



Minnesota's Farm to School Market

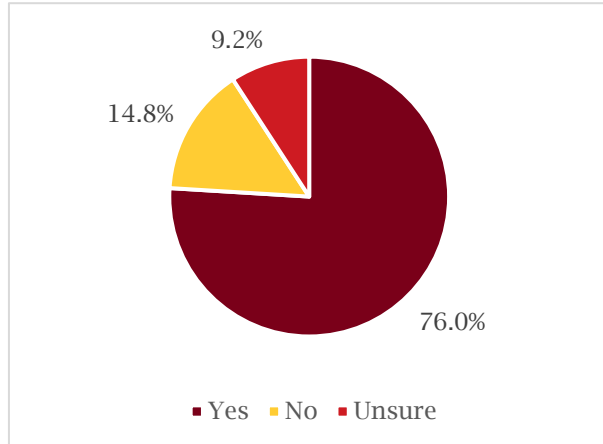
Ryan Pesch, Extension Educator

Survey of Schools

In spring, 2023 Extension and its partner, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), asked schools to participate in a web-based survey about their experience with farm-to-school efforts. This factsheet presents the responses from 264 participants representing 204 schools or districts. Although a good sample, survey respondents represent less than 10% of the schools in the state and should not be taken as statistically representative. According to the Department of Education, Minnesota has 2,252 public schools (in 325 districts) and 464 non-public schools operating in the 2023-24 school year.

The majority of respondents were food service directors, although some administrators replied (20% of respondents) and a small number of teachers (7%).

Purchasing Experience of Schools



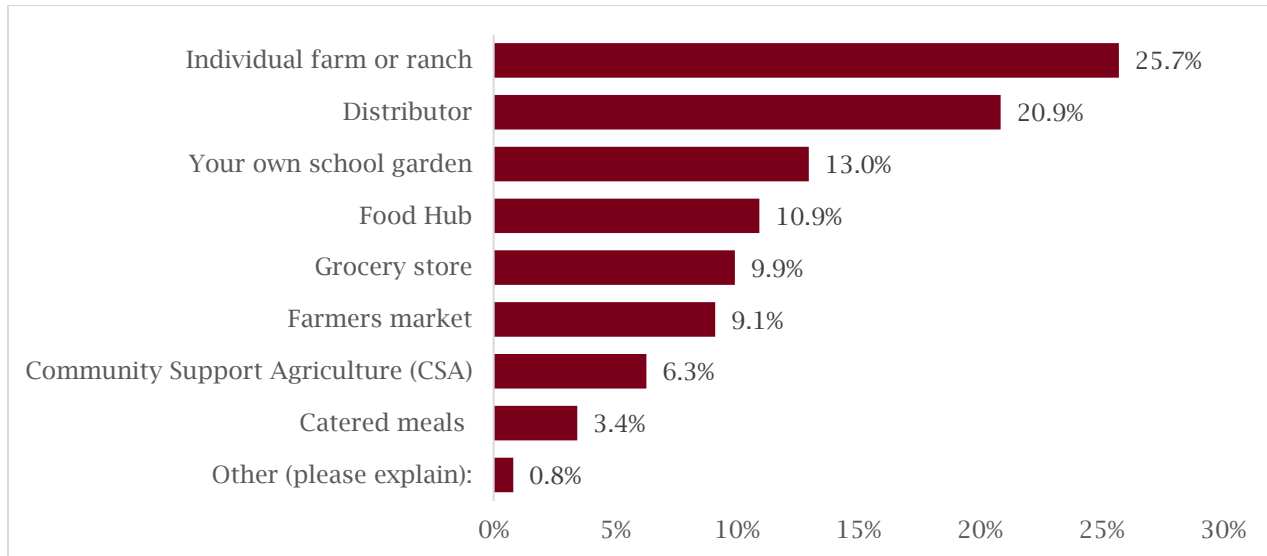
Three-quarters of respondents reported that their school or district has experience purchasing local foods for their schools.

Being a farm kid raised on eating what we grew, I believe it is important that people know where their food comes from. It is exciting to see kids eating local products, know where it came from, and loving the taste of it.

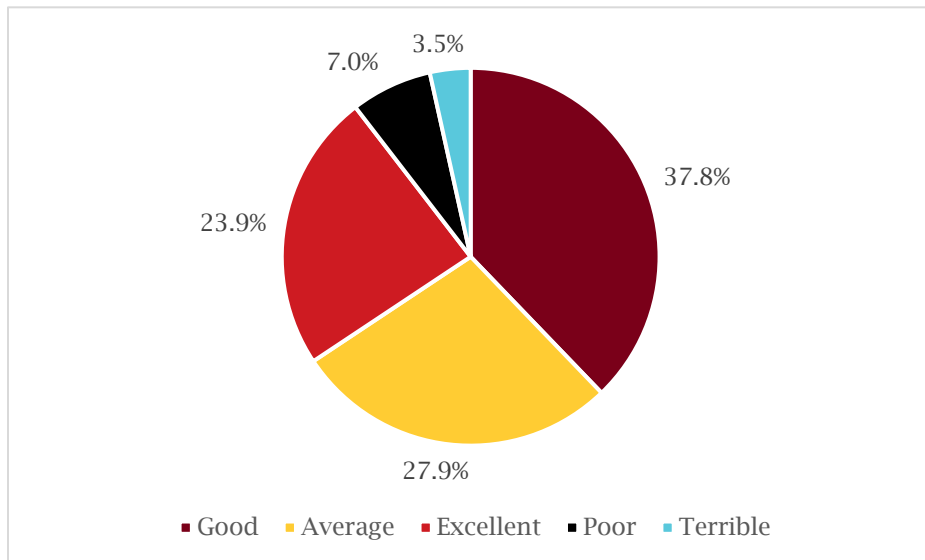
-Survey Respondent

Although the procurement of food is a primary activity in farm to school efforts, it's not the only one. Respondents also reported that their schools 'educated students about locally-grown foods' (11% of respondents) and 9.6% reported that their schools operated a school garden.

Schools are buying from a mix of sources, but directly from farm operators is the top mode of procurement, followed by distributors (21%), garden (13%), and food hub (11%).



Some of the respondents have been purchasing for farm to school for years, while others are new to the process as well as their farm suppliers. As with any new endeavor, this creates some challenges.



Over 10% of respondents ranked the ease of sourcing local foods as either poor or terrible, while 28% ranked the ease of buying as average. In contrast, 62% of respondents ranked sourcing either good or excellent.

About Farm to School Buyers and the Buying Process

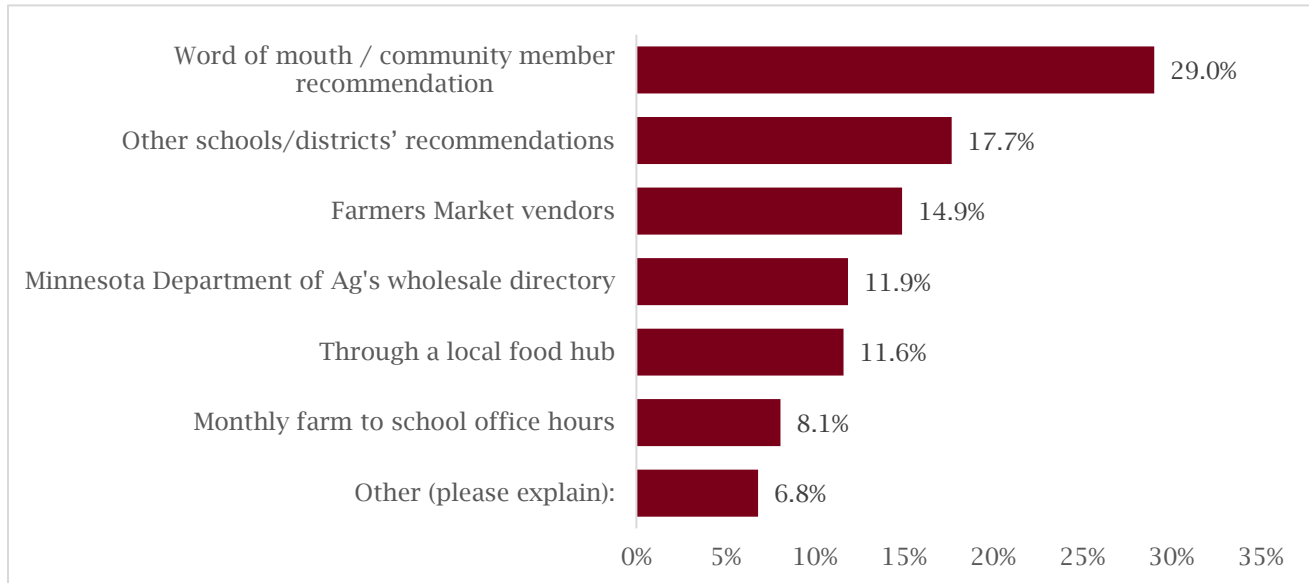
For any operator interested in selling to an outlet, an understanding of the buyer cannot be overstated. Few farmers have first-hand experience operating a food service kitchen and all the many competing interests on the time and attention of food service directors.

Employing these survey results can help to communicate with and provide quality customer service to school food service buyers. The first step to meeting the needs of a customer is understanding their needs.

Buyers learned about farmers through word of mouth

A positive word of mouth travels and sourcing local foods is no different. Nearly one-third of respondents reported finding farm suppliers through this avenue, whereas 18% also reported using the recommendations of other schools. The wholesale directory from MDA (<https://minnesotagrown.com/wholesaler/>) was called out as a resource by 12% of respondents.

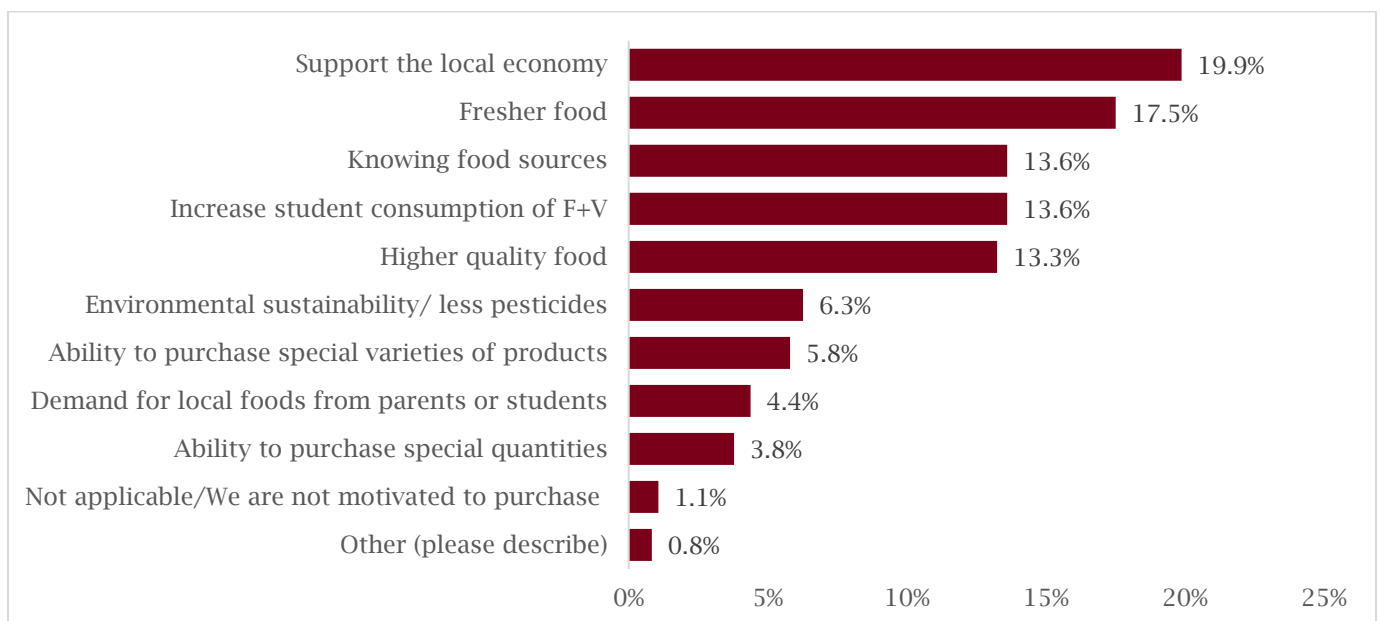
How did you find or establish connections with your local growers? Check all that apply.



Freshness and supporting local economy lead the motivations of schools

Motivation is an important component to understanding a customer and the reasons given by respondents were not different from motivations of non-school customers in buying local or direct from a farmer: freshness and support of the local economy.

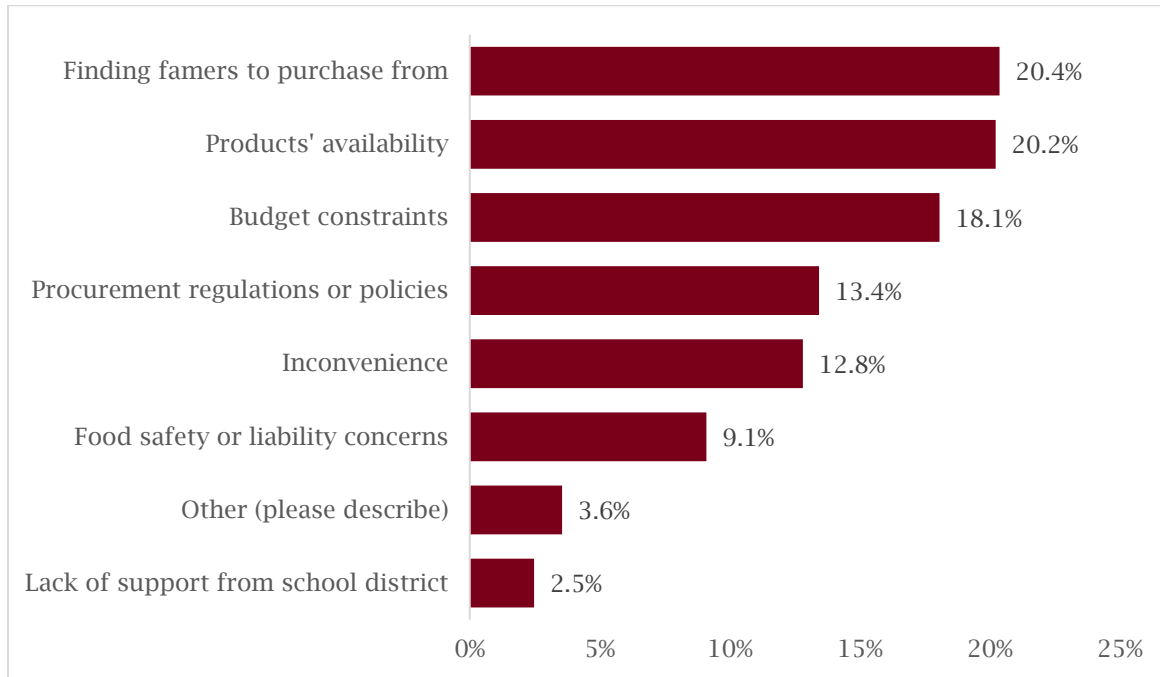
What motivates you to purchase and serve local foods in your school food service program?



Making connections with farmers top all challenges

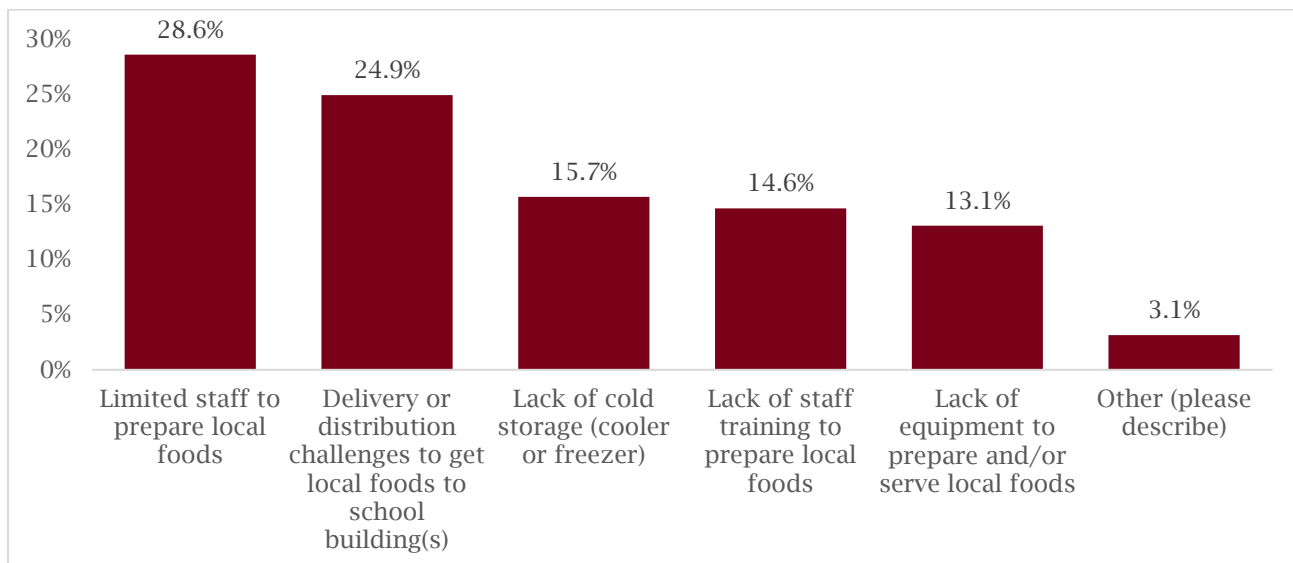
Find farmers to purchase from top the list of challenges ranked by survey participants.

What barriers do you face in purchasing local foods? By percent of responses



But the challenges of servicing local foods are different from simply purchasing product and these issue are an important consideration for any producer looking to meet the needs of this market.

What challenges do you face in servicing local foods? By percent of responses



Takeaways for farmers looking to market to schools

- Lots of schools across the state have access to funds through the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's procurement grant, so the opportunity exists for operators.
- Conduct a market channel analysis of your current outlets to understand your marketing mix and how other outlets can fit. See <https://extension.umn.edu/managing-farm-business/marketing-mix-analysis-farm-operators> for details.
- Look for efficiency by selling to schools on or near existing distribution routes and use the same sales sheets and ordering system to streamline logistics.
- Be patient. If you are new to selling wholesale, it may take time to learn the standards expected of suppliers. In addition, it takes time to build a solid buying-selling relationship with wholesale buyers. Put your best foot forward and be ready to adjust to meet their needs.

For more information about Farm to School efforts in Minnesota:

- University of Minnesota Extension with resources for schools and farmers: <https://extension.umn.edu/school-and-child-care-nutrition/farm-school>
- Minnesota Department of Agriculture for information about its farm to school procurement grant: <https://www.mda.state.mn.us/farm-school-grants>
- Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy for resources to assist in building farm to school programs across the state: <https://farmtoschoolmn.org>