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Farm-to-School Programs: Farmer Involvement Differs¹

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Introduction

Farm-to-school programs are often used by communities to support local food production and consumption. According to the National Farm-to-School Program Network (www.farmtoschool.org), “farm-to-school” connects schools (K-12) and local farms in order to serve healthier meals in school cafeterias, improve student nutrition, provide agriculture, health and nutrition education opportunities and support local and regional farmers². There are now over 2,000 farm-to-school programs nationwide. In New York, both the Department of Agriculture and Markets and Cornell Cooperative Extension actively promote farm-to-school programs (www.agmkt.state.ny.us/f2s/ and farmtoschool.cce.cornell.edu). In 2009, a survey of school food service directors in New York indicated that over 60% bought local items, with the most important being apples, tomatoes, carrots and lettuce (Grace, 2010).

Despite its broad support, opportunities for farmers to benefit from farm-to-school programs depend, in part, on how the programs are structured. Approaches to farm-to-school programs vary greatly and many factors affect the feasibility of establishing and maintaining a program (such as vicinity to agricultural production, school district budget and community support). At present, there is not much information on what and how much is purchased locally, the numbers of farmers involved and the financial benefits, impacts on both the diets of school children and changes in school food service expenditures. This issue of *Smart Marketing* examines three farm-to-school programs operating in coastal California, to give examples of how programs involve farmers in different ways. (A subsequent issue will examine some of the factors affecting farmers’ decisions to participate in farm-to-school programs.)

Examples of Three California Farm-to-School Programs

Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District Farmers’ Market Salad Bar Program. Widely recognized as one of the first farm-to-school programs in the U.S., this program was

¹ Parts of this document are adapted from Bogard et al. (2011).

² The definition of “local” or “regional” varies for the purposes of farm-to-school programs. “Local” may be interpreted according to political or geographic boundaries ranging from a city to a state or a region.

established in 1997. The program provides fresh fruits and vegetables to students through a salad bar. Under this program, the food service director for the SMMUSD coordinates directly with growers who sell produce at the Santa Monica farmers' market. The coordinator places produce orders directly with farmers and the farmers' market serves as an "aggregation hub" where the school district picks up produce using its own truck two times per week. The products are then delivered with a school-district-owned vehicle to the central kitchen where they are sorted and later delivered to individual school locations. The produce requires minimal processing for the salad bar, which simplifies and lowers the costs of operating of the program. In this program, farmers already selling at the farmers' market make additional sales with limited distribution costs above those of participating in the market.

Ventura "Healthy Foods Project." The Ventura Unified School District program operates with a combination of a third party produce distributor, contracted farmers, and occasional deliveries from other local farmers. The program obtained funds to purchase salad bars, hire additional staff, expand the school garden program, and hire a community health educator to reach out to the local adult population. The primary supplier for the program is a private produce wholesaler, which delivers to the schools daily. Price sheets are sent to the VUSD food service director each week, specifying which items are grown locally (defined as within a 150-mile radius). In addition, a for-profit CSA organization using student volunteers for much of the labor has been contracted to grow carrots specifically for the district. The program also allows local farmers to deliver produce items directly to the central kitchen when mutually agreed upon. Thus, there are many alternative ways for farmers to participate, but most produce is purchased through a traditional produce wholesaler.

Santa Cruz Farm-to-school Program. This program is a collaboration among the Santa Cruz City School District (SCCSD), the Santa Cruz County Food System Network, and the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA), a non-profit cooperative whose focus is to facilitate the entry and success of new farmers. The school food service director for SCCSD coordinates orders and deliveries with ALBA, which assumes the activities of a produce distributor. ALBA makes daily deliveries to the central kitchen for the SCCSD. In addition to working with ALBA, the director has arrangements with about 50 other local farmers to purchase additional local items. In this program, a farmer cooperative is the primary facilitator.

Thus, although each of these programs focuses on local produce purchases, the mode of participation and activities required of farmers differ. This suggests that the potential sales volumes, costs of production (and sometimes transportation costs) and therefore farmer returns will vary depending on how the program is structured. It is not yet clear which farm-to-school program arrangements might provide the greatest financial benefits to farmers, but it is likely that there is no single type of program that will work best for all farmers. Thus, it becomes important to understand what is required and assess the costs and benefits of farm-to-school program participation on a case-by-case basis.

References

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