



**INSTITUTE FOR AGRICULTURE AND TRADE POLICY**

# Grower Perspectives on Farm to School

A Survey of Interested Farmers, Ranchers  
and Other Producers

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*Grower Perspectives on Farm to School: A Survey of Interested Farmers, Ranchers and Other Producers*

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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).

IATP's work on Farm to School efforts are funded in part by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota's Prevention Minnesota Initiative, which works to improve the health of Minnesotans by combating the root causes of cancer and heart disease, of which unhealthy eating is a leading factor.

## About this survey

As part of our work on Farm to School, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) conducted our second annual survey of growers interested in Farm to School in Spring 2012. This survey was designed to assess growers' perceptions of Farm to School, 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 in Minnesota and four adjacent states, including various newsletters, emails, list serves and blogs. This survey complements a similar survey that IATP conducts annually with Minnesota school food service leaders, which is available at [www.iatp.org/localfoods](http://www.iatp.org/localfoods). Our most recent food service survey found that the number of Minnesota public school districts engaged in Farm to School programs has grown from fewer than 20 districts in 2006 to 145 in 2011. Participating schools serve 68 percent of Minnesota's K-12 population.

A total of 101 farmers, ranchers, orchardists, and other producers responded to the grower survey, up from 67 respondents in 2011. The majority of respondents live in Minnesota or Wisconsin, with a few respondents from Iowa, North Dakota and South Dakota.

## Key Highlights

- Fifty-four percent of respondents indicate that they are “very interested” in selling to K-12 schools, while 35 percent say that are “somewhat interested.”
- Eighty-seven 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 reasons that respondents gave for their interest in Farm to School were: “Educate children about the food system and where food comes from,” “Increase access to healthy, locally grown food,” “Build relationships within my community,” and “Diversify my markets.”
- A majority of the respondents were interested in supporting Farm to School educational efforts by having school children visit their farm and/or by participating in Farm to School activities at schools.
- Thirty-five of the respondents indicated they have sold to K-12 schools in the past. Of those, 37 percent rated the experience as “very successful.” Forty-seven percent gave a “somewhat successful” rating.
- A majority of respondents reported that prices received from their K-12 buyers are “about the same” as prices received from other wholesale accounts for comparable product. Ninety-five percent indicated that they felt they received a fair price from their school buyers.
- Ninety-seven percent of respondents who have sold to K-12 schools indicated that they felt they were treated respectfully by the K-12 schools they have sold to.
- Nearly all of the participating growers who have sold to schools reported selling less than \$10,000 to K-12 buyers in 2011.
- The three greatest challenges that growers identified were: “Seasonality of my products doesn't fit with schools' ordering schedule,” “We have difficulty guaranteeing a specific quantity on a specific date,” “In my experience, schools haven't been willing to pay the price I need.” Growers also raised concerns about schools' demand either being too large or too small for their operation.
- Asked what would help growers work more with K-12 schools, respondents expressed strongest interest in information about what specific products schools want; making an agreement early in the season that a given school/district will purchase the product; creating opportunities to meet face-to-face with school food service staff; and help marketing their product to schools.
- Ninety-three percent of respondents said they would be “very” or “somewhat” interested in meeting with schools over the winter to identify products schools would purchase in the fall.

# Survey Questions & Responses

## A note to readers:

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

### 1. Basic information about all survey respondents (name, farm name, address, county, etc.)

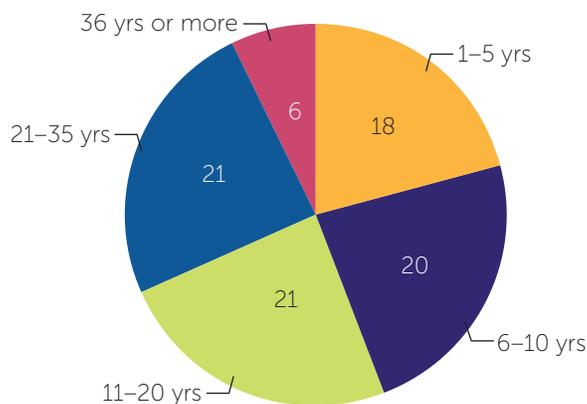
A total of 101 producers from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota and South Dakota responded to the survey. Most respondents live in either Minnesota or Wisconsin.

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

Product	% of respondents
Perishable vegetables	69%
Storage vegetables	54%
Fruit other than apples	39%
Apples	32%
Chicken or turkey	26%
Eggs	25%
Beef or pork	23%
Honey	17%
Grains	11%
Dried beans	9%
Maple syrup	8%
Dairy products	7%
Wild rice	3%
Bison	3%

Additional products produced by survey respondents included lamb, garlic, fish, rabbit, flour/milled grains, goat, hazelnuts, yak, goose, duck and guinea hen.

### 3. How many years have you been farming? (number of respondents)



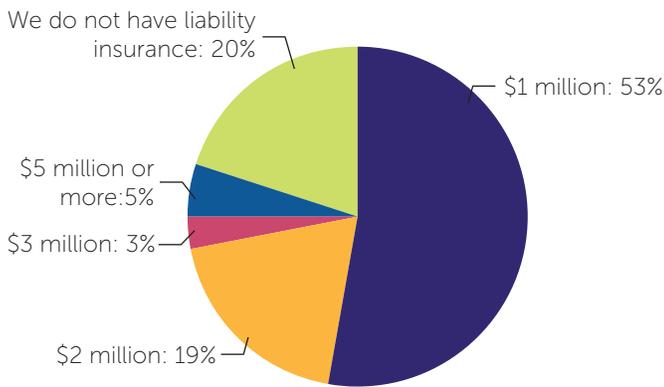
### 4. How do you sell your product? Please check all that apply.

Sales Type	% of respondents
Direct marketing to consumers (e.g., farmstand, CSA, farmers market)	90%
Restaurants	46%
Grocery stores/co-ops	44%
K-12 Schools	28%
Other Institutions (e.g., colleges, hospitals)	22%
I sell to a multi-farm collaborative (like a farm co-op)	14%
Produce distributor	10%
Broadline/prime distribution company	4%

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

Gross annual revenue	Response Percent
Less than \$10K per year	26%
\$10K-\$25K	21%
\$25K-\$100K	24%
\$100K-\$500K	13%
\$500K-\$1 million	3%
\$1 million-\$5 million	3%
Over \$5 million	0%

## 6. How much liability insurance do you carry?



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

35 respondents answered "Yes."

## 8. Respondents who have past experience selling to K-12 schools were asked about their interactions with schools:

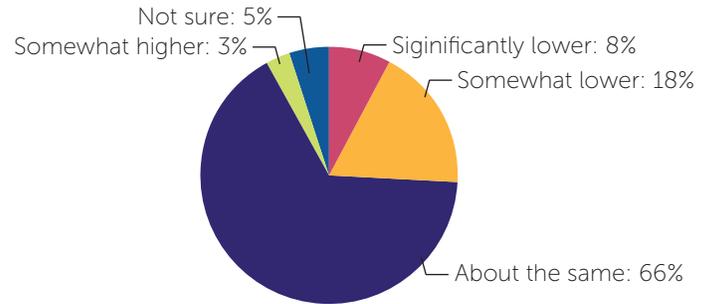
	Yes	No
Do you feel that you were treated respectfully?	97%	3%
Did you receive a fair price for your product?	95%	5%
Were the schools' requirements sufficiently clear to you?	97%	3%
Was the school a reliable buyer to work with?	83%	16%
Were you paid promptly?	92%	8%

## 9. What was the dollar value of products you sold directly to schools or school districts in 2011?

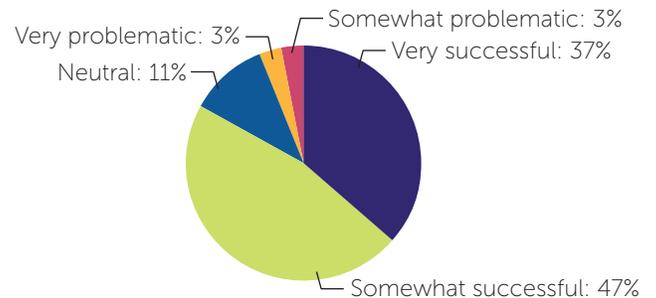
\$ value of sales	% of respondents
Up to \$500	35%
\$500-\$1000	14%
\$1000-\$5000	32%
\$5K-\$10K	8%
\$10k-\$25K	0%
\$25K-\$50K	3%
\$50K-\$100K	3%

No respondents reported having K-12 sales over \$100,000 in 2011.

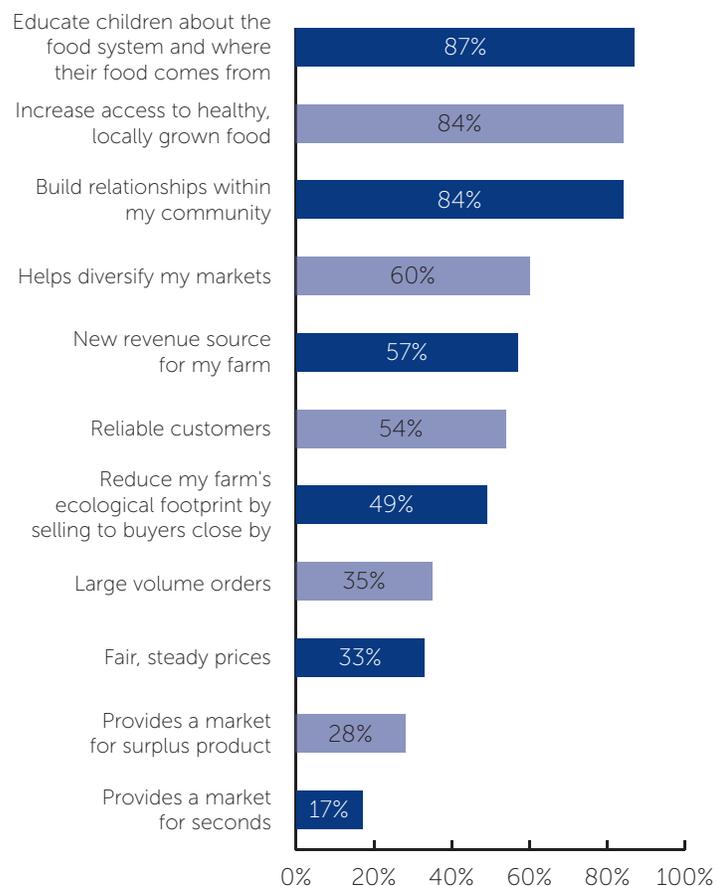
## 10. In general, how do the prices you have received from K-12 schools compare to the price you receive from other wholesale or institutional accounts for comparable product?



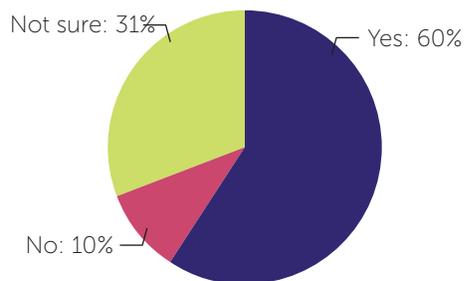
## 11. Overall, how would you rate your experience selling to K-12 schools?



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



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



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

Yes	73%
No	8%
Not sure	19%

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

Seasonality of my products doesn't fit with schools' ordering schedule	45%
We have difficulty guaranteeing a specific quantity on a specific date	38%
In my experience, schools haven't been willing to pay the price I need	35%
Schools' volume needs are too large for my operation	28%
Schools' volume needs are too small to be of interest	24%
The schools I have approached in the past weren't interested	21%
Delivering logistics	17%
I don't have relationships with school food service staff	14%
Schools' product specifications are hard for us to meet (e.g., products of a specific count size)	14%
Food safety requirements	14%
Liability insurance requirements are problematic	10%

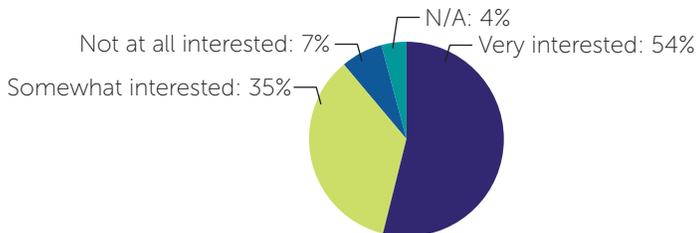
Fewer than 10 percent of respondents who have sold to schools in the past identified these issues as challenges: difficulty cleaning the product adequately, and too much paperwork.

Respondents also provided comments including:

- “Regular weekly orders are needed, with a minimum of five cases.”
- “GAP (third-party on-farm food safety audit) costs are too high and too rigid. It's too much paperwork and government intervention...taking up my time of growing and producing healthy foods.”
- “If the people running the kitchen aren't interested—they're not buying.”
- “The biggest challenge is that schools have such a meager amount of money to work with when feeding kids.”
- “Not a regular customer—difficult to plan for.”

■ “All of the above barriers were worked through with consistent communication between the Food Service Director, myself and other involved farmers.”

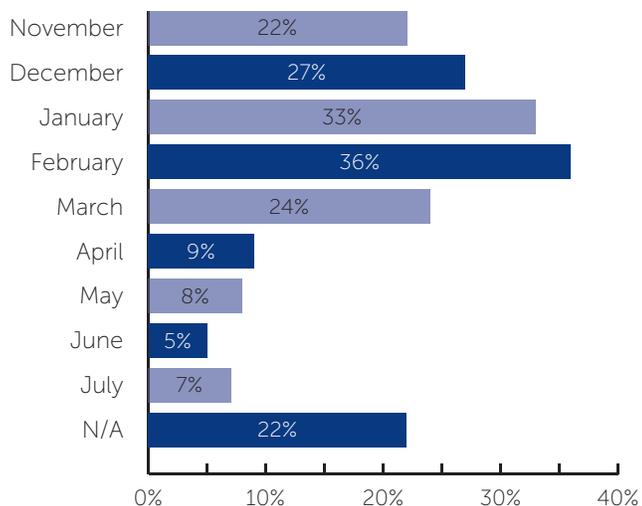
**16. In the future, how interested would you be in selling to K-12 schools overall?**



**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?**

I would be very interested	63%
I am somewhat interested	24%
I would not be interested	6%
N/A	7%

**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, etc.)?**



**Comments included:**

■ “The earlier the better. I would also be willing to give a lower price for larger quantities delivered at one time.”

■ “I meet with the school district food service director in March and create sample menus for the following fall (Sept and Oct). I then meet with farmers to go over the menus. This has proven to be a very successful model. We will meet in March, 2012 and not only go over 2012-2013 school year, but begin to experiment with spring produce for April-May of this year and will engage in summer programs as well. It has been a fantastic endeavor.”

**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?**

Very interested	55%
Somewhat interested	38%
Not at all interested	8%

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

	Response Percent
Info about what specific products schools want	80%
An agreement early in the season that a given school/district will purchase my product	59%
Opportunities to meet face-to-face with school food service staff	54%
Help marketing my product to schools	48%
Phone and email addresses for K-12 food service staff in my area	47%
Having info about my farm shared with nearby schools	43%
Ways to adjust my production to meet demand from schools	42%
More information about schools' requirements for cleaning product before it is delivered	41%
Having info about my farm shared with nearby schools	40%
Meet-and-greet event with schools in my area	35%
Food safety training	27%
Info on the ins and outs of how school lunch works	22%

**21. Would you like us to let schools know that you are interested in selling to schools?**

Yes: 75 percent

No: 25 percent

## 22. How interested would you be in developing a written food safety plan for your farm?

	# of respondents
Very interested	21
Somewhat interested	36
Not interested	13
We already have a plan in place	13

## 23. What else should we know about your hopes for selling to schools or the barriers that you see?

Comments included:

- “We’d like to sell to schools. We’re putting up high tunnel(s) to increase our production and do have some more space to expand as needed.”
- “We have a small amount of land, so quantities would be limited, but will do what we can.”
- “Barriers: Fair price for grass-fed, which takes longer to grow and school budgets? Delivery time restrictions? Coordinating beef cut orders and package sizes with butcher?”
- “I believe educational hands-on activities i.e., real work is beneficial for children. There is a complete and total disconnect among children and adults in our society. It is time to bring family farming back to the forefront. Sign me up, as a long time teacher this is my new venture!”
- “Currently we think that we don’t have volume or products that schools would be interested in. We are much more interested in how to connect with schools/kids about food.”
- “It will be a lot of work for both sides. I’m willing to put in the time as long as the schools are interested and willing to put forth the effort.”
- “Typically more work than economically justified.”
- “We would need to provide seconds, or get a higher price if they want firsts.”
- “It’s all about the food service director it seems. If they want it to work—it works. Support of the parents/community also seems to have helped.”
- “Great idea—helps both producers, schools and students.”
- “Our volume is not sufficient for school use.”
- “The school district in our area has been uninterested in buying locally grown organic produce. They seem to want to buy from large distributor/suppliers. Bummer.”
- “We’re trying to build Farm AT school—with greenhouses and gardens.”
- “I think what would help me the most is to just simply connect with schools in my area—good communication can take it from there. Keep up the fantastic work!”
- “The greatest barrier is that the industrial food system is pretty well entrenched.”
- “Inconsistent ordering creates a challenge of having sufficient product at any given time.”
- “Knowledge is needed on how to prepare and source local foods at the schools.”
- “I hope to sell an increasing amount of my farm products to local schools. It’s a huge new market opportunity for farmers and a great investment in kids’ health.”
- “It works best for us to work through [a produce distributor] to service the schools. [The distributor] gets daily deliveries from us and they deliver small quantities to the schools.”
- “When schools hire food service management companies to handle their lunch programs, the local food service director has little if any influence in determining where the products are purchased, and these companies do not seem interested in buying local products.”
- “I recently met with an adjacent district FSD. She was very concerned and felt she bore the responsibility to make sure farmers had necessary records in place to meet GAP and would need to have copies of those for her own records, along with copies of liability insurance. I feel we may need to engage FSDs, again, to review requirements since the passage of Food Safety Modernization Act, USDA Nutrition Standards and the like.”

## 24. Please share any other thoughts about Farm to School here. We welcome your input and Ideas!

Comments included:

- It can work!

- Farm to School is a wonderful program because it teaches children while they are still willing to learn. “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” Proverbs 22:6
- I appreciate the effort for healthier eating habits.
- With our product, starting small would at least give us a wedge into the industrial food market.
- I think this would be wonderful to see in Wisconsin and any help to make it happen would be spectacular.
- I think the program is great, we are just getting started to be involved.
- In my hometown schools, the kids and parents know me, know the food from the CSA, know what to expect, how to handle the food without me taking time to educate the lunch ladies on cleaning, cooking, etc.
- We have enjoyed doing presentations at the schools and believe this is working to expose children to new, healthy foods—building a future demand.
- Thanks for doing this work! It’s so important to build the LOCAL agricultural economy in this area. And it’s important for our kids to eat quality food too.
- Wish I had a larger operation.
- I think it’s a wonderful idea, and hope all schools are able to find local growers.
- We need much more than the current minimal incentives to have schools buy local, and reintegrate with producers.
- This is a great idea for anyone who has a large enough operation that can supply food to schools even in the winter in our area.
- Great idea—lots of work to make it happen, but it is possible. Thanks.
- I would like there to be an educational component in our farm to school relationship. I would like to know what options I have.
- For some reason, schools are not thinking about sourcing grains locally to use in their food service menus. It would be great if this could be brought up more to let schools know that grains are a local food too—especially organic ones!
- So much talk and organization and effort and I still only know one farmer selling any significant amount to a school and it is a college that was already sourcing local food before the farm2school initiative took off. I am glad you are surveying, hopefully you will detect the hurdles and help move things forward.
- Could be a great program, but find it difficult to work especially with contracted food service providers.
- I would like to see a pricing website that was easily accessible for MN-area produce. I feel that pricing appropriately is one barrier. I also feel that many farmers do not know how to package/prepare their produce and are not familiar with counts/units when packaging (myself included). That may be another teaching opportunity.
- We wish it was an on-going, reliable order, week after week. It’s only been 3–4 times per year to each school for the past 3 years.
- Very pleased with our working relationship.
- The cooks did not know how to prepare/serve the food. The cooks did not like the idea of having to PREPARE food.
- We did not sell on a regular basis—only special occasions.
- Love working with the school staff!
- The volume is very low. We would like to sell more to other schools.
- Payments not always so prompt, but always get paid.
- Schools would not be willing to pay our price.
- We want this to work, so we stay with it and welcome the orders that come in to us. Just wish things were easier for the schools to do this. We know more kitchen equipment or added value produce would help get things used as schools have equipment challenges themselves. We are trying to get involved in all ways as it’s a very important issue.
- Want to develop robust local foods infrastructure.
- The cooks and cook supervisors are excited about good food and are fun to work with.