

PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND REGIONALLY GROWN LEGUMES AND GRAINS

Overview

The largest school district in Oregon, the Portland Public Schools (PPS), is composed of 47,000 students in 81 schools. PPS is a diverse district with 46 percent of children eligible for free or reduced-price meals. About half of its student body is white, 16 percent are Hispanic, 11 percent are African American, eight percent are Asian, and seven percent are multi-racial. Portland's Nutrition Services¹ serves 11,000 school breakfasts, 20,000 school lunches and 1,800 suppers daily and employs approximately 240 staff, including seven registered dietitians, child nutrition program managers, food service leads, and central distribution personnel.

Portland Public School's Nutrition Services is taking many steps to put more locally and sustainably grown food on students' trays. Students have participated in the *Harvest of the Month* program since 2007. Each month, a regionally-grown fruit or vegetable is highlighted in the classroom and then served in the cafeteria. Nutrition Services also offers Local Lunch Days, which feature regionally grown and minimally processed foods, including antibiotic-free meat.

The most significant component of Portland's Farm to School efforts focuses on the procurement of foods offered in the cafeteria as part of normal meals on a daily basis. Over 30 percent of the food purchased—including fresh, preserved, and frozen items—comes from local farmers and local companies.

PPS' Nutrition Services partnered with the nonprofit organization Ecotrust,² the western regional lead for the National Farm to School Network,³ to build its local purchasing program. Gitta Grether-Sweeney, Director of Nutrition Services,⁴ says that she wanted to support local companies through food service procurement while introducing students to more minimally processed, locally grown foods. Through Ecotrust, the district was introduced to many regional growers and processors, including Truitt Family Foods, a certified sustainable food processor, and Shepherd's Grains, a cooperative of wheat growers using sustainable farming practices. Both vendors, along with a cluster of other suppliers, have played key roles as Portland has expanded its offerings of regionally grown legumes and grains.

Truitt Family Foods' Beans

Truitt Family Foods⁵ is a food processor based in Salem, Oregon that incorporates principles of sustainability all along the supply chain from production to harvesting and processing. When the district first started buying from Truitt, they ordered canned green beans, pears, and plums. This soon expanded to include black beans, garbanzos, and a vegetarian chili. Truitt's beans are grown in northern Idaho and eastern Washington, with the specific grower labelled on each can, providing an unusual degree of transparency in the supply chain. Grether-Sweeney is able to order Truitt's products through PPS' broadline distributor, Food Services of America (now it is McDonald Wholesale Co.).

The district now offers bean salads, including a black bean and corn salad and a garbanzo salad, every three to six weeks. Vegetarian chili, made with several bean varieties by Truitt, is offered once every three weeks. The bean salads are counted as a vegetable, and the chili, served with cheese, is counted as a protein.

Rod Friesen, Director of Market Development at Truitt Family Foods,⁶ says that his company sells to several other school districts in the Pacific Northwest, but reports that "Portland is unique in the sense that they are very clear on their mission and what they want to do. Then they figure out how to get it done. If they want to get products, they will figure out how to make it possible." This two-way communication between district and supplier has been particularly important with bean-based recipes, which have been somewhat challenging to introduce to students.

Grether-Sweeney says that bean-based recipes are unfamiliar to most students. Although Nutrition Services has offered taste testings, she says that it can be challenging to change student preferences in the cafeteria. She explains, "One thing we have found to be more effective is fresh fruit and vegetable program in classroom. That way they are not risking their lunch on trying something new—when they see an unfamiliar item they are going to pick something they know." As the students become more familiar with the bean-based recipes over time, Grether-Sweeney expects to see an increase in consumption. She is also working closely with Truitt to make adjustments to the recipes.

Friesen says that his company really values the partnership with Portland Nutrition Services: "Feedback about cost, packaging, and flavor goes directly back to the product development team and changes what we offer." PPS is currently

working with Truitt on recipes for hummus and other bean-based dips using regionally-grown products, which Grether-Sweeney hopes to offer to students in the fall.

Shepherd's Grain

PPS' Nutrition Services has also worked to expand its use of regionally grown grains, particularly wheat products. A key partner in this effort is Shepherd's Grain,⁷ a cooperative of about 60 wheat growers from southern Alberta (Canada), the Pacific Northwest and southern California. All of their growers use sustainable farming methods and either are, or are becoming, certified by a third-party audit. PPS vendors currently use Shepherd's Grain flour in all pizza crusts, in hotdog, hamburger and dinner rolls, and a breakfast bar. PPS offers bread and other grain products on its menu every day. Pizza is offered once a month, which is typically the highest-participating day each month with 15-16,000 participants.

When PPS asked its vendors to use Shepherd's Grain flour in their recipes, Grether-Sweeney discovered that some vendors, like Portland's Fairlight Bakery (which produces a breakfast bar used by PPS and many other school districts), were already using Shepherd's Grain. Other vendors were surprisingly open-minded about making the transition.

Roadrunner Pizza, a Portland-based manufacturer of fresh-frozen pizza and pizza dough, began using the flour in all of its products after making the switch for PPS. Dave Caum, Plant Manager at Roadrunner Pizza, says that "PPS was a major factor in our decision to change our recipe. When they

approached us with the idea to use a local, environmentally conscious product, it just made sense. It made so much sense that all our Roadrunner brand products include it today."⁸

Roadrunner has found that PPS is not the only institutional purchaser interested in local and sustainably-produced foods. Caum says that "consumers are paying closer attention to labels to see where the product is originating from and the ingredients used in the product." Tom Fitzgerald of Fairlight Bakery agrees: "There's a growing concern—people want to know where their food comes from."⁹

Grether-Sweeney reports that using Shepherd's Grain did result in a small price increase for some suppliers. However, she plans to continue purchasing products made with regionally grown and sustainably produced ingredients as long as she can fit it into her budget. And she is continually looking for new suppliers. In fall 2014, she hopes to offer locally-produced tortillas made with Shepherd's Grain flour.

Moving toward systemic change

PPS was able to build on existing business relationships with its local vendors to purchase regionally grown beans and grains, expanding the regional economic impact of district purchasing. PPS worked with its vendors to reformulate recipes and select products that meet its goals. The vendors interviewed for this case study clearly valued their two-way relationship with PPS.

Grether-Sweeney says that, while PPS will continue to offer special meals featuring local products, her goal is to make systemic changes to how Portland Public Schools procures food: "Not just once-a-month a pizza made with local flour, but every time I serve it. It's more cost-effective and efficient to do systemic change." She explains that most of the students are not aware that the foods they are eating in the cafeteria are grown by local farmers. Instead, students tend to choose familiar foods. While PPS has successfully expanded its Farm to School purchasing, the changes in the cafeteria need to be reinforced in the classroom, in the community, and at home. As Grether-Sweeney asserts, more education and outreach programs are needed to make children, teachers, and parents aware of how the changes in the cafeteria impact the health of students, the local economy, and the food system.



Cauliflower pizza

Best Practices

- Candid, two-way communication between school districts and their vendors can help lay the groundwork to explore mutually beneficial strategies for meeting district procurement needs. While these relationships can take time to cultivate, they can often result in innovative, unanticipated solutions.
- Communications from school districts can also provide vendors with important information about how the nature of market demand may be changing (for instance, toward more local or sustainably grown products). Ongoing feedback to vendors about the pros and cons of their product can also encourage continued quality improvements.
- When assessing the cost of incorporating ingredients like locally grown grains and legumes, it is important to look at the overall cost of the finished product, not only the difference in price per pound of a particular ingredient. Modest cost increases can often be accommodated by trimming costs in other areas.
- Efforts to make children, parents and teachers aware of Farm to School efforts can help build support and increase children's openness to new foods.

Endnotes

1. For more information on Portland Public School's Nutrition Services, see <http://www.pps.k12.or.us/departments/nutrition/index.htm>.
2. For more information on Ecotrust, see <http://www.ecotrust.org/>.
3. For more information on the National Farm to School Network, see <http://www.farmtoschool.org/>.
4. Gitta Grether-Sweeney, Portland Public Schools personal communication, May 19, 2014.
5. For more information on Truitt Family Foods, see <http://truittfamilyfoods.com/>.
6. Rod Friesen, Truitt Family Foods, personal communication, May 23, 2014.
7. For more information on Shephard's Grain, see <http://www.shepherdsgrain.com/>.
8. David Caum, Roadrunner Pizza, personal communication, June 9, 2014.
9. "Bake Works takes Fairlight Bakery brand to new heights." Vancouver SW Washington Business Journal. May 30, 2014. Available at <http://www.vbjusa.com/home/spotlight/retail4/10179-bake-works-takes-fairlight-bakery-brand-to-new-heights>.

