was critical. Understanding the complexity of the system is also essential. This experience has been extremely positive."
- "[...] A very workable relationship as they were willing to take whatever quantity of the desired produce I had whenever I had it. They were quite flexible."
- "If schools are willing to try new methods and products f2school can be very successful but it depends on a large part on the willingness of food services to try new products and ways of implementing them into their menus."
- "Economical distribution to out-state districts remains a challenge, and school kitchen facilities are the primary hurdle [...] most districts are limited or reluctant to use uncooked meats."

- ‘Obviously the school year doesn’t line up terribly well with the typical MN growing season.’
- “Red potatoes worked because the schools were more flexible about the size (of the potatoes). Russet potatoes did not work because the size needed was too restrictive.”
- “[Delivering to the schools] 1x/week worked great. I would like to hold back more fruit in the future to deliver longer into Jan/Feb.”
- “More flexibility in menuing we think would open up many more possibilities to respond to variations in weather, timing, crop success etc. I can tell you 1–2 weeks in advance what we’ll have; six months is unrealistic for most small farms and most crops [...] I suspect our prices are high for them and limit the volume they’re interested in.
- It worked great and [I] hope that despite budget cuts, we can continue to sell to schools.

**15. In the future, how interested would you be in selling to K-12 schools overall?**



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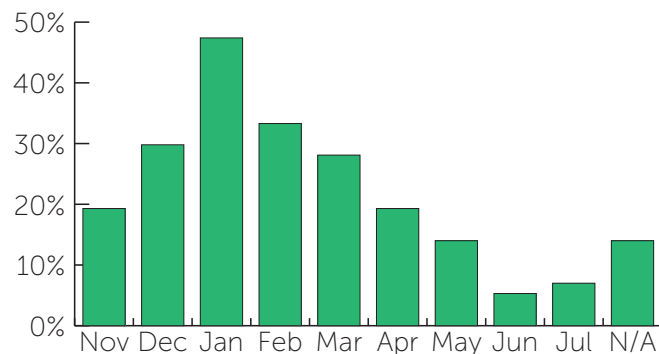
**16. For what reasons are you interested in selling to schools? Please check all that apply.**

Reason	% of respondents
Educate children about the food system and where food comes from	90.3
Increase access to healthy, locally grown food	85.5
New revenue source for my farm	83.9
Build relationships within my community	80.6
Reduce my farm’s ecological footprint by selling to buyers close by	56.5

**17. If a school/district made a commitment to purchase your product (e.g., in the winter for product the following fall), how interested would you be in growing specifically for that school?**

Response	% of respondents
I would be very interested	60.3
I am somewhat interested	30.2
I would not be interested	4.8
N/A	4.8

**18. If you were going to grow product for a specific school, at what time of year would you need to know what product they want (given when you purchase seed for various crops, etc)? Please check all that apply.**



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Comments included:

- “We would need notice normally 100 days in advance. This is a safe number of growing days for most vegetables.”
- “For apples, would need to know by July for fall; for honey would need to know by September for sale later in the fall or spring.”
- “BUT we’d like a commitment to flexibility. We can’t sink hundreds of dollars into a planting if, when that

planting is harvestable a week before or after the menu date, we get a 'no' from the school."

- "We have a movable high tunnel which extends the season. We have already harvested lettuce and spinach and sold some to school. We are able to harvest April through December."
- "We grow greenhouse produce in the winter. Additional information would be required every three months."

**19. How interested would you be in meeting with nearby schools in January/February to identify the products they would purchase from you the following Fall?**

Response	% respondents
Very interested	61.9
Somewhat interested	31.7
Not at all interested	6.3

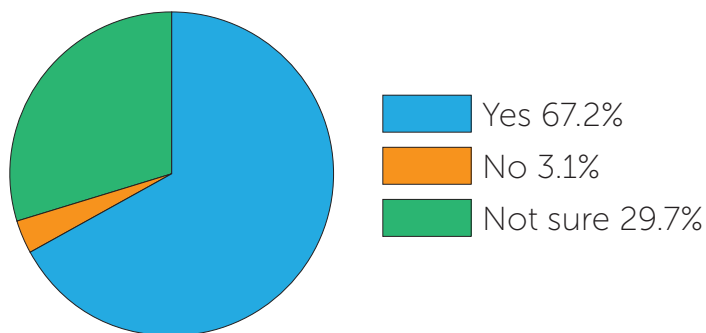
**20. In most years, do you typically have extra product available that you could potentially sell to schools?**

- Yes: 72.1%
- No: 27.9%

**21. How interested would you be in having additional markets for your "seconds"?**

Response	% respondents
Very interested	47.5
Somewhat interested	39.3
Not at all interested	13.1

**22. Is your farm interested in having students visit your operation?**



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**23. Would you consider visiting schools to help demo your product, engage in educational activities, etc?**

- Yes: 78.1%
- No: 4.7%
- Not sure: 17.2%

**24. What kind of information or learning opportunities would help you work more with K-12 schools? Please check all that apply.**

Response	% of respondents
Info about what specific products schools want	82.5
Opportunities to meet face-to-face with school food service staff	59.6
More information about schools' requirements for cleaning product before it is delivered	56.1
Having info about my farm shared with nearby schools	52.6
Strategies for pricing my product	52.6
Phone and email addresses for K-12 food service staff in my area	49.1
Help marketing my product to schools	47.4
Food safety training	38.6
Info on the ins-and-outs of how school lunch works	36.8

**25. In a typical year, what is your gross annual revenue from agricultural activities?**

Gross annual revenue	% of respondents
Less than \$10,000 per year	33.9
\$10K-\$25K	28.6
\$25K-\$100K	17.9
\$100K-\$500K	14.3
\$500K-\$1 million	3.6
\$1 million-\$5million	1.8
Over \$5 million	0.0

**26. How much liability insurance do you carry?**

Response	% of respondents
\$1 million	51.7
\$2 million	16.7
\$3 million	3.3
\$5 million or more	1.7
We do not have liability insurance	26.7

**27. What else should we know about your hopes for selling to schools or the barriers that you see? Comments include:**

- “The foodservice director and her staff toured our farm in early 2010. It was important (for them) to see where the food was grown [...] and the process of harvest and packing [...] Many kids have been to the farm. Additionally, I personally went to every school to tour the kitchens, meet staff and learn delivery procedures. I also was the “farmer in the lunchroom,” introducing myself and my food, along with fun facts on local foods [...] I have met with the food-service director and created a list of products for fall 2011. I’ve met with other farmers in our area to generate interest and provide information on this new market.”
- “What do schools want and when?”
- “Schools need to have the capability of working with unprocessed foods [...] Also, schools need to know how to utilize whole grains in their menus. They are available year/round, extremely healthy for students and available at costs which are rather inexpensive.”
- “Great program. Needs more promotion and implementation.”
- “[We] would hope to train all schools on how to safely handle and prepare locally grown produce for maximum nutrition to our schools and community.”
- “I thought this would be a good way to expand my market, but it has been very limited. Most schools will only purchase 1–2 times per year.”
- “We have a small produce/beef/eggs production at this time, but we could scale up gradually to meet demand. We primarily produce now for ourselves, but believe growing and buying local is a part of rebuilding a new American Dream.”
- “We don’t need the market—but we are interested in educating students.”
- “I think this market has a long way to go before it would appeal to me but I do support the need to get quality local foods to kids. I personally think that schools would get more on board if they went the route of having their own gardens and greenhouses which would provide some great curriculum opportunities as well as getting kids and parents (and school boards) excited about it.”

**28. Do you currently have children or grandchildren attending a public school district in Minnesota?**

- Yes: 45.2%
- No: 54.8%

**29. Do you currently have children or grandchildren attending a private, charter or tribal school in Minnesota?**

- Yes: 13.1%
- No: 86.9%

**30. Would you like the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy to let schools know that you are interested in selling to schools?**

- Yes: 77.2%
- No: 22.8%

**30. Please share any other thoughts about Farm to School here. We welcome your input and ideas!**

- “Tremendous opportunity exists, and it’s exciting to see it beginning to come together! As some of the hurdles are addressed, the growth could be terrific.”
- “I believe a better diet will have a direct impact on the overall health of our population. It is even more important to feed children better since they are in their development stages and their nutritional needs are significant.”
- “Keep up the ‘fight’ to get local foods and fresh produce into our schools. From a parent perspective, I want our children to get healthier food at school. From a community member perspective, I want our local schools to support local businesses. From an environmental perspective, I want our food to be local if and when possible.”