



December
2014

Final Report

Connecting Florida Specialty Crops and Florida K-12 Schools: Interview Report

With the United States Department of Agriculture and the Florida Department
of Agriculture and Consumer Services

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For More Information

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Suggested Citation

Qu, S., Roper, C. G., & Rumble, J. N. (2014). Connecting Florida specialty crops and Florida K-12 schools: Interview report. PIE2012/13-12B. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education.

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Acknowledgments

The success of this project could not have been possible without the help and/or input from the following individuals:

Sonia Tighe – Executive Director, Florida Specialty Crop Foundation

Nathan Connor, Ph.D. – Assistant Professor, Tennessee Tech University

Sandra Anderson – Research Coordinator, UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education

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Alix Weeks – Freelance transcriber

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Executive Summary

Connecting Florida Specialty Crops and Florida K-12 Schools: Interview Report

United States Department of Agriculture and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
December 2014

Introduction

The PIE Center conducted research funded by the United States Department of Agriculture and Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services specialty crop block grant focused on connecting specialty crops to the K-12 school lunch program through Farm to School. During the spring of 2014, researchers interviewed Florida producers, schoolteachers, school foodservice directors, distributors, extension agents, and regional Farm to School coordinators to identify their experiences with the Farm to School Program. Participants were asked to discuss their opinions of the Farm to School Program, including any benefits of the program, barriers they had experienced when implementing the program, and their thoughts on the future of the program.

Findings

The key findings from the interviews indicated the participants were satisfied with the Farm to School Program, although many mentioned barriers they had faced and provided insight into the future of the program. The following major themes were discussed throughout the interviews:

- Supporting the Local Economy and Community – Participants felt that the Farm to School Program was beneficial to the community and provided support to local small farmers and the local economy.
- Benefiting the Students – Participants discussed the multiple benefits the Farm to School Program provided to students, which included providing an educational outlet for students and providing students with access to fresh, healthy, nutritious food.
- Food Safety – Participants discussed barriers and challenges associated with the food safety requirements for the Farm to School Program. Participants discussed that the burden of responsibility for food safety was placed on producers and that more should be done to assist program participants in reaching the food safety requirements.
- Farm to School in the Future – Participants discussed the growing role of Farm to School in the future and are optimistic that the program will continue to expand to more schools.
- Satisfaction with the Farm to School Program - Although many participants did provide insight and suggestions for improvements to the program such as more financial support and better communication among producers, schools, and distributors.

Background

The Farm to School Program is a national effort to encourage school districts to purchase produce from local farms (Joshi, Azuma, & Feenstra, 2008). The Farm to School Program provides school children more fresh fruits and vegetables to fight hunger, malnutrition, and obesity (Joshi & Beery, 2007). The UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education (PIE Center) conducted the interviews of Florida producers, schoolteachers, school foodservice directors, distributors, extension agents, and regional Farm to School coordinators to identify their experiences of being part of the Farm to School Program. The interviews focused on topics including their opinions of the benefits of the Farm to School Program, barriers when implementing the program, what makes this program successful, what could be done to enhance the program, and what is expected for the future of the Farm to School Program. This project was funded by the United States Department of Agriculture and a Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) specialty crop block grant.

Methods

A qualitative approach was applied to explore the perceived barriers within the specialty crop producing, buying, and distributing of the Farm to School initiative in the state of Florida. Face-to-face interviews, lasting approximately one hour, were conducted with 29 participants. Researchers interviewed 29 participants, including five Florida Farm to School Program coordinators, five producers, three distributors, five school district food service directors and two school food service staff, two schoolteachers, five extension agents and two Farm to School representatives from FDACS.

After researchers obtained approval by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Florida, researchers began contacting Farm to School district coordinators across the state of Florida and conducting interviews with them. The snowball sampling technique was utilized to identify other individuals that were connected and involved with the Farm to School Program through the interviews with the Farm to School district coordinators. New individuals were contacted by phone or email to be notified of the purpose of the study and to set up a time for the interview if they agreed to participate. Researchers continued to utilize the snowball sampling technique to contact other key individuals until saturation was reached.

Semi-structured interview guides were developed for each group of the participants. The interview guides focused on participants' perceptions of the benefits and barriers of the program, what could be done to improve the program, and what role each participant played in the Farm to School Program. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The researcher took notes during the interview. The transcripts were then analyzed using a thematic analysis.

Results

After analyzing the interviews, responses were grouped into themes. This report represents the findings in two ways: 1) themes derived from the interviews of Florida Farm to School Program coordinators, producers, distributors, school district food service directors, school teachers, extension agents, and both Farm to School coordinator and Bureau Chief of distribution in FDACS and 2) common themes derived from the interviews as a whole.

Florida Farm to School District Coordinators

According to the job description on UF/IFAS website, the role of district coordinators is to “provide district-wide leadership and support of the Florida Farm to School Program’s goals and objectives in each of the five University of Florida IFAS Extension Districts.” The district coordinator will promote and expand Farm to School activities at the multi-county level within an extensive and diverse statewide network of school authorities, parents, and children; farmers and distributors; University of Florida Extension faculty and administrators; staff of federal and state agencies; and representatives from other public and private organizations. Responsibilities include supporting county and state faculty in the design and development of nutrition education and/or agricultural production training programs to support Farm to School program priorities, maintaining communication among team members as well as designing, leading, and participating in extension trainings, outreach events, and team meetings.

Five Farm to School program district coordinators were interviewed. Their pseudonym, sex and district they serve are listed below.

Table 1. Florida Farm to School District Coordinators position, pseudonym, sex

Pseudonym	Sex	District
Elena	Female	South
Rachel	Female	Central
Tina	Female	Northwest
Monica	Female	Northeast
Sam	Male	South-Central

The themes derived from the district coordinator interviews are below.

Defining Local Food

District coordinators were asked how they defined local food. District coordinators discussed no set definition of local food, local as being from the state of Florida, and local as being from the Panhandle area or the surrounding states.

No Definition of Local Food

District coordinators discussed that there was no set definition of local food for the Florida Farm to School Program.

- Monica: “Local food is a challenge to define because different people can consider different things local.”
- Sam: “A lot of the definitions are going around as [local].”

Local Food from Florida

District coordinators discussed that local was considered any product from Florida.

- Rachel: “I think if it’s within the state of Florida, it’s local.” She further explained, “And most of the time when we talk to school districts about local, we try to start at a county level. But if they have distributors who work in several counties and what they need is in a different county then since it’s still within the state of Florida, and it’s a Florida Farm to School Program, we’ll consider that local.”
- Elena: “I would define it as something within the state.”

Farm to School Benefits

District coordinators were asked to discuss the benefits of the Farm to School Program. When discussing the benefits of the Farm to School Program, the following themes emerged:

Benefits for Children

District coordinators identified benefits for children in the Farm to School Program including better nutrition and education.

Better Nutrition

- Tina: “I think a lot of school directors see it as a nutritionally valuable necessity for their kids.”
- Monica: “It’s increasing the actual amount of fresh fruit and vegetables that they are consuming. I think that that’s something we don’t do nearly enough.”

Education

- Monica: “It increases outdoor activity and agricultural knowledge in the students. It increases the students’ knowledge base of healthier eating habits and [of] fresh fruit and vegetables and like I said, to a variety of exotic fresh fruits and vegetables that they may not see at home.”
- Rachel: “Because the students of today are the consumers in the future. So if we can get them tuned in to who their local growers are now and get them [the students] eating fresh fruits and vegetables, then that’s something that they’re more likely to keep up as an adult. And they’re going to be a healthier adult and more connected to their community in the future.”

Community Benefits

District coordinators discussed that the Farm to School Program benefited the community by supporting the local economy, building relationships in the community, engaging community members, and educating the public.

Supporting the Local Economy

- Rachel: “They [producers] understand local product is really a win-win for the community. It [Farm to School] supports the local community. It’s just putting that money, that federal money into this community. And keeping it here instead of sending it to California, so that’s a big benefit.”
- Monica: “It [Farm to School] provides an economic resource that wasn’t previously there, especially since it’s a direct sale.”

Building a Relationships in the Community

- Elena: “[Farm to School creates] more connections throughout the community...getting to know the farmers. I guess there’s more of a connection between the farmer and the students eating the food, and maybe families, too. Since some farms have their own U-Pick thing, it could be something that students go back to, potentially. And overall, just the general goal is to just have everyone be healthier and have a healthier lifestyle, so that is a benefit [and] one that we’re hoping to see changes in.”

- Rachel: “And then with school gardens and farmers visiting the schools, it just helps with a better sense of community for the school district.”

Engaging Community Members

- Elena: “I did an activity where everyone planted a seed and then they could theoretically take it home and plant it in a garden or a pot. And something I actually heard about yesterday, the community garden that I met with, they’re working with the school. And most of the students live in apartments, so they’re specifically doing classroom garden activities with containers, so it’s something that could [be transferred] back home.”
- Monica: “It also helps increase the health of their youth and we’re trying to also spread that knowledge to the parents and adults. We’re also able to provide educational resources to the teachers and the communities to share with their communities and students.”

Positive Public Image

District coordinators discussed a positive public image as a benefit to school districts enrolled in the program.

- Tina: “And I also think that it [local food] is something that, right now, it’s such a hot button [topic]. People really like to see local food. I think that’s another big influence. It really does make them [school district] look good and it’s something to talk about.”
- Tina: “It makes them [school district] look good and, you know, plus they have the benefit... of a lot of these school districts have RD’s, registered dietitians, who are in charge.”

Farm to School Barriers

District coordinators discussed the barriers associated with the Farm to School Program. District coordinators discussed barriers associated with communication, local sourcing, food safety, working with distributors and school districts, and economic barriers.

Communication Barriers

District coordinators discussed barriers associated with communication, including barriers between producers and school districts as well as general communication barriers.

- Tina: “School districts make their menus months ahead of time and they can’t always just change it at the drop of a hat, so they really have to have notice. If we have a crop failure, most of the times [a] school district would say as long as they let us know so we can make other arrangements. But again, it’s about the communication. Who is a grower communicating with? With the school district, with the distributor? You know, we still haven’t really defined that.”
- Elena: “And then they [school districts] are also unfamiliar with the agricultural terms. There’s not really an in between person, if the farmer talks about bushels, they’re trying to talk about fifty servings of a fruit or vegetable or something.”
- Monica: “And some of them [the producers], especially in this northeast region... a lot of them don’t have email... a lot of them don’t have Internet and so technology can be a barrier as well to some of them.”

Local Sourcing Barriers

District coordinators discussed barriers associated with local sourcing including limited local food supplies in urban areas and local products peaking when school is not in session.

- Elena: “We talk about Florida as what we’re considering local foods, but for example, in Broward County, there’s not a whole lot of agriculture and farms. There are a few small places, but if someone wanted to consider their county as their local food source, there’s not a whole lot of availability in Broward, specifically, it’s all city.”
- Tina: “A lot of our product is coming in, in the summer, you know. And it’s [not good] unless we can get it into summer feeding programs...a lot of times our best stuff is coming in when school’s not happening.”

Distributors Barriers

District coordinators discussed price barriers associated with distributors in the Farm to School Program.

- Monica: “I know that a lot of these distributors are not happy about it [Farm to School] because they’re the ones that have the ball in their court at this time. The way the system works right now is that they go and find the lowest bid produce they can find and then they’re able to charge whatever fee they want to, to sell it to the schools. And so what we’re trying to transition over to is a drayage fee where they only get a delivery fee and that’s going to be a huge help. However, a lot of them [distributors] aren’t real thrilled with it, but they’re the ones that are kind of going to make or break this program in many counties. So, thankfully there’s enough pressure on them that, you know, they’re starting to try to bend, but we’ve got a long ways to go with the distributors. And I don’t think there’s anything that’s going to make these guys happy except for getting to keep doing what they’re doing where they get all the money.”
- Rachel: “They are, you know, they’re in it for the money. I don’t think they necessarily care if it’s local or not local.”

Limited School Kitchen Staff and Equipment

District coordinators discussed a lack of kitchen facilities and staff as barriers associated with working with school districts.

- Tina: “That’s a lot of time and school cafeterias have less staff than ever and they only get to have them for maybe six hours a day.”
- Monica: “[Lack of] equipment in the cafeterias [is a barrier].”

Economic Barriers

District coordinators discussed economic barriers associated with the program. District coordinators discussed barriers related to economics, including the economic feasibility of buying and selling local food.

Economic Barriers of Purchasing Local Food

- Rachel: “Sometimes they [local food] can be [more expensive] if you purchase directly from the grower. But the reason for that is when a distributor can get the produce for a school, a lot of the times they get it from a source that will provide it cheaper. But that source is usually outside of the state or outside of the local area and that’s why they can get it cheaper.”
- Elena: “It’s hard to meet some of the price points when people can get foods internationally for very cheap...”

Economic Barriers of Selling Local Food

- Elena: “It’s hard to meet some of the price points when people can get foods internationally for very cheap and then the local producers, the small farmer, who could be selling to a restaurant for a higher price...it’s difficult for them to bring down the costs to sell to a large school market.”

- Tina: “A school district can only pay so much. And that doesn’t really change much, so when you have a grower that’s saying, ‘Well, I can sell it to a restaurant and not [have to] meet any of these requirements and make a whole lot more money for it.’”

Inefficiency of the Program

District coordinators discussed the inefficiency of the Farm to School Program as a barrier to implementation.

- Sam: “Well, they’re [all segments of the program] all kind of doing their own thing over here. So trying to tie them into something that’s going on way on the other side, even though they’re doing almost the same thing...but really [trying to combine] it into one program where it can all be moving efficiently [is difficult].”
- Tina: “You’re taking something, [this entire system], that’s been years in the making and now we’re saying this isn’t working [so] let’s change it. And so only being really in the first year of it, you know...you’ve got school districts who are like, ‘We [food service directors] want it, we want it, we want it’ and we would love to give it to you, but we may not be able to give it to you yet. So, there’s kind of that...like you mentioned before, there’s truly a disconnect because most people do not understand what goes into Ag [agriculture] and what it takes.”

Enhancing the Farm to School Program

District coordinators were also asked to discuss ways the Farm to School Program could be improved. District coordinators suggested improvements could be made by having a Farm to School liaison, employing more individuals in the program, improving communication tools, changing economic aspects, providing more training and activities, and providing other improvements.

Farm to School Liaison

District coordinators discussed that adding a liaison to be a middle contact person could enhance the Farm to School Program.

- Rachel: “I think just them [schools] knowing that they have the support to make it happen and then giving them the tools they need, such as, educating them on how the program works, making sure that they have a go-to person that they know who can help them meet the growers, helping [[to] answer their questions and, you know, guiding them. So, they don’t feel like it’s something where they’re jumping off a cliff alone. They know they have the resources and the help they need to make it happen.”
- Tina: “Positive transition for the school district, I think again, making sure that they have a middle man or another person to call. Making sure that they know that they don’t have to contact each grower individually. Setting up some kind of something [procedure]. Even if that means that we go into counties and help set up co-ops, I mean, if people are interested in that. And they could contact one co-op instead of eighteen different growers that all supply different things.”

Employing More Individuals

District coordinators discussed employing more individuals to improve the Farm to School Program by filling gaps in the system.

- Sam: “And I think we need more people like the district coordinators, well, to coordinate a little better or a little faster on a greater area.”
- Monica: “My thoughts were if we hired our own distributors for the state... (laughter) I’m not sure that’s realistic due to cost and things like that...but I think distribution is a huge barrier to this program. And so if we were able to provide distribution channels that would really open up the market. So, I think the farmers

and the food service workers are definitely trying to move forward over and over and over again but there's still some big objects in the way.”

Improving Communication

District coordinators discussed that communication in the program could be improved by providing more communication guidelines and materials. Suggestions given by district coordinators included having access to detailed materials, having a common purchasing language, utilizing Florida Food Connect, and developing a Farm to School app.

Creating Detailed Materials

- Monica: “If we come up with some kind of an entry level packet for them [producers] to get started with, that would be really helpful. I think the more we can do to format that into an A-B-C-D type of equation, the better it's going to be for them.”
- Elena: “What I'm thinking...I can dream big now...probably having good handouts that specify... like just summarize the program for a farmer. And I think what everyone would love to have is a step by step guide of how [to] do Farm to School.”

Common Purchasing Language

- Elena: “When the food service wants 200 servings of something, they [distributors] know exactly what to bring them. So food service more speaks in [terms of] serving size and meals, whereas the farmers [are] talking about a whole field.”
- Rachel: “We have a grad student who's working on a conversion Excel spreadsheet, so that if a food service director knows how many servings of a certain thing...like if it's blueberries for instance... if they know they need this many servings of blueberries, they can put that in an Excel spreadsheet and it will tell them how many pounds of it they need to purchase and at what price to meet their needs. So, I think a lot of tools like that are very helpful and are going a long way.”

Florida Food Connect

- Tina: “Florida Food Connect now...it used to be Market Maker...it has been developed so that a school district could go in and say, ‘This is how many blueberries I need. Can anybody provide that to us?’ That's a great thing. It's just a matter of if we get enough people using it, which I'm hoping that we will.”
- Elena: “I think it's kind of interesting finding the best way to reach out to farmers because you could go meet with them, but it would be nice to do a meeting where we hit a lot of people which is what we're planning for our Florida Food Connect trainings.”

Changing Economic Aspects

District coordinators also discussed the importance of money in the success of the Farm to School Program. District coordinators discussed improvements to the program by providing incentives for producers, providing more money to school districts to purchase local food, and providing more money for school gardens.

Incentives for Producers

- Rachel: “I think it would be better if there were more incentives given either to growers to get more involved or to the food service directors to get more involved. Because both of those [groups] have a lot more on their plate than I could ever imagine dealing with in a day. And a lot of times asking them to do Farm to School, if it's not something they're already passionate about, [then] they see it as just one more thing that they have to

do. So I think if there were incentives, monetary incentive or whatever it may be, [it would] make it easier and definitely more worth their while.”

- Sam: “More money to work with would be great, if we can offer incentives for farms that do not have their food safety up and rolling.”
- Monica: “Guaranteed sales, which they’re starting to get the concept down for that.”

Providing More Money to School Districts to Purchase Local Food

- Rachel: “I think it would be very helpful for the food service directors if they had a little bit more money to work with, if they were going to purchase local foods. Because a lot of the times, price is also a barrier.”
- Monica: “They can supply additional funding for either [fruits or vegetables] to compensate for the cost of fresh produce.”

Providing More Money for School Gardens

- Elena: “I really like doing the school gardens and that’s a way to reach out. If we had more funds to do a few more school gardens, I would really love to do that.”
- Sam: “Money for the gardens would be nice. We were reduced this year and I didn’t think that was the right decision, but it’s not my [place] to say, I suppose.”

Trainings, Conferences, and Activities

District coordinators discussed that additional trainings, conferences, and activities could help improve the Farm to School Program.

- Rachel: “I really think a lot of the tools that we’re developing at FDACS and the University of Florida are going to be really helpful. We’re doing like school garden[s], IST trainings, and we’re teaching Extension faculty how to work with the schools. We do things like that. The FSNA Conference where we took the school food service directors on a tour to meet the farmers helped farmers [to] know exactly what it is that food service needs and the things that they look at when they go to purchase produce. We’ve been coming up with a garden guide so I think that’s going to be very helpful to teachers.”
- Elena: “Different conferences...I think [in]Florida...what do I have on my calendar...it’s like the Florida Citrus Show or something like that, or the Fruit and Vegetable Association Conference...so different conferences where a lot of farmers are already going. A few of the coordinators were able to go to the Small Farms Conference and have a table there...so increasing our visibility to a lot of people is important.”

Food Safety

Food safety is an important component of the Farm to School Program. District coordinators discussed barriers associated with food safety and the importance of food safety in the program.

Food Safety Barriers

District coordinators discussed the barriers associated with food safety including general food safety barriers, the burden placed on producers, and cost.

General Food Safety Barriers

- Rachel: “You know, some growers are a lot larger and they already have the food safety program set up, so they can sell to more consumers outside the school system. But [for] some of the smaller growers, the food safety stuff is difficult for them...and then just building relationships and [the] time...it just takes time to meet people and get the relationship built between distributor and grower and the food service director.”

- Tina: “Most people aren’t meeting [the food safety requirements]. Some of them have had third party audits and such, but most of them have not.”

Burden Placed on Producers

- Rachel: “Most of the distributors who I have talked to about food safety... if you’re going to buy local, [the requirements] are laid out already in the contract between the food service department and the distributor. Yeah, it’s just the distributor has to purchase the food or the produce from a farm that has the required food safety.”
- Monica: “The distributors are, again, just like the schools where they want all of the liability and risk to stay on the farmer. The distributor has things that they have to monitor as well, such as the temperature of the trucks and keeping the fruit and vegetables at the proper concentrated temperature and also in the correct storing packages to keep moisture and condensation and things like that from building up. But really and truly, the distributors have much less risk than the farmers do.”

Cost

- Elena: “It’s a lot of money to get the audit done or it could be an issue [is] they [producers] can’t afford to implement certain aspects.”
- Monica: “And that’s a big one as far as the distribution aspect goes, both for the larger distributors that the schools work with and for the smaller farmers that are willing to do distribution themselves if they have the equipment. Food safety audits are expensive for the farmer and if they’re a small farmer that can be a big barrier.”

Importance to School Districts

District coordinators discussed the importance of food safety to school districts.

- Monica: “But the way that it essentially works for the school board is the schools can’t have not even one student get sick, they have allergies they have to be concerned about and then they also have processing that they have to be concerned about. So, when they get a product in from the farmer they need to know that the farmer has followed everything as far as pesticide rules, composting rules, and pathogen rules.”
- Rachel: “They [schools] want very strict food safety because they want to keep the students safe. And if anyone does get sick, they don’t want the blame to be on them. So that’s why they require such strong food safety [practices].”

School Gardens

District coordinators were asked to discuss school gardens since they played an essential role in the implementation of school gardens. District coordinators discussed both benefits and barriers of school gardens.

Benefits of School Gardens

District coordinators discussed benefits of school gardens, which included increased consumption of fresh produce, increasing student physical activity, providing an opportunity to educate students about agriculture, and other benefits.

Increased Consumption of Fresh Produce

- Tina: “[For] kids seeing [the garden] growing it makes it feel less strange, less weird, and they almost take pride in eating something like that because they grew it. So, the gardens are really a great doorway into that.”

- Sam: “If they [students] are growing it in their school garden and then they see it on their lunch line, they’ll definitely eat it and then it will become nutrition.”

Increasing Physical Activity

- Rachel: “It’s basically [that] the school gardens are a great tool for teachers to use because it’s a way to get the kids outside and moving around and get their hands dirty...so they’re not stuck inside all day long.”
- Monica: “And also give them physical activity... so rather than being in a classroom all day, they’re able to get out and get a little bit of exercise and some fresh air. Obviously the younger kids just go crazy over being able to plant their own veggies.”

Educating Students about Agriculture

- Tina: “And a lot of teachers use whatever they’re growing and they’ll make something for their classroom, or whatever. So it’s just constant exposure to something really good and it also gives them a new appreciation for what farmers do, which I think a lot of kids... they don’t know.”
- Elena: “Farm to School uses local food to feed students and help educate them about foods that are grown in Florida.”

Other Benefits

- Rachel: “Some students who don’t excel in the classroom will excel in a garden setting. So making them in charge of certain tasks makes them feel important and that sort of thing...so they do better when they get back in the classroom because they have a sense of confidence. And, you know, even though they don’t keep up as well in the classroom, they do have this one thing that they’re great at...so it’s just like a behavioral and confidence building tool sometimes, also.”
- Sam: “We’re getting them lifelong learning traits that they can take with them to grow their own food, but also tying it back into their curriculum. Because I know going through school it was like, you learn stuff...you learn stuff, you take your test and then you forget about it. But something with a garden you can tie that in to have that hands-on experience where now you can relate, you know, the life of a bug to the lives of everything and tying it back to water conservation, soil, the importance of soil, looking at the weather, noticing the seasons, even.”

Barriers of School Gardens

District coordinators also addressed barriers of school gardens. District coordinators discussed the work associated with school gardens and difficulties associated with grants.

Work Associated with School Gardens

- Tina: “You [The teacher] really have to have a plan for how you’re going to use a garden in your curriculum, so that it doesn’t end up being you coming out every day after school watering the garden, weeding the garden and doing this and doing that.”
- Rachel: “It takes a lot of time for the teachers to write grants and find volunteers and helpers for the gardens.”

Difficulties in Writing Grants

- Rachel: “There are lots of school garden grants available, but either teachers aren’t familiar with them or they do apply for grants and they don’t get the funding. If you have a garden in a poorer area of town, a lot of times you can’t really count on parents for donations or anything like that. A lot of times a teacher is kind of paying for it out of pocket and that is a barrier.”

- Sam: “every school can go apply for a grant here and there but some schools have a grant coordinator and some don’t have the time. The teachers won’t go and apply for it or they don’t know how to apply for it so they just don’t.”

Successful Components of Farm to School

District coordinators discussed what currently helps the Farm to School Program succeed. District coordinators discussed materials, supporting programs, a good team, good relationships and positive attitudes as currently helping with the success of Farm to School.

Materials

District coordinators discussed that reliable and relevant materials aided in Farm to School’s success.

- Elena: “Like I have a whole box under my desk of like the Gardening for Grades book you’re holding. So it’s great that I can go to a school and deliver those. I have all these posters that I can give with Florida Ag to everyone I see. So that’s nice that I can automatically hand a teacher a curriculum, a map, and activities she can do.”
- Monica: “We’re provided a lot of educational materials through like Florida Ag in the Classroom, so that is a huge component.”

Support Programs

District coordinators also discussed the importance and assistance found in supporting programs.

Below is a list of partner and supporting programs that work with the Farm to School Program:

Agriculture in the Classroom: “Implemented by state-operated programs, National Agriculture in the Classroom supports state programs by providing a network that seeks to improve agricultural literacy — awareness, knowledge, and appreciation — among PreK-12 teachers and their students.” (United States Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2014)

The Smarter Lunchrooms Movement: “Started in 2009 with the goal of creating sustainable research-based lunchrooms that guide smarter choices. It is a grassroots movement of those concerned with the way children eat and wish to change these behaviors through the application of evidence-based lunchroom focused principles that promote healthful eating.” (Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Program, 2014)

The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program: “A federally assisted program providing free fresh fruits and vegetables to students in participating elementary schools during the school day.” (United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, 2013).

The Healthier US School Challenge: “A voluntary certification initiative recognizing those schools enrolled in Team Nutrition that have created healthier school environments through promotion of nutrition and physical activity.” (United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2014)

District coordinators discussed each of the programs by name and their assistance in the success of the Farm to School Program.

Agriculture in the Classroom

- Tina: “The Ag in the Classroom is a great resource. They provide garden grants [and] they provide curriculum. And we hand that out, you know, we let them [teachers] know about it.”

- Elena: “The Ag in the Classroom resources are very helpful.”

The Smarter Lunchrooms Movement

- Tina: “We’re doing Smarter Lunchroom trainings. Part of our contract with FDACS is that we provide two Smarter Lunchroom trainings in each district. So, we go in and we have these... they’re going to be chef trainings and Smarter Lunchroom trainings...kind of worked in together. So, we have a chef, David Burrell, who’s been hired onto our team, and he will do these trainings and help school cafeteria staff learn how to really work with local product...fresh product when they get it...something that’s not prepackaged. He’s working with that and helping train knife skills and simple recipes [with] simple techniques and then the Smarter Lunchrooms kind of fits in to that.”
- Monica: “And then Smarter Lunchrooms kind of helps bring the whole thing together by increasing and incentivizing the students to actually eat the products. Without that, the knowledge base still may be lacking in the actual cafeteria.”

The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program

- Monica: “The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program supplies funding for schools that are in very low income areas.”
- Elena: “One way that we try to get foods in is encouraging the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program...just saying, ‘Hey, how about you bring in cucumbers a couple of times a year or something?’”

The Healthier US School Challenge

- Monica: “They [The programs] help also when you look at programs such as the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and Healthier US Kids Challenge. It [The Healthier US School Challenge] increases physical activity.”
- Elena: “We are working on the HUSCC applications with Palm Beach County and they want to make sure that all of the schools are meeting the guidelines. They don’t want any schools to get the award if they’re not actually following every guideline because they genuinely want the students to be healthier. They don’t want the school to get an award if it’s not helping the students.”

The Farm to School Team

District coordinators discussed the Farm to School team, including FDACS, Extension agents and other coordinators contributing to the success of the Farm to School Program.

Extension Agents

- Rachel: “Being connected with the IFAS Extension offices are very helpful. They’re always a wealth of knowledge and resources, and for the most part, they’re really tapped into their community and they know the stakeholders who are most likely to want to be involved. So they’re very good at making connections and helping with resources.”
- Tina: “They [school teachers] can reach out to Extension, and Extension can hook them up with volunteers, or trainings, or different curriculum or whatever, and get that to them.”

District Coordinators

- Tina: “A lot of the resources I use are coming from our team because a lot of them don’t exist yet. So, like, for instance, the conversion chart from, you know, the field to the cafeteria...that’s a very helpful [resource]. We’re still kind of developing that, but the fact that it exists and that it’s something that we will be able to give, is a big thing.”

- Elena: “I think being able to talk to our team members easily and being...yeah...just being able to ask questions. The technology is definitely a resource just because I’m regularly on the phone with the other district coordinators and the state coordinators. We use Polycom to meet once a month.”

Emphasis and Enthusiasm for Local Food

The district coordinators discussed that many of the schools they have encountered had placed emphasis on and had enthusiasm for local food, contributing to the success of the Farm to School Program.

- Rachel: “They’ve been working for several years on getting local foods into the school system.”
- Elena: “Slowly over several years, it’s progressed to having a weekly highlighted item and if you look up their full school menus online you’ll see that they highlight like local Friday or something special every Friday on their menu. They really emphasize that.”
- Tina: “Gadsden County reached out to me and said...their school district did...and said, ‘We really, really, really want all of the local food that we can get. We want it.’ And they’ve been incredibly... they were already actually...they were purchasing a lot of local food.”
- Elena: “But working with that team [county school district], I can see that they’re all very dedicated to health and wellness and getting the kids learning about school.”

The Role of District Coordinators in the Farm to School Program

District coordinators were asked to discuss the role they play as coordinators. District coordinators discussed that they play the role of communicating, providing assistance, and attending trainings.

Communicating

District coordinators serve as communicators by meeting with others involved in the Farm to School process.

- Tina: “We’re actively having meetings with growers, distributors, and food service people and bringing them together and trying to identify the products that school districts want and the level of processing that they need.”
- Elena: “My role is going out and meeting with farmers, meeting with food service, and a lot of working with Extension Agents because they know a lot of the people in each county. A lot of the people I work with have a good relationship with the Extension Agents in their county.”
- Sam: “For instance, I’ve been working with Bliss Produce Service and they service nine counties. So, if I can get them onboard with more Florida farmers...which I’m already working on...and I’m targeting the larger farmers so they can handle nine school districts...I’m hoping it’s just going to happen.”
- Rachel: “I just kind of try to talk to the distributors and find out where they’re working, what counties they’re working in, what kind of relationship they have with local growers, [and] what they’re already buying local. Because some things they purchase local already and the school districts just don’t ask...so, they aren’t aware of what’s being [bought] locally.”

Providing Assistance

District coordinators discussed their role in providing assistance to schools when filling out applications for funding and providing materials.

Assisting Schools with Applications

- Elena: “Well, we are helping the schools get more of these HUSCC applications like I’ve talked about. So, it’s not necessarily my role to go in and make every county fill one out, but if there is an interest in the county, we will assist them since we’ve done it before.”
- Tina: “School districts know that we’re available to help coordinate that [HUSCC paperwork] and get those applications filled out and sent in for them.”

Providing Materials

- Monica: “I also supply materials for different meetings. So, whether it be brochures, educational resources, [or] anything like that, I usually bring goodies. We also supply financial support for the school gardens that a lot of them are already working in.”
- Tina: “We also have a lot of materials [to provide]. How to build a raised bed; How to make an irrigation system; How do you calculate how much soil you need for this or that.”

Attending and Providing Trainings

District coordinators discussed their role in attending and providing trainings. Their discussion focused on smarter lunchroom training and school garden training.

Program Training

- Rachel: “We have the smarter lunch room training that we do and that’s just [an] education piece for the school food service department...and then the HUSCC applications are... we help school districts do those.”
- Elena: “I will work with our team’s chef to do two Smarter Lunchrooms trainings in the county and those are always fun...helping [and] working with the food service.”

School Garden Training

- Elena: “So, I usually work with Extension to figure out what school needs a garden, and [it has to be] a garden that I know will have support from Extension, and I work with teachers there. I’ve also helped do a lot of teacher trainings, so even though we don’t have funds to do a garden at every school, I can at least teach them the curriculums. Like Gardening for Grades, I’ve taught a few lessons out of that. And I let teachers know about different grants and funds that are available for gardens.”
- Sam: “We have gardens in a lot of schools around here and every other school that’s tried to work with me, I have helped out in some way just to make sure that they have something to grow. But really tying it back into if they grow it, they’re going to eat it has been my best conclusion so far.”

Implementing Farm to School Program in Large vs. Small School Districts

The district coordinators were asked to compare the Farm to School implementation between large and small school districts. Common themes included limitations and benefits of small school districts, and benefits of large school districts.

Limitations of Small School Districts

The district coordinators reflected limitations of small school districts when implementing the Farm to School Program. The limitations discussed included limited technology, staff, and financial resources.

Limited Staff

- Tina: “Because they [teachers in small school districts] are crazy busy. [In] a bigger school district, they normally have people that are there to just make sure that these things happen.”

- Monica: “Another aspect is many times in the small counties, the food service directors will carry five different jobs. So, they may be covering multiple counties or they may just be doing multiple positions.”

Limited Resources

- Monica: “And another resource in small counties that is limiting is technology. You know, I have quite a few small counties that, you know, many of their citizens and people don’t have Internet, don’t have computers, [and] don’t have email. And for this type of a program in today’s world that is definitely limiting... [while] large counties, on the other hand, can be great as far as there [being] more resources [they are] able to access.”
- Sam: “I don’t know if the smaller counties just don’t have the time or money or resources or what...but it seems like the meetings I have in the smaller counties are just passing through, almost. We’ll talk about the stuff but nothing will ever actually come of it. They [large districts] have the interest and the resources to follow through on their end.”
- Rachel: “A lot of times they [small school districts] don’t have as much money to work with. Just because most of the smaller districts, they have the higher rate of the free and reduced lunches and not as many à la carte’s, so a lot of the times they don’t have as much money to work with as a larger [district] like Seminole County.”
- Monica: “The smaller counties have less resources and that goes all the way down from financial resources to staff resources [to] distribution resources; they’re very limited on what they are able to do.”

Advantages of Small School Districts

The district coordinators also talked about the advantages of implementing [the] Farm to School Program in small school districts. The advantages discussed included small school districts having more flexibility and closer relationships with surrounding producers.

More Flexibility

- Tina: “But a smaller school district is...if they only have five or six or seven schools in their school district, they don’t have as much [and] don’t need as much volume...so it’s a lot easier to, logistically speaking, get the product to them. And a lot of times they’re not using the really big guys for their distributors...so they don’t have the same food safety requirements. So, it can be a little bit easier.”
- Elena: “I think there is one [school district] that probably has less than five schools in the county [and] that’s very small. I think it’s maybe a little bit harder to make changes in some of the big districts. Well, it’s easier and harder in some ways.”

Closer Relationship with Surrounding Producers

- Rachel: “I found the small counties to be much easier to work with...because most of the time the food service director in that county, they’re from the county or from a nearby county...so they know a lot of the people. They know a lot of the growers already or they at least know what is grown in their area and they just don’t have as many regulations and stuff that they need to jump through.”
- Rachel: “And most of time, a large school district means a very populated area, so there aren’t as many farms to work with.”

Advantages of Large School Districts

The district coordinators also reflected [on the] advantages of large school districts including that they have more resources, connections, and they are more progressive.

- Elena: “The larger districts who I’ve worked with, they do a better job of treating it like it is a business [by] treating their school food service department like it’s a business that needs to generate money. So they do a better job of being more in tune with their distributors, of demanding more of their distributors, and I guess, just marketing what they want to sell so they get more income for it.”
- Tina: “The larger school districts normally are more progressive. Just because if they’re a larger school district they normally have a city and normally a city is a little bit more progressive in thinking and wanting local products.”

The Future of the Farm to School Program

District coordinators were asked to provide what they hope for Farm to School in the future. Common themes included better communication, more common practice, more education on agriculture and nutrition, and more local food.

Better Communication

District coordinators reflected their hope of better communication among segments of [the] Farm to School program.

- Monica: “I hope that the [direct] relationships between the farmers and the schools continues to improve.”
- Rachel: “I think, like I said, the dots in the future hopefully will be connected.”

Local Sourcing

District coordinators discussed that local sourcing will become more common in the future.

- Sam: “And hopefully the food service directors won’t even have to know, you know, they won’t have to spend their time and money on it, because the distribution company is already sourcing locally. And I’m hoping that...I’m hoping it all just ties together nicely.”
- Tina: “It might be ten years from now [but] I feel like this [sourcing locally] will be the common practice. I just feel like that’s the way that we’re going and it’s obviously becoming very important to people. And it’s truly beneficial. I feel like it’s going to be the, you know, the standard operating procedure years from now. I don’t see this movement going anywhere.”
- Elena: “I think, I envision more local foods in Florida and I think that is happening now that people are more aware of the program.”
- Sam: “If we can do it with the schools, the hospitals, the jails, all the institutional larger markets as well as the restaurants, [and] the farmer’s markets, I think that will boost local agriculture.”

More Education on Agriculture and Nutrition

District coordinators discussed incorporating more educational materials about agriculture and food production into the Farm to School Program.

- Tina: “What I hope, is that there’s a much more comprehensive view of nutrition, gardens, [and] local farmers, you know? There’s a kind of a new excitement for agriculture and I’m hoping that that’s what I see.”
- Elena: “[I hope that] students knowing more about where their food is coming from, especially if farmers are going in the classroom and they’re [the students are] going on field trips and using school gardens. And I think it’s something that could always be growing because there is so much food that’s produced here.”

Producers

Producers play a vital role in the Farm to School Program. Producers provide produce to schools that participate in Farm to School. Four producers interviewed were currently participating in the Farm to School Program, and one producer had been considering participating in the Farm to School Program. Table 2 described the five producers who were interviewed.

Table 2. Descriptions of Producers

Pseudonym	Sex	Location	Primary Products They Grow	Program status
Ethan	Male	Central	Blueberries, Pomegranates, and Peaches	Participating
Joe	Male	North East	Satsuma Oranges	Participating
Melody	Female	South Central	Blueberries and Peaches	Considering
Phil	Male	Central	Potato	Participating
Tyler	Male	North west	Satsuma Oranges	Participating

Farm to School Benefits

Producers were asked to discuss the benefits of the Farm to School Program. Producers discussed increased educational opportunities, increased fresh produce consumption, and the program providing an additional market for producers as benefits of the Farm to School Program.

Increased Educational Opportunities

Producers identified that the Farm to School Program increased educational opportunities for school children.

- Phil: “[The benefit of this program is] just the overall connection of the children to their food source and understanding that farmers grow.”
- Joe: “The long term [benefit] is being able to get that fresh fruit to those kids and building the market for the future. When those kids get older, they’ll still want Satsumas or oranges or whatever we got. That they understand that it came from the farm, it helps them appreciate the freshness of the product, you know? Those kids they catch on pretty quick, you know, to stuff like that.”

Fresh Produce Consumption

Producers discussed that the fresh produce provided from the local farms to the schools was beneficial to the school children.

- Phil: “Well, just keeping it close to home. Freshest produce on the store shelf or on the plate.”
- Melody: “The benefit is to be the school children eating it. I think it’s the top one. Because it’s only picked when it’s ripe, ready and full of nutrition...[there] will be less opportunity for cross contamination than [with] the food they eat now.”

Additional Market for Producers

Producers also pointed out the Farm to School Program provided an additional market for their products.

- Tyler: “With a crop like mine, I only have ‘x’ amount of weeks to get rid of a lot of fruit and you can’t just... grocery stores and other places can’t handle the numbers of fruit that I have. So it’s a good outlet to get rid of the bulk of my citrus when it’s ready, you know, without having to put it in a cooler and hold it.”
- Joe: “The advantages for us are we know where it’s going [and] we don’t have to find a market for it. We can move a lot of product at one time versus the retail side.”

Farm to School Barriers

Producers were asked to share their thoughts about barriers associated with the Farm to School Program. Barriers identified by producers include distribution issues, challenges associated with farm size, food safety requirements, and limited quantities wanted by schools.

Distribution Issues

Producers stated that issues with distribution logistics caused barriers to participate the Farm to School Program.

- Tyler: “I can’t afford to go school to school and say two boxes here, two boxes here, [and] two boxes [here] ...you know, it’s not feasible.”
- Ethan: “Packaging and transportation are your big costs.”
- Joe: “If we were to have a warning about how labor intensive it is to deliver to all those schools, (laughs) that might have helped. But, you know, getting started that you maybe [should] make people aware that, you know, it can be overwhelming when you’re responsible for delivery.”
- Ethan: “I have to work through a distributor. I don’t work directly with the schools even though I’d like to. I know I could go down to the school right here and put a bee in somebody’s bonnet.”
- Phil: “The only thing I see to make it work out, I mean, if you want to do it, is to [understand that] the school system is tied to a county by county basis. Okay? So the food director...there’s a food director for every county...at least the counties that I’m dealing with...well, this county over here may use food distributor ‘X’. This county over here may use food distributor ‘Y’. This county over here may use food producer ‘Z’. And so instead of me dealing with one food distributor that comes and buys product for all of these schools, I’m now dealing with three or four different people.”

Farm Size

Producers discussed being small farmers created challenges with participating in the Farm to School Program.

- Phil: “Now if I was a little farmer and I just had one little patch of collard greens or one patch of cabbage, it [Farm to School] doesn’t work that way. You’ve got to be an operator who’s going to have a product for a long period of time, so they know that they’re going to get that product at that time. If you’re going to grow cabbage and you’re going to grow five acres of cabbage over here for the Farm to School lunch program, what happens if your farm gets flooded out with rain? You lose your crop. They’re not going to have that cabbage for the school.”
- Tyler: “When we contact a broker or something they want to know how many semi loads we have. Well, I probably have maybe five [to] six semi loads. That’s not what they’re talking about. They’re talking about 40, 50, 100, [even] 200 semi loads. So being a small farmer, the size I am, I’m not big enough to interest a broker because he can’t make enough money to even make it worth his time.”

Food Safety Requirement Costs

Producers also discussed the cost of food safety requirements as a barrier.

- Joe: “If my extension agent comes out here and knows that I’m doing good agriculture practices that really should be enough. [Right now], you [the program] pay somebody to come do that and they don’t know what the heck they’re looking at.”
- Phil: “They [Distributors] require a tremendous amount of insurance and different things that would not necessarily be cost effective for various producers.”
- Melody: “A lot regulations, food safety regulations... I am wondering in regards of food safety and the cost of regulation that goes into that. It’s [The produce has] not been shipped across the county, so we can take this part out of the equation, like a different lower standard.... This is a unique way of distributing food, if you know the farmer. It’s going straight from the farm to the school. It’s a direct deal. So I don’t think all that other business necessarily has to go into it because any step takes time and time takes money and farm labor. A lot of farmers would love to participate [in the] Farm to School program, but they can’t get their cost down.”

Limited Quantities that Schools Request

Producers discussed that the school often requested limited quantities of product, which often proved to be challenging and of little benefit to the producers.

- Phil: “They [Schools] have limited quantities. I mean, it doesn’t ever amount to anything. Like, they come to pick up 50 bags of potatoes. They pick up 50 bags next month. You understand what I’m saying? It’s not much.”
- Ethan: “In the amount of blueberries that they [the schools] wanted, that they want. Now, I don’t know if they said that they had 2700 students in the Putnam County School District. I don’t know how 500 pounds, going into 2700 students, I don’t know how many blueberries they [the schools] are going to get. Not very many.”

Relationships with Extension Agents

Producers were asked about the role Extension agents played for producers who participate in the Farm to School Program, some producers expressed that Extension agents didn’t play an active role.

- Phil: “They [Extension agents] haven’t played an active role in it and they don’t need to...they don’t need to. I mean, really the food directors need to menu the items. I can’t say it enough.”
- Tyler: “They [Extension agents] don’t seem to be. I wasn’t even aware they could assist us in it to be honest with you, other than to come out to my house.”

Enhancing the Farm to School Program

Producers were asked to share what could be done to enhance the Farm to School Program. Enhancements suggested by producers included working in cooperatives, having better communication and networking, initiating the action to get their produce into schools, and educating schools about farming.

Work in Cooperatives

- Tyler: “I think the way to go is through co-ops, or whatever groups you want to call it.... In my opinion, we’re losing out by not all combining [together] and having a central location to carry our product to and then let that location sell [and] move the product for us.... We could also get into brokers if we were all combined like that because then we would have the number of semi loads to interest a broker.”
- Melody: “I know cooperatives can help on a whole lot of levels because usually in a co-op you can trade equipment and maybe even boxes. I’m thinking about this for myself for about to go about blueberries and peaches, and I know I will have to come up a few thousands of dollars to buy boxes because of the amount. So I’m only gonna buy X amount of boxes, because I am a small farmer... [and] I’m gonna pay \$2 a box for that but if I work with

other growers that needed the same box and we all went in [and] had a big order, [then] all of the sudden, my [cost] per box is a dollar not 2 dollars, so I'm making one extra dollar of that product. So I think that's a huge benefit of co-ops. It's just to work together so everybody wins."

Better Communication and Networking

Producers discussed that communication between schools and producers needed improvement.

- Joe: "Definitely more communication with them [school districts] and that way we...you know, if it [communication] was a mutual thing [then] we could let them know what we have. Sometimes you get in that situation where you [have] got 'x' amount left and you just want it gone. And that could be a really good deal for both sides."
- Tyler: "I think that what is missing is that person that knows the farmer and knows the school to be able to match them up. I think that's the piece that's missing."
- Melody: "[I need] someone to kind of like get it going...to kind of say 'You are a great fit for this program and these are the steps you take. This is the paperwork, let me sit with you and help you fill it out because it is a benefit not only to the farmers but to the schools, as well as to the University of Florida.' To kind of have someone to say 'Hey we have the University of Florida saying we have this great program, [It would have] benefited the USDA to have someone help facilitate more accurately, like if they had a regional person.'"

Getting into Schools

Producers also discussed that it would be helpful if schools or someone else initiated the Farm to School process.

- Ethan: "I have learned that the [Farm to School] program is definitely worthwhile, but I think the food service directors should visit every one of these farms with their staff and say, 'Okay, Ethan, we know you are late because of weather and everything else like that, but you are the selected farmer for the Farm to School Program in Putnam County. We want this, this, and this. Yes or no?' And that's it."
- Tyler: "To help farmers to get into the schools is where the help is needed. Once I'm in there, you can leave me alone, we'll get along fine, but it's somebody to help us get into them [schools]."

Educating Schools about Farming

Producers discussed that it is necessary for schools to understand farmers' work.

- Joe: "It [educating schools of producer's work] would help them have faith in what we do, you know, in that they're getting something healthy and safe."
- Ethan: "We would like to form some type of a field trip. We would like to educate. We would like to be teachers as to what goes on, on the farms, how it's done. Not just go out and visit the cows, not go out and visit the blueberries, but how do blueberries grow, where do they come from? From the bees to the pollination and everything...it should be in the education system."
- Tyler: "There's a lot of things like that [organic food], that they probably need to know. But the difference between systemic and topical produce to me is that's my major selling point, we don't use anything systemic, you know, to me it's a whole lot more important than the difference between topical and organic. That's my own personal opinion, but there's some things like that, that they probably need to understand and I don't know that they don't, but I get the impression they don't."

Favorable Opinions of the Farm to School Program

When producers were asked to discuss their opinion of the Farm to School Program, many of them discussed favorable opinions of the program.

- Joe: “I think it’s a really good thing. It’s a really positive thing for the kids and for us as an industry. I think it’s going to help build a market way out in the future beyond where we can even measure with school kids being the benefactors.”
- Ethan: “I think it is a unique, absolutely fantastic program.”

The Future of the Farm to School Program

Producers were asked how they envision their future involvement in the Farm to School Program. Producers were willing to keep participating in and promoting the program.

- Phil: “I’m continuing to promote a good program.”
- Tyler: “I hope more involvement. I’m hoping.... How? I don’t know yet, but I’m hoping.”

Distributors

Distribution companies which offer locally produced agricultural products bridge the gap between local farmers and schools participating in the Farm to School Program (<http://toolkit.centerfornutrition.org/category/distributors/>). Two distributors who participated in the Farm to School Program were interviewed. Their pseudonym, sex, location, and program status are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptions of Distributors

Pseudonym	Sex	Location	Program status
Ben	Male	Central	Participating
Will	Male	South	Participating

Defining Local Food

Distributors were asked their definition of local food. Both distributors said they would define local food for the Farm to School Program as within the state of Florida, but they would prefer to source produce as close as possible.

Within the State of Florida

- Ben: “Anything within your state’s borders would be considered local.”
- Will: “As far as Localecopia (Localecopia is a non-profit organization who supports local product consumption, and helps achieve sustainable business practices) and what we do, local food is anything in the state of Florida.”

Close as Possible

- Ben: “Now granted, I won’t contact someone in the Panhandle to ship something here when I can get it coming out of down by the lake, you know, down in the middle of the state.”
- Will: “Obviously we’d prefer everything to be literally within the same city or the same county.”

Farm to School Benefits

Distributors were asked to provide their opinions about benefits associated with the Farm to School Program. Common themes were benefits for children and benefits for the community.

Benefits for Children

Distributors discussed the benefits of the Farm to School Program for school children. The common theme was that kids are eating fresh fruits and vegetables.

- Ben: “I can’t see them all but I swing by and see the kids are taking it [fruits and vegetables]. I don’t know if they ate it all, but for the most part they’re taking it and they gain exposure to some of the new things.”
- Will: “We’re trying to offer fresh fruits and vegetables because a good portion of what they serve students are canned or you have frozen products. So from the school side, trying to get in fresh fruits and vegetables for students [is good]. They [school districts] have doubled their requirement for fruits and vegetables.”

Benefits for the Community

Distributors discussed the benefits of the Farm to School Program for the community, including supporting the local economy, and building good community will.

- Ben: “It’s kind of a perfect circle if you’re selling to people and people stay, jobs are good, and homes are built it’s just kind of like the circle of life.”
- Will: “The advantages are that it [the Farm to School Program] really builds a lot of good community will, like goodwill from the community. There are a lot of our individual school managers, school parents, and kids that we’ve gotten notes and cards and stuff [from]. Their families work at the local place [farms] where they grow it [local foods] or pack it [packaging facility] and we get, you know, like get a thank you card [for distributing local products].”

Farm to School Barriers

Distributors were asked to provide their opinions about barriers associated with the Farm to School Program. Common themes included barriers that producers face, barriers that distributors face, economic barriers, and general barriers.

Barriers Producers Face

Distributors discussed the barriers faced by producers while participating [in the] Farm to School program. The common theme was barriers associated with the food safety requirement.

- Ben: “The farmers. Like you have to have...there’s so much USDA and inspection and all that. And when this program started, we were inundated. I still answer a lot of calls about people wanting to sell me stuff. Well, I ask them, ‘Do you have this form of... do you have this certification? Do you have this inspection? Do you have this coverage?’ And unfortunately if they don’t, I can’t do business with them.”
- Will: “[If producers] don’t have certain insurances or they don’t have certain food handling programs in place, the distributors won’t buy from them. If the distributors don’t buy from them that means the products not available to the food service directors at the school level.”

Barriers Distributors Face

Distributors discussed the barriers they face while participating in the Farm to School Program. The common themes were bidding, lack of motivation for local sourcing, and lack of knowledge.

Bidding

- Will: “They’re [The state is] doing this bid on behalf of the schools which is a great thing and I think it is really good for the schools. But a lot of the food service directors don’t really know much about this [state bid] and the distributors have no clue. And the distributors have no idea what the state bid is all about, so a lot of it is the communication process of how the state bid works, what’s involved, [and] what people need to do to bring these products in...so that really [is about] the communication [and] the marketing.”
- Will: “Even a lot of the distributors don’t really understand this [state bidding] is in place. If they did, they’d be more apt to bid on some of the products themselves. So really, it’s the communication at the state level because they’re doing this, but they need to have a greater reach in terms of who they go out to.”

Lack of Motivation for Local Sourcing

- Will: “They [schools and distributors] have agreements and they [schools] rely on their distributors to get certain products in. And the distributors, their mentality is filling cases or filling orders. They [distributors] are not too concerned about where the product comes from. If the schools need 300 cases of oranges, they’ll get oranges from Arizona, California, Florida, wherever. They are going to go to make it happen. That’s their biggest concern.”

Lack of Knowledge

- Ben: “Then some counties [school districts], you know, you don’t hear a thing from them and then they hit you with like, ‘Yeah, we want to use strawberries in October.’ Well, there’s no Florida strawberry in October, it’s only California.”
- Will: “And food service directors, I don’t think they understand [bidding]. What a lot of the food service directors don’t understand is they’re comparing a snapshot price of today compared to a state bid that’s a two month [agreement] and it’s really not a fair comparison.”

Economic Barriers

Distributors discussed the economic barriers in the Farm to School Program. Economic barriers included competitive prices and limited budgets.

Competitive Price

- Will: “The disadvantages, again, there’s no assurances and we talked about this before that if my main distributor can offer something at 40 cents less from product that comes from California, that’s where they’re going. There are no assurances in place for being in the Farm to School [program].”
- Will: “We’re a niche company. That’s why sometimes it’s difficult for us to compete against some of the other organizations.”
- Ben: “Sometimes big business prevents it [school districts purchasing local produce] because there are always bigger companies that have the muscle and the money behind [the] business. Their business can override and make deals behind closed doors.”

Limited budgets

- Will: “Because schools, their budgets are so tight to begin with [and] their only source of income is food service departments. So they use that income to cover food service, but also to spend monies in other places and the last thing they want to do is cut into whatever revenue they do have coming in, so I don’t really see a lot of it changing.”
- Ben: “I think what prevents them [school districts] is sometimes their own financial constraints and their own budget.”

Language Barriers

Distributors also reflected that the different language used for units of measurement between producers and schools created a barrier to [the] Farm to School program.

- Ben: “Sometimes the sizing is wrong. Most schools want a 100 or 125 size orange. It’s a count. It’s how many in the box. Well, if the fruit’s running large, what they’re [farmers] picking at the certain, like they’re running 88 or 72, like the big old things you see in the store? That won’t work for the schools, now with the federal guidelines it has to be so much, the half cup serving.”
- Will: “A lot of the farmers, they will talk in bushels and half bushels and they don’t understand what’s required from say, the schools. You know, the schools don’t understand bushels, they don’t understand certain weights. What they understand is per portion costs.”

Successful Components of the Farm to School Program

Distributors were asked what had been helpful while participating in the Farm to School Program. One of the distributors repeatedly mentioned the state commissioner of agriculture.

The State Commissioner of Agriculture

- Ben: “He’s the state Agricultural Commissioner. He oversees everything agriculture, [his team members] have done a great job of putting a lot of information and getting a lot of educational things out there. And they’ve got a lot of things lined up to help promote the program going forward.”
- Ben: “They (Commissioner of Agriculture’s team members) will probably be a wealth of information for you...because they’re very supportive and this program has a lot of merit and we’re backing it a hundred percent, here at my business.”

Enhancing the Farm to School Program

Distributors were asked about their recommendations to enhance the Farm to School Program. Common themes included providing more money (to producers and school districts), increasing knowledge of the Farm to School Program among producers, developing a procurement system, collaborative effort, and guaranteed sale to producers.

More Monetary Incentive

Distributors discussed that monetary incentive was needed to enhance the program.

- Ben: “I hate to keep sounding like a broken record, but it’s all about money. They [producers] are getting ‘X’ amount of dollars to send it out of state, so they have no reason to sell it locally at a lower amount and make less. Now, if they were to make even the same money, I’m sure they’d sell it locally.”
- Will: “The schools have to work on a very limited budget, pennies per student. So if you gave them [school districts] an incentive, some type of [monetary] incentive, it would really help the program.”

Increasing Producers’ Knowledge of Food Safety

One of the distributors repeatedly talked about the necessity of increasing knowledge of food safety.

- Ben: “Increase the knowledge and get it out there to the smaller independent farmer. Because they’re growing it, and they think they can sell it to a local distributor to work in the school program. If they’re spraying pesticides you have to have checks and rechecks and the list is as long as my arm. You have to protect where it’s going, you can’t just [say] ‘Okay, let’s just send it down the road.’ You can’t do that.”
- Ben: “The biggest misleading problem is that everybody’s like, ‘Oh, I can grow some...I have 50 acres that my grandfather left me [and] I can grow whatever and I can sell it to the school board.’ It doesn’t play, because it’s the number one, most important thing we have [is] food safety, have to have it.”

Developing a Procurement System

One of the distributors repeatedly discussed that it is necessary to develop a procurement system in order to enhance the Farm to School Program.

- Will: “What we want to do is we wanted to have pretty much a one stop shop for food service directors to be able to go onto a site to [and] show them [food service directors or school district] what products are available. Something very consolidated... something very simple.”
- Will: “We wanted to do a procurement system. The idea is pretty much a one stop shop for any food service director, any school district, to go onto the website to have access to any of the farms, locations, and just make pretty much a web portal for local...Florida local products.”

Collaborative Effort

One of the distributors repeatedly mentioned the Farm to School Program could be improved through collaborative efforts.

- Will: “I think a lot of it is just getting more of a collaborative effort on the whole process.”
- Will: “We’d love to help work with them, help promote it, and we’d like to just get all this stuff out there, but I think there has to be some type of way to link everybody together.”

Guaranteed Sale to Producers

Distributors discussed the importance of guaranteed sales to producers as an enhancement to the program.

- Will: “They’re [Producers are] taking a gamble because if they’re going to commit their land to certain crops, they’re basing it off of what they’re hoping someone’s going to buy. And the thing is, there are incentives in place for them that they have some type of assurances that the products they are going to grow are going to be sold. It takes a lot of the gambling or guesswork out of what they do.”
- Ben: “A guaranteed sale. That’s what the growers are looking for. They want hard numbers. That’s why we’re working right now...we’re providing information to the state office about the last five months [and] what our counties that we provide to are buying.”

Food Service Directors

School food service directors are responsible for handling food procurement and program delivery. They play an important role in the Farm to School Program. Five interviews were conducted with seven food service directors and staff. In the southern region, one food service director and two staff members were interviewed together; other interviews were conducted with only one food service director. Table 4 provided descriptions of food service directors and staff who participated the interviews.

Table 4. Descriptions of Food Service Directors

Pseudonym	Sex	Location	Number of Students in District	Program status
Janet	Female	South Central	200,000	Participating
Lulu	Female	South Central	43,000	Participating
Angie	Female	North West	34,000	Participating
Emma	Female	North East	9,500	Participating
Stacy	Female	Alachua County	—	Participating
Tiffany				
Becky	Female	South	181,000	Participating
Halley				

*Tiffany, Becky, and Halley were all from the same school district.

Definition of Local Food

Food service directors discussed how they would define local food. Many of them defined local food as food from Florida.

- Tiffany: “Local food would be starting off in Palm Beach County and then it would spread out to the state of Florida, if we weren’t able to get the food in Palm Beach County.”
- Janet: “I think for us in Florida especially...I think local can be the entire state.”

Benefits of the Farm to School Program

Food service directors were asked what the benefits of the Farm to School Program were. They discussed that the Farm to School Program provided educational opportunities for children, supported the local economy, and provided positive public image for the schools.

Educational Opportunities

Food service directors discussed that the Farm to School Program provides opportunities to educate school children about agriculture.

- Emma: “The educational component of it [is a benefit]. For school children, making that connection that what’s on their plate was, you know, grown in Florida or nearby, and this is what it took to do it. They don’t all come with that connection these days.”

- Janet: “I think it really helps relate a child to where the food came from and it is not out of a bag. It is fresh. We know that many of our student customers never see fresh produce at home. We know that it is something that they would never experience perhaps elsewhere. So, schools might be the only place they ever see anything fresh.”

Supports the Local Economy

Food service directors mentioned the Farm to School Program supports the local economy.

- Angie: “It [The Farm to School Program] supports the local economy.”
- Haley: “Supporting our economy is also very critical and very beneficial. Since we started Farm to School, you know, with like RC Hatton, they employed quite a bit of new employees during that time.”
- Stacy: “We [The Farm to School Program] might be able to help... keeping money in the local economy, just seems like a general good.”

Positive Public Image

Food service directors discussed the Farm to School Program provided positive public image for the schools.

- Janet: “Our [farm to school] program was built on working with farmers.... We [Food service directors and schools] also think they [farmers] enhance our program from a public image [perspective]. We can tell parents that we are serving fresh green beans, corn on the cob, and strawberry shortcake. And it has a very homemade, locally grown kind of feel to it that is very in touch with the way the whole culinary scene is going.”
- Haley: “It [The Farm to School Program] changes the perception [of food services in schools] in a different way. Because the perception of school food service has been really in the old ages where people just think we serve from a can and we open a bag...and it just makes it more of an opportunity for us to market and recognize that these kids are gonna be eating things that are whole and are just better for their health overall.”

Barriers of the Farm to School Program

Food service directors were asked what barriers were associated with the Farm to School Program. The barriers included the cost of local food, difficulties associated with training staff, challenges in planning menus, the perishability of fresh food, and stakeholder’s lack of knowledge about how to conduct business with schools.

Cost of Local Food

Food service directors discussed that local food cost more.

- Janet: “I have got to balance it with cost. Fresh green beans are about 32 cents a portion...my commodity frozen green beans are around nine cents.”
- Becky: “It’s one of those things that when we evaluate the cost of the fresh produce, it’s much more expensive than a like item that is frozen...or if we were going to do canned, which we don’t if we use a vegetable that is frozen. But cost is a huge barrier.”

Children’s Food Preferences

Food service directors discussed that children did not always like the fresh food provided to them.

- Stacy: “The kids in general, like just like all of us, we’re used to fast food and junk food and that’s a huge barrier is even getting kids to want to choose a vegetable. You know, we can bring them in, but they’re going to choose the Cheetos any day.”

- Madonna “They [the students] don’t want anything else and maybe a bag of chips, and they’re happy, of course with the sauce.... The students don’t welcome, you know, meal patterns.”

Lack of Kitchen Facilities and Staff Kitchen skills

Food service directors discussed that some schools lack kitchen facilities, and some schools kitchen staff lack kitchen skills.

- Stacy: “Another barrier is the cafeterias, you know, [lack of] equipment in the cafeterias, staff training and abilities to process food.”
- Janet: “You have to prepare your staff, back to your staff in the kitchen that is going to be handling more fresh produce. They need to be prepared, prepared on how to handle it. There are all sorts of little things.”

Difficult to Train Staff

Food service directors discussed that it was difficult to do staff trainings.

- Lulu: “It’s very difficult to train the cashier. It’s difficult to train the children. It’s a very complex program the way they’ve got it set up right now. And I think it’s a little too complex.”
- Angie: “I really have a big training issue. I’m trying to train people because you can say it, say it, say it, but I’ve got to put them in different context where they realize that I really mean what I’m saying. And that we have to do this because this is regulatory and they’ve got to do it.”

Menu Planning

Food service directors discussed the issues they face when planning and creating menus.

- Emma: “In a smaller district such as ours, I have just two high schools, but they can be very different in what they like. They like something at our school, but they don’t like it over here at this other school. But we write one menu [because we] can’t have different [menus]. [I’ve] got nine elementary schools and they’re all on the same menu. I’m not going to have four different menus.”
- Angie: “When the one mushroom farmer was asking, ‘Will you buy my mushrooms?’ I’m going, ‘I don’t need mushrooms. I don’t have mushrooms on my menu. It’s not something that kids will eat.’”

Distribution

Food service directors discussed that it was difficult finding distributors who were willing to source local produce to local schools.

- Stacy: “we have a limited number of distributors in this area who would serve the schools and of those, no one is really onboard with the Farm to School local stuff yet. So that’s been really tough.”
- Lulu: “The big problem has been that the current produce distributors in Florida are unwilling to break their cycle, how they’ve done business for so many years. And what that cycle is, is they ship the product from [a local city], which is right here in [County], for example, to New York City to a distribution facility there and then it goes out across the United States.”

Fresh Food is More Perishable

Food service directors discussed that fresh food was more perishable.

- Tiffany: “[The] shelf life [for fresh food is short], obviously. If you are looking at frozen [food] you can keep that...you can store that for a long time. Fresh you can’t, but there are so many more benefits to the fresh.”

- Lulu: “When you’re dealing with produce, the big challenge is you’ve got to get it and you’ve got to get it out to the schools in a timely manner, or it’s rotten.”

Stakeholders Lack Knowledge of School Business

Food service directors discussed that farmers and other stakeholders lack knowledge of how schools do business.

- Haley: “But the relationships with that [stakeholders] was through meetings, conversations, and discussion and sometimes even clarifying our responsibilities, and our capabilities because sometimes other stakeholders may think, ‘Oh, they’re just not participatory of this process,’ but they don’t understand our business.”
- Lulu: “It’s making contact with the local farmers which is not so easy because the local farmers don’t know how we do business. We don’t know who they are. What we did is we put out media, press releases and I had a lot of local farmers call me and contact me.”

Limited Interaction with Farmers

Some school Food service directors mentioned that they did not directly work with farmers.

- Angie: “I don’t really deal with any farmers directly. I do most of my business with distributors.”
- Emma: “Not directly [working with farmers], no.”

Programs Incorporated into Farm to School

Food service directors were asked how other established programs were incorporated into the Farm to School Program. Food service directors discussed they used fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, Healthier US School Challenge, and Fuel Up to Play 60.

Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program

Food service directors discussed how they incorporated [the] Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program into their Farm to School program.

- Angie: “We have that Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program.... We do try to promote through that Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. We do signage when we have little signs that promote the greens from Marianna and the Satsumas that we get so that the kids know that we are buying local. So [we use] posters, you know, signage because we want parents to know. Whenever we talk about our menus, we do always say that we try to purchase locally as much as possible.”
- Emma: “We do the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program this year at two sites, both elementary schools, and I’ve applied for three elementary schools for next year. We’re expecting... waiting till late June to hear the results of that. I’m hoping we get to add one more school.”

Healthier US School Challenge (HUSSC)

Food service directors discussed how they incorporated HUSSC into their Farm to School program.

- Lulu: “We had six schools win the gold, Healthier US School Challenge. And we actually have a University of Florida Extension person who’s working with us to write the [grant], because it’s very time consuming to write the grant.”
- Haley: “We have really a handful of schools that have received just the bronze, actually two bronze and one that is gold and silver. We’re in the process of looking at more elementary schools for this award. But in the design, when

you're doing the inventory or the completion of the application, there is an area of school meals and you have to design like two weeks of your menu by incorporating it."

Fuel Up to Play 60

Food service directors mentioned that they incorporated Fuel Up to Play 60 into their farm to school programs.

- Angie: "I think a lot of our elementary schools now really are promoting healthy eating and we have a number that are working towards programs like Fuel Up To Play 60 or the Healthier US Schools [and] Generation or the Alliance for a Healthier Generation."
- Lulu: "We're doing Fuel Up to Play 60."

The Role of Food Service Directors in the Farm to School Program

Food service directors discussed what their roles were in the Farm to School Program. They frequently mentioned their roles as communicating and creating school menus.

Communicating

Food service directors discussed their role as communicating about the Farm to School Program.

- Lulu: "What I've been doing is recommending people go through one of the regional coordinators [Farm to School Regional Coordinators] for the state of Florida in my region who's working on Farm to School. So, I've been putting people in touch with him, like on opportunity buys. And I've given his contact information to this one grower that I was just talking to on the phone and left a message for."
- Janet: "I think on some of our communications and our social media, we again, send out info on our Farm to School initiatives such as we have [done on our] Twitter feed that goes out every day and you can subscribe to that. We have Facebook... a Facebook page. We have done really well with our website. We also have a partnership with Radio Disney. And every day during drive time, twice a day, they do a promo for us."

Creating School Menus and Materials

Food service directors discussed their role creating school menus in the Farm to School Program as well as supporting documents and materials.

- Lulu: "We set all the menus here and we also do summer school."
- Angie: "Between our central kitchen manager and Eli and I, we sit and we plan the menus. Of course regulation drives the menus, but we also are looking and sometimes we're not real specific on our menus, we'll say mixed fruit or fresh fruit."
- Stacy: "Right now it's more of an advisory type role. They [schools] are looking to me to provide a packet of food safety information, which I will do. And we're developing a packet that, just like if you want to start a school garden with things that will grow in the garden and when to start."
- Angie: "We give them [students] activity sheets and knowledge sheets and things that explain what they're eating and where it comes from and so there's an educational component to it."

Successful Farm to School Programs

Food service directors were asked to think about one school district or school that is successful and describe what made it successful. When describing successful programs, food service directors mentioned Florida's location, effectively communicating with children, and having a supportive staff contributing to the success of the program.

Location of Florida

Food service directors discussed that the location of Florida is important for the success of the Farm to School Program.

- Angie: “I think we’re so lucky we’re in Florida and that we have the items available. There are places that are never going to be able to accomplish what we are because they don’t have the opportunity to get those products.”
- Lulu: “We live in Florida. It’s the perfect place for Farm to School...just like [in] Arizona, California, and our state. [Although,]I think our state’s the best.”

Effectively Communicating with Children

Food service directors discussed that effectively communicating with children was important for a successful farm to school program.

- Janet: “I think the presentation of the products have to be absolutely great. One thing we do is our chef sends out a template on how everything is supposed to be set up in the hot wells. And guess what is first, in front of the kids?...the fresh green beans. So, that is what they are gonna see, the green beans, the okra gumbo, the black beans, [and] the brown rice. They are gonna see those things right up here [in the] front. So, he sends them something on how to set it up to encourage kids to pick it up.”
- Emma: “It’s more of communicating to them [the students] what these items [vegetables or fruits] are and that’s why I say posters help. I have a chef that we’re always getting weird stuff for.... she’s the typical chef who thinks out of the box. We let the kids know and they, especially the elementary, are so much more likely to try things. And if we can train all of these elementary kids, then maybe when they get to middle school they’ll continue to eat it.”

Supportive Staff

Food service directors discussed having a supportive and passionate staff contributes to a successful farm to school program.

- Lulu: “I now have a dedicated dietician on staff. I can’t believe I finally got a position. [Name block] is my dietician. I’m a dietician also, but now I’ve got somebody who can help take some of that off my back.”
- Emma: “The teacher that’s running the school garden at the middle school, that his students, [and] when they’ve worked with the school garden and then they have a product, I mean, there’s excitement about that. And I think that if there was that product on a menu, it’s like showing off your art work or you got an ‘A’ on this report, you know, that you work towards that product and there it is and everybody’s enjoying it and there’s much happiness.”

Enhancing the Farm to School Program

Food service directors were asked what could be done to enhance the Farm to School Program in their county or school districts. Food service directors discussed improving the support from local distributors, improving communication between Farm to School stakeholders, and educating farmers on school businesses.

Increasing Support from Local Distributors

Food service directors discussed increasing support from local distributors would enhance the Farm to School Program.

- Janet: “We are always talking to them [distributors]. We wish that we could get more distributors interested in the school food business. I wish more of the produce vendors would see us a viable business segment that they want to compete for and that it is something that could be steady business for them.”

- Lulu: “If we find a good opportunity buy, conceivably they [distributors] could take that product to one of the major produce houses located someplace else. And since their trucks are already out around the state of Florida, they could stop at a farm and pick up a load of strawberries or blueberries or a load of green beans, or corn on the cob, or whatever it is. So, we’re hoping one of those distributors...and with our cold chain management system language that we put into our bid...only those large distributors that have that in place, which is really essential to getting a good quality product, all of those companies have their trucks going out all over the state. So, I think I’m going to be able to solve the distribution problem.”

Improved Communication between Farm to School Stakeholders

Food service directors discussed that the communication among individuals working in the Farm to School Program needs to be improved.

- Angie: “Maybe the communication between all of us [needs to be enhanced]. And again, it’s very important not to leave [the distributor, name block] out because he’s the middleman here, really. And I don’t want to deal really directly with the farmers, so he’s the one to make sure that the produce has been grown properly and been handled properly. ...and anything I can get from him, I’m assured that, you know, that it’s clean and that it’s good and I don’t have to deal with that. I’ve got enough to deal with. I don’t want to have to deal with that.”
- Lulu: “Perhaps, if it wasn’t me [but instead] someone else, doing one-on-one [conversation] with the distributor that I’m using for produce [it would be helpful.]”

Educate Farmers on School Businesses

Food service directors discussed that farmers needed to be educated about how school businesses work to enhance the Farm to School Program.

- Lulu: “[We need to be] putting together Farm to School meetings and inviting local growers to educate them on how we do business and how we need them to do business. Trying to learn as much as possible from those meetings, and like I said, I have not come away from one of those meetings where I have not learned a ton of information.”
- Becky: “I think education to the farmers and in different terms of how school business works [would be helpful]. Because when they fill out a bid, they’re afraid that they’re going to be held to that bid and if their product doesn’t produce the way that they think it’s going to, they feel like they’re going to be penalized. And so I think, too, getting them familiarized with how school business works and how the contracts are set up would be helpful, too. Because I know that I’ve talked to a couple farmers and our bid [which is] 30 pages long, they’re like, ‘We don’t even know where to start. Like we don’t have anybody that does bids.’ You know, so that’s a scary process for them to go through.”

Other Farm to School Topics

Food service directors discussed other topics related to the Farm to School Program including the importance of food safety, the importance of seasonality and availability, and the procurement process.

Food Safety is Important

Food service directors discussed food safety as a critical factor in the Farm to School Program.

- Angie: “We definitely have to be very careful about the quality and the safety of the product we get, because God forbid that a child get sick because they had a melon that had *E. Coli* on it. I think that’s the biggest scare for any food service director is having a food borne illness outbreak in a school.”

- Lulu: “It’s critical. That’s why all of our growers have to be GAP certified which is Good Agricultural Practices certified and are basically, you know, cleared as far as their audits. We don’t do business with any farmers that are not GAP certified and that’s one thing that I think the state’s working on is trying to get more small farmers GAP certified.”

Seasonality and Availability is Important to Consider

Food service directors discussed that seasonality and availability were important factors to consider when purchasing local food.

- Angie: “Availability [is important]. And for distributors, it’s availability. The only thing I buy direct from farmers are Satsumas. And it’s just...I did it last year and I’ve done it this year. The last two years we have done that and it’s easier for us just to bring them [the Satsumas] in and transport them ourselves...cheaper for us to do that. We have like a three month time period where they’re available and so we’re able to pretty much buy whatever they can get us.”
- Janet: “You have just got to look, of course, at season and availability. So, we obviously go by seasons a lot. To be honest, at the first of the school year, in August, there is not a lot of Florida seasonal produce available. August [and] September [are] not real good months. Then you start maybe picking up on okra and cucumbers and some other things and then it continues to get better. So, it certainly has been a seasonal issue.”

Procurement Process

Food service directors discussed their local food procurement process. Some food service directors stated that their local food was purchased through bidding while some food service directors stated they did not use bidding.

- Angie: “I don’t have to [use bidding] with produce. [The distributor, name block] is the main dealer here in town [and] he’s the only one really that can handle what we need.”
- Janet: “Everything is on a bid and in this particular bid we have what is called a ‘cost plus fixed fee.’”

Taste Testing

Food service directors discussed that taste testing was effective to encourage students to eat fresh food.

- Stacy: “I think the taste testing is really helpful too. With the unfamiliar food that the kids have had a chance to taste it beforehand, [they get excited on] the day they get to actually have the salad that they tasted.”
- Lulu: “We send different products in for taste testing.... It’s educating them [students] at a very young age [about] fresh fruits and vegetables and [to] snack on these items. Because that’s when they’re forming their taste buds for the rest of their life. You know, it’s educating them at a young age that this is something tasty, that this is something that’s good for them, that this is something they should want to eat.”

Teachers

Two teachers that work in schools participating in the Farm to School Program were interviewed. These teachers work closely in the school garden and teach children about agriculture. See descriptions of the teachers in Table 5.

Table 5. Descriptions of Teachers

Pseudonym	Sex	Location	Responsibilities associated with the Farm to School Program	Program status
Lily	Female	South Central	Building and maintaining school garden; teach children about agriculture	Participating
Holly	Female	North East	Incorporate school gardens as part as her curriculum in her high school environmental science	Participating

Creating Educational Opportunities for Students

The teachers discussed that school gardens provided educational opportunities for students.

- Holly: “The population of students that I teach are the kids that tend to drop out more. They are the average to low group that are less engaged in school anyway and one of their problems is seeing how school connects to the real world. This way [through the school garden] they are getting outside, it is practical and hands on, they are getting their blood moving, [and] it is a break in the day.... I would hope that in ten years when their lives are different they look back and see it as a positive moment and think, oh I could grow food [because] I have done it before.”
- Lily: “Even the jobs that I didn’t think kids would like, like the preparing of the soil or cleaning up the beds before things can be planted [or] ripping out the old plants that have finished producing and things like that...To me, those don’t seem like fun activities, but then when I ask a class to do it they are very excited. And then just the learning that goes beyond it, like the insects and the bugs...you’ll notice some [students] will participate and then they’ve kind of had enough, but then there’s others who you don’t see much life from in the classroom and then they’re out there and they’re like all covered in dirt having the best time, so it’s just I like that, it’s fun.”
- Lily: “Our Master Gardeners will do lessons...they’ll come in and do lessons. And we had...it’s called the ‘Veggie Face Lesson’ and so they bring a bunch of veggies in. Some that we have in our garden and some that we don’t. And the kids have a piece of paper with a face outline and then they get to like make their face [with the veggies] and everything so then, you know, they learn about the fruits and the vegetables in a different way.”
- Lily: “I know our younger students do like health and nutrition classes. I’m not sure if that’s part of the program as well. I know we have two ladies that come in and do that for our classrooms, so they’re teaching about the healthy plates and like what the food groups are and what goes into that.... I do the school garden and incorporate that as much as possible and then we have our Master Gardeners who work with us.”
- Holly: “Mainly the soil testing that is the big one. They [students] do some research on how stuff grows in Florida like what grows when and a little bit of like crop research but mostly testing soil for nutrients and the rest is learning as you go when stuff comes up.”

Maintaining the School Gardens

The teachers discussed the time and effort required to maintain their school garden.

- Lily: “For me, as the teacher, [the barrier is] just having enough time outside of the classroom requirements to squeeze in the work, the maintaining it. We just take class time and so instead of teaching a certain lesson, we are going to spend time out in the garden.”
- Holly: “The barriers would be that they [teachers] do more work but they don’t seem to mind it. It could be more work with cleaning and chopping. There is the whole...you have to be willing to do stuff when it comes ...the planning.”
- Lily: “I have the responsibility of keeping the garden up.”
- Holly: “I basically built the beds myself from school money. For starters had an old shed in place and have been gradually adding on more tools each year. This year I got the new shed (from Lowes grant)...it is a ten year process.”

Barriers

Teachers discussed the barrier that some students were not excited about some elements of the school garden such as getting dirty and under hot sun.

- Holly: “I have bigger classes for one and I am teaching kids that are juniors and seniors and it is way harder to get them excited about dirt as opposed to elementary school [kids] ...my kids are going to be like ‘Ew, I don’t want to get dirty!’”
- Lily: “There are some students who would prefer not to get dirty, they don’t want to put their hands in the dirt. Depending on when we visit the garden, they might not necessarily want to be out in the hot sun, so some of the climate or like the environmental factors might play into a role of them not liking it.”

Extension Agents

Extension agents who were interviewed are members of the Florida Cooperative Extension Service. Extension agents have a three-way partnership of federal, state, and local governments, and represent the USDA, the University of Florida, and Boards of County Commissioners, respectively.

In Florida, conducting agriculture programs is one of the responsibilities of state and county Extension faculty. The Farm to School Program is one of the programs that fall under the responsibilities of some Extension agents. Table 6 provided the description of the extension agents who were interviewed.

Table 6. Descriptions of Extension Agents

Pseudonym	Sex	Location
April	Female	Northwest
Bill	Male	South Central
Carrie	Male	South
Gloria	Female	Central
Ronald	Male	South Central

Defining Local Food

Extension agents were asked how they defined local food. Extension agents primarily defined local food as food grown or produced within the State of Florida. Other definitions extension agents offered were food grown or produced within 100 miles, 250 miles, or from surrounding counties.

In the State of Florida

Some extension agents defined local food as food within the State of Florida.

- Gloria: “[Food that is] grown in Florida”
- Bill: “The industry has pretty much been defining it as, you know, within the same state or 250 miles or something like that.”

Varying Definitions

Extension agents offered varying definitions when they discussed the definition of local food.

- Bill: “I would think you would try to get surrounding counties, but it’s probably going to be within the state or even, possibly beyond.”
- Carrie: “It [the definition of local food] varies. I certainly have seen where 400 miles is considered local foods. This time of year, almost any produce would be from south Florida, Palm Beach County in particular.”

Benefits of the Farm to School Program

Extension agents were asked what benefits the Farm to School Program offered. Extension agents discussed the benefits of the program as providing an additional market for producers, providing good publicity for producers, providing good nutrition for children, providing educational programming about agriculture, and supporting the local economy.

Providing an Outlet for Producers

Extension agents discussed that the Farm to School Program benefited local producers because it provided them with another market outlet.

- April: “[Selling to the school] is another outlet for them [producers] to get their product out. That is the biggest benefit if it does come to fruition...it is just another outlet.”
- Carrie: “I think the incentives [of the Farm to School Program] just are the fact that it’s a fairly large market, if the price point works... if the economics work.”

Good Public Image for Producers

Extension agents also discussed that the Farm to School Program provided a positive public image for participating producers.

- Ronald: “They [producers] get a lot of satisfaction [from] getting recognition for one thing...[the] more public knows that they are a commercial farmer in their community and that they’re part of a program that brings Florida grown food to the children of the community...it means a lot. They’re very community oriented people.”
- Bill: “Some of our larger farmers have been participating and I think more would like to [participate in this program]. They like the positive publicity. A lot of these larger farmers...they’re always getting bad publicity about using chemicals or abusing labor or harming the environment. So, anything they can get on the positive side helps them.”

Good Nutrition for Children

Extension agents discussed that the Farm to School Program provided nutritious food to children.

- Ronald: “I think by and large, talking about the importance of good nutrition for learning, for behavior, and health, of course. And that’s primary.”
- Bill: “[It is] fresher, healthier food for students”

Providing Agriculture Education

Extension agents discussed that the Farm to School Program provided educational programming about agriculture to children and others.

- Gloria: “[The benefit of the Farm to School Program is to] inform the kids about what the different things are going to be [on] the school lunch menus and give them a little bit of background info on it. So, in a way, educate the kids too. Because without having that kind of a thing going on, usually it is hard for kids to eat something new immediately.”
- Ronald: “Obviously it [the Farm to School Program] helps children and parents know where their food comes from. So they understand the importance as citizens that we need to have public policy that supports our farmers as well as theme parks and highways and everything.”

Supporting Local Economy

Extension agents also identified one of the benefits of the Farm to School Program is supporting the local economy.

- Gloria: “One of the main benefits is a lot of the food dollars that are spent for procuring food are now going back into the community, for instance, or [back] into the state instead of us having to send that money out of the state.”
- Ronald: “[Something] I am very interested [in] documenting more and more is the economic benefits to the local economy. I think that obviously everybody’s focused on the economy and job creation and everything, and that’s a huge opportunity with Farm to School.”

Barriers of the Farm to School Program

Extension agents were asked what barriers existed when implementing the Farm to School Program. The barriers identified by Extension agents could be put into three categories: barriers for producers, barriers for schools, and other barriers. Barriers for producers included difficulty for producers to change practices, lack of facilities, and the program’s lack of profitability. Barriers for schools included insufficient time and labor at schools, lack of school facilities, and schools’ lack of money. Other barriers included seasonality and communication problems between schools and producers.

Barriers for Producers

Extension agents discussed the barriers producers faced when participating in the Farm to School Program. Extension agents identified difficulties in changing practices, lack of facilities, and the program’s lack of profitability as barriers.

Difficulties with Changing Practices

Extension agents discussed that it was difficult for producers to change their production practices to meet the Farm to School Program guidelines.

- Ronald: “At the beginning we were told to try to convince farmers that this kind of program [the Farm to School Program] is an example of risk management for them. That it was a more secure market that they could count on selling their food as opposed to the typical marketing system now, [where] some years they can make lots of money and many years they don’t make any money. What’s interesting is that the strategy to try to convince farmers didn’t quite work as well as I thought it would. The farmers I’ve met and talked to, even though they lose money many years, when they make money they make lots of money and they like that.”
- Bill: “Another big factor that I see is the farmers themselves...the motivation for the farmers. Most of our farmers are quite large and we have individual farm businesses. They may be selling 100 semi loads of product a week...some even more. The entire school system might take one a month, maybe. So, for them to change their practices to accommodate that business...it’s not very interesting to many of them.”

Lack of Facilities

Extension agents discussed the lack of packing and processing facilities created barriers for farmers participating in the Farm to School Program.

- Carrie: “I think they [producers] know that if they were to try it out for a year on a small scale, they would lose money. It has to be on a large enough scale that they’ll make money. And some are not willing to take that risk. I think it also depends upon whether growers have their own packing house or whether it needs to be packed from somewhere else.”
- Ronald: “They [Farmers] don’t have these [processing and packing] facilities...they don’t have these capacities. They’re used to filling up a semi-truck, selling it to a broker, and then it’s off their hands. And now it’s the responsibility of the broker to get them to the next step of the food chain and that’s holding most of them back. ”

Lack of Profitability

Extension agents discussed the lack of profitability for producers when selling produce to schools.

- April: “The demand for locally grown produce is so big, like at farmer’s markets and stuff. People want that, and they will pay a premium, [but] schools can’t pay a premium for [it]. We don’t have a lot of huge growers here, so I am not so sure that it’s going to be a real money making venture for most of the smaller growers that we have.”
- Ronald: “I teach classes to people that want to become farmers and ranchers. Now, these people won’t have a whole lot of land, [but] they may be interested in something like Farm to School. I definitely tell them about Farm to School, but when I tell them the prices that they would get to sell to Farm to School compared to the prices they would get selling at the farmer’s market, or to a restaurant, there’s no comparison. They would go broke. They can’t afford to sell to Farm to School because Farm to School can’t afford to pay that much.”

Barriers for Schools

Extension agents discussed the barriers schools faced when participating in the Farm to School Program.

Insufficient Time and Labor

Extension agents discussed a lack of time and labor causing barriers for schools to participate in the Farm to School Program.

- April: “Unless you [schools] have dedicated volunteers and a super ultra-dedicated teacher to really kind of work with that [school gardens hard to maintain]. I mean, I have seen a lot of school gardens [where] if the teacher who was doing it left [it is hard to replace them]...and you hear teachers say, ‘Oh, we are just so busy.’ And they are busy. It’s another lab though, I mean, I think that a school garden is really a living lab.”
- Bill: “They [schools] don’t have the labor to chop and dice and peel and clean. If they’re buying carrots, they want the baby carrots already peeled in smaller packages so that if they’re feeding 200 children they can take 20, one-pound packages and put into a salad. Or if they’re preparing corn, they don’t want a 50-pound crate of corn that [where they] have to shuck the leaves off and cut the ends off and break in half, they want the cobbettes. And again, maybe 25 in a package so they...again feeding 200 kids...25 in a packet... they take eight packets and dump [them] in boiling water... it minimizes their labor. And, they don’t have a lot of labor, so they have to do that. So, that’s been a big impediment.”

Lack of Facilities

Extension agents also discussed the lack of facilities at school districts as one of the barriers when participating in [the] Farm to School program.

- Ronald: “Here you [farmers] have to be able to deliver to the individual schools, [and] the school district doesn’t have a centralized distribution center of their own. Well, that’s pretty tough to do. You gotta have personnel, you gotta have trucks, and you gotta have time to make all those deliveries as opposed to being able to take it to one central location.”
- Bill: “A school storage space is probably limited. So, the school can’t take 200 boxes of tomatoes at the beginning of the month because they have no way to keep those. So, they have to get five boxes on a Monday, five on a Wednesday, and five on a Friday.”

Lack of Funding

Extension agents discussed that schools do not have enough money to pay more competitive rates to producers because of limited funding.

- Gloria: “They [Schools] are limited on their budget. And if you ask anyone, they will tell you it is like a dollar [and a] few cents that they have for one of the meals to supply for the school kids. So, they are limited on their budget side of things.”
- Bill: “I’ve sat with these directors [and] the amount of money that they have per lunch is quite small. It’s a dollar and a quarter, or something in that vicinity. And when you take out labor and protein, the amount of money left for fruits and vegetables is something like 25 cents or 30 cents per child, [per] day.”

Other Barriers

Extension agents also discussed seasonality and the lack of communication between schools and producers as barriers to the Farm to School Program.

Seasonality

Extension agents discussed the seasonality of fruits and vegetables impacting the program.

- April: “[The barriers are] having the product available, knowing what product is available, [and] getting it harvested and cooled down and to a distributor. The growing season is a big issue for us because a lot of the things that you think about trying to get kids to eat are available in May, June, [and] July.”
- Bill: “Another big impediment is seasonality. If you’re feeding school children, there are certain things that you almost have to have every week. Maybe potatoes, for instance, or carrots or apples. We don’t grow carrots and apples, so they’re going to come from always...almost always...from elsewhere.”

Lack of Communication between Schools and Producers

Extension agents discussed the lack of communication between schools and producers having a negative impact on the Farm to School Program.

- Bill: “I know a lot of these farms they will... for instance a farm in Florida that starts planting in August, they should be talking with the people they’re going to sell to in June. In the case of the schools, it would be the school food service directors who in June are probably thinking about summer vacation. But, they should be thinking about, this is what I’m going to need every month, and get that information to the local farm, so they can say, ‘Okay, I’m going to plan on meeting a portion of that demand or all of that demand.’”
- Ronald: “I have to educate the farmer about the school cafeteria and I have to educate the school cafeteria staff about the farmers because they don’t understand each other’s’ worlds. So a farmer may get upset that he can’t sell what he grows because he can’t cut it [and] package it, the way that they need to receive it at the school cafeteria because he has never gone to see a school cafeteria. Same way with the school cafeteria cooks.”

Food Safety

Extension agents were asked to discuss how food safety played a role in the Farm to School Program. Extension agents discussed the importance of food safety and the food safety certification program.

The Importance of Food Safety

Extension agents discussed the importance of food safety in the Farm to School Program.

- Gloria: “Making sure that you [the producers] follow the right production practices is really important.”
- Bill: “The worst thing that could happen in a program like this [the Farm to School Program] is if we got a bunch of children sick. It would kill the program forever.”

Food Safety Certification

Extension agents also discussed farmer's food safety certification and identified it as a barrier in the Farm to School Program.

- Gloria: "Another thing is the food safety certification. If they were required to [have] a rigorous third party audit, it can get expensive. They [the producers] are more scared of the whole concept too, I feel, because they probably do the right practices to begin with. So besides it being cost prohibitive, the amount of paperwork and record keeping involved tends to be really daunting....That's difficult, because oftentimes it is just your family members that work on the farm and maybe you just have one person that you hire, or two maximum."
- Bill: "It [Food safety] is an impediment. You know, some of the food safety, depending [on] the level, these large farms are spending tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of dollars on an annual basis. So, it presents a barrier to the small farmer."

The Role of Extension Agents in the Farm to School Program

Extension agents were asked to discuss what their roles were in the Farm to School Program. Extension agents discussed playing a role communicating to producers and educating farmers.

Communicate to Producers

Extension agents discussed communicating to producers as one of their roles in the Farm to School Program.

- Carrie: "I think our role is to certainly work with the school board, growers, [and] distributors to make them aware of it [the Farm to School Program] and to kind of foster those conversations."
- Bill: "One [role I play] is I have a newsletter, [on a] LISTSERV. I send things out every day. I promote the program through the LISTSERV by sending examples of programs that work in other areas of the country. I send information out to the growers about bids that might be coming up. I send information out on how to comply with food safety regulations. So, I send a lot of information to growers about the program."

Educate Farmers

Extension agents discussed that another role they play in Farm to School program is educating farmers.

- Gloria: "My responsibility primarily is to provide educational information for fruit, vegetable growers and the nuts, like pecans and all those. Also, the landscape industry and pest control, pest management industry and the nursery folks. So, I do a lot of educational programs for them."
- Carrie: "We worked with growers [and] with packing houses to determine, you know... first of all to educate them on the child-sized portion...that one cob is too much for elementary school children, where a half a cob is really what they need."

Elements of a Successful Farm to School Program

Extension agents were asked what makes [the] Farm to School programs in their counties successful. They discussed being passionate and developing personal relationships makes these programs successful.

Be Passionate

Extension agents discussed that being passionate makes [the] Farm to School programs successful.

- Carrie: "That particular farm does many things to benefit the community. So they have a huge philosophy of service to the community and they actually plant acreage that can be gleaned."

- Bill: “[Our food service director] in [County] is very dedicated and, you know, wants to support the local farmers. I think she feels it would be good publicity for the school system as well as for the local economy. Many of the students, especially from [City in that County], are the children of migrant workers, so she sees it as supporting their families as well.”

Personal Relationships

Extension agents also discussed that developing personal relationships make [the] Farm to School programs successful.

- Ronald: “My food service director...she was putting the names of the farms [on] the menu and trying to introduce a name and a face to the fact that this month we’re having strawberries or green beans or something like that. I think the same thing has to happen between the grower and the purchaser for the school district. There has to be a more of a personal relationship so that if you go visit their farm...”
- Bill: “I’ve been involved in the produce business since I graduated from college, even before I picked tomatoes to help put myself through college, so I know the business. A lot of it has to do with personal relationships.... [If] I’ve been doing business with you for many, many years and we’re good friends, you’ve gone to my daughter’s wedding and sometimes we go on vacation together, you’re going to help me get the eighteen dollars a box...I think it is going to take effort on all sides...the farmer’s side [the effort is] to get out there and make those personal relationships...maybe invite the food service director to see the farm [and]to see some of the things that the farmer has to deal with.”

Enhancing the Farm to School Program

Extension agents were asked what could be done to enhance the Farm to School Program. Extension agents discussed that the program could be enhanced by connecting farmers with distributors, having more conversations between schools and farmers, having networking meetings, providing more monetary incentives for farmers, and updating or modifying kitchen facilities.

Connecting Producers with Distributors

Extension agents discussed connecting growers and distributors as being a way to improve the Farm to School Program.

- Gloria: “[The Farm to School Program can be enhanced by] having more access to their [producers] distributors or having those relationships or contacts made. So saying, ‘XYZ Distributors,’ here is your day, [producers] come meet your distributors. Or making that contact information readily [available] to the growers and then giving them the assurance that the state is committed to this program and as long as you meet the criteria that you would have a contract with your distributors to buy the produce.”
- April: “If it helps them [producers] get with a distributor [it will be helpful for the program].... I am mostly worried about the farmer’s bottom line. I want them to make money. And if they get a connection with a distributor, that could help them make money.”

Conversations between Schools and Farmers

Extension agents discussed that increasing conversation between schools and farmers can enhance the Farm to School Program.

- Carrie: “Some of these contracts are put into place so that growers really need to plan 18 months ahead of what they need to make the decision...18 months ahead [about] whether they’re going to participate in this program or not, and then plan what they’re going to plant. So, having these conversations periodically allows them to keep

planning for the future and determining what are the markets currently for certain crops and how can they plan ahead to do that.”

- Ronald: “I know the distributor or someone like myself has the capacity to improve that communication a lot, because I was so surprised just how much when I brought the farmer to the school cafeteria...not only [did] they say, ‘I never knew what the situation was,’ they [also] said, ‘I want to do more of this. I want to meet the kids and I want them to meet me.’ And then when I took the staff to the farm it was the same way. ‘We never had any idea of what farming is like in Florida and we want to go as much as we can.’”

Networking Meetings

Extension agents also discussed that hosting networking meetings could be helpful for the Farm to School Program.

- Gloria: “Having those networking meetings [will be helpful]. Let’s say there is two or three distributors in our region that are doing this [and they have] different school districts that are buying directly [from them], for instance, bring those people [the distributors and school districts] into the room and then send out an invite to the growers and say, ‘Come meet them so you can build relationships, get your questions answered and move forward from here.’ In the end, we can give the information and if they choose to [use it] or not, that is up to them. But, I think, making sure that they are aware of it and have the right information is going to go a long way to making those contacts.”
- Carrie: “I think occasionally to have those meetings [will be helpful]. And it’s probably been almost a year, so we’re really due to do this again...to bring everyone to the table and see what some of the issues are and see if we can help to facilitate some of that. I think that’s a good role for Extension is really to be able to bring the parties together and say, ‘Here are our needs...how can this be helpful?’”

Monetary Incentives for Farmers

Extension agents discussed that providing monetary incentives for farmers will enhance the Farm to School Program.

- Gloria: “As long as they get a good price, I think that is incentive enough.”
- Ronald: “The incentives would be well, funding to provide these food hubs. And then the farmers don’t have to spend extra money out of their pocket to meet the criteria to deliver it. Some farmers are capable of doing that, but most of them are not going to be able to do it.”

Increase Distribution Facilities

Extension agents discussed that the Farm to School Program can be improved by having more facilities, such as food hubs or clearing houses, available for school districts and producers to utilize.

- Ronald: “I think it’s going to be the food hub infrastructure that can provide them [the] capacity to meet the criteria that the school districts ask for in their food.”
- Bill: “I’ve always thought that possibly through some of these projects that we could create some sort of clearing house or distributorship. You know, maybe creating jobs for some new entrepreneurs to almost exclusively source Florida product and do the preparation necessary to put it in a form that the schools need.”

Increase Kitchen Facilities

Extension agents discussed that setting up more school kitchen facilities could enhance the Farm to School Program.

- Carrie: “Maybe preparation, in terms of a variety of methods of preparation [can be improved]. [Food] preparation facilities also [need to be improved] because some schools have kitchens [and] others do not.”

- Bill: “They want the tomatoes diced. So, how are we going to do that? It means we have to rent or buy or set up a kitchen somehow...maybe there could be a project to help with that.”

The Future of the Farm to School Program

Extension agents were asked to discuss how they envision the Farm to School Program in the future. Extension agents discussed that they envisioned the program continuing to improve.

- Ronald: “I see it getting bigger and better. I have a Food Service Director here that really is committed to making it succeed. She’s done things I think that are above and beyond what other county Food Service Directors have done. I have more and more farmers, people that I meet, and people taking my courses that are interested in Farm to School. They would love to be part of it, if it could be viable for them. If a food hub could be set up so they don’t have the extra expense of processing the food [and] packaging it, they could get the money they need to be profitable...or if the food district could pay more.”
- Bill: “I think we’ll see that [the Farm to School Program] will increase as long as conditions and everything comes together that we’ve talked about to make it possible. I think the desire is there.”

Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS)

The Farm to School Program in the State of Florida is housed in the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, or FDACS. Two of the Florida Farm to School representatives were interviewed together. One was the Florida Farm to School State Lead, and the other was Bureau Chief who assisted the Florida Farm to School Program (see Table 7).

Table 7. Descriptions of FDACS Representatives

Pseudonym	Sex	Responsibilities associated with the Florida Farm to School
Anne	Female	State lead for the Florida Farm to School
Judy	Female	Bureau Chief, assisting Florida Farm to School

Defining Local Food

FDACS Farm to School representatives were asked to define local food in the Florida Farm to School Program.

- Anne: “I think it varies from person to person and from program to program. So, depending on what you’re looking for and what you want to either purchase or eat, then it could vary. So, here within our Department with a target of agriculture and our Farm to School Program, we consider local to be the state of Florida.”
- Judy: “And then also states that border or have our borders also. So Georgia [and] Alabama for those districts, school districts that are in the Panhandle especially, you know, if they’re on the very northern side of Florida, it’s maybe easier for them to get Georgia peaches and that could still be local to them.”

Benefits of the Farm to School Program

FDACS Farm to School representatives discussed the benefits of the Farm to School Program. They discussed the benefits for the public, for producers, and for the community.

For the Public

FDACS Farm to School representatives frequently mentioned the benefits of the program for the public. Benefits for the public include assisting the public in learning about agriculture, encouraging the public to farm, and influencing consumers to purchase local produce.

Learning about Agriculture

- Anne: “You’re learning more about your area, you’re learning more about agriculture, [and] you’re learning more about agriculture practices in terms of, you know, where your food comes from...you’re learning more about farmers in your area.”

Encouraging the Public to Farm

- Anne: “Hopefully we’re encouraging people to become farmers. I mean, we’ve seen, you know, statistics of the small farmers who are decreasing and more people that own family farms don’t really want their kids to continue into that business just because it’s not as profitable as it was once before.”

Influencing Consumers to Purchase Local Produce

- Anne: “I think we also want to sort of work to change the consumer buying trends in Florida so, you know, for people to go look for local foods, you know, when they’re in the grocery store to know more about where their food comes from [and] know who their farmer is, as the USDA says.”

For Producers

FDACS Farm to School representatives discussed the program benefiting small producers since the program provides an additional market.

- Anne: “When it comes to bidding time with a larger producer, maybe they [larger producers] can beat them [small producers] on the price. So, that’s sort of something difficult, but it’s something we can work with [the] schools [on]. So like, let’s say that a school is really interested in working with a small farmer or a diversified farm, in that instance then we can sort of work with their [school] contract and sort of say we’re only looking to procure foods from this size farm, and all that kind of stuff. So I mean, there’s ways that we can work around that to sort of help different kinds of farmers and stuff like that.

For Community

The benefits for the community discussed by FDACS Farm to School representatives included supporting the local economy and bringing the community together.

Supporting the Local Economy

- Judy: “We have our Fresh from Florida Program over in the Division of Marketing. So I think that the education and outreach that we’re providing to the kids, the parents, the students, and the teachers in the schools is [are] also helping market Florida products, in general, on a larger scale both in the state[and] out of the state. So, I think that that’s had a significant impact.”

Bringing the Community Together

- Anne: “It brings a sense of community together, especially when you start to incorporate school gardens. Everybody sort of working together to meet a common goal. A lot of teamwork when we talk about school gardens.”

Barriers of the Farm to School Program

FDACS Farm to School representatives discussed barriers associated with the Farm to School Program for schools, and FDACS.

For Schools

FDACS Farm to School representatives discussed barriers faced by schools when implementing the Farm to School Program, including conforming to food service regulations, not understanding contract terminology, and challenges in finding distributors.

Food Service Regulations

- Judy: “I can’t even tell you how many regulations are in our program that they have to ensure that, you know. Not only does their procurement have to be conducted properly but how a student goes through the line, what they pick up, [and] what has to be in the serving size...they have to say their name and their number to identify themselves”

Lack of Knowledge of Contract Language

- Anne: “I think the challenge is that, you know, making schools have the correct contact or contract language when it comes to working with distributors, so, I mean, I think that’s a challenge to make sure that you’re getting those local foods into that school. So, unless it’s specifically spelled out what you’re looking for, that could be a major issue if you’re trying to actually participate in Farm to School and work with the distributor if you’re not really sure on what you want, and also managing that contract.”
- Judy: “I was going to say managing it [contract language] too, because a lot of times they’re like that one we saw, language was in the contract, but that director didn’t even know that she [or he] had that in her [or his] contract that the distributor had to provide her where that product came from.”

Working with Producers

- Anne: “The problem is that a lot of farmers sort of shy away from the term ‘cooperative’.... That’s up to them. If they would want to do that it would definitely help.”

Difficulties Finding Distributors

- Anne: “You know, I think a lot of the small schools have a challenge with trying to get distributors to want to work with them in the first place, so they [small schools] feel that they can’t be that demanding even though they hold the contract. I feel like we get that a lot.”
- Judy: “You create some issues where the distributor’s going to be like, oh, I can’t get that product. So that he can just lump you in with the rest of everybody else that he’s already buying for. If he’s already getting product from California and it’s going to be more cost effective for him to lump in all 20 of his schools into that truck versus getting one truck from Florida and nineteen from California, I think, you’re creating some cost issues with economies of scale”

For FDACS

FDACS Farm to School representatives discussed barriers they encountered when implementing the Farm to School Program. The barriers included not having a contract with anyone, lack of information about producers, and limitations on how funding can be distributed.

FDACS Doesn’t Have Contract with Anyone

- Judy: “I think it’s still a challenge because we’re not in contract with anyone, so it’s really more of us being very persuasive to have people come around to our point of view versus us just saying, ‘No, we’re the customer you have to do what we say.’ So, I think that’s a little bit challenging.”

Lack of Information about State Producers

- Judy: “I think our first challenge, which is still really a challenge for us, is that nobody has a list of all the growers in the state. Even IFAS won’t give us that list of all the growers in the state. So, I mean, other than short of us calling every Extension office, which we tried to do, the Extension Agents... just some of them do have really good records on what’s available in their area and they just know the growers by the ones that come in and the ones they talk to and things like that. So, we’ve tried several times to get a really comprehensive list of growers in the state so that we could start that whole, who’s doing Farm to School?”

Limitations on Funding Distributions

- Judy: “I think a lot of time, just the way that our funding is through USDA Farm to School, although it’s an initiative and it’s a really large initiative in Florida, it’s not a USDA funded program. So, a lot of our outreach and

education materials we can't produce for growers. We can produce them for schools, but we can't use that money to produce for growers because it's not an allowable expense."

Food Safety

FDACS Farm to School representatives discussed food safety. They mentioned that food safety requirement varies from county to county, creating challenges when coordinating between farmers and school districts in different parts of the state. They also mentioned the food safety liability was too heavy on small farmers.

Requirement Varies Across Counties

- Judy: "Each county has different requirements on what they consider to be an acceptable food safety plan. So, you may have one county that if someone has a HACCP plan and they're USDA GAP Certified, then that's okay for them. You may have another district that wants a PRIMUS 'R' audit conducted on the farm. So, you have different things throughout the state and like Anne said if one district wants you to go through a distributor, that distributor might have one set of requirements for food safety. Another distributor for an adjacent county has another whole set of, you know, requirements, so that farmer is having to do two different things."
- Judy: "Since it's not a [state-wide] law that requires you to have this, this, and this, we don't want to make something more restrictive on one person than they may want or be comfortable with, and kind of exclude farmers that way, so we definitely don't want to do that."

Liability is Too Much for Farmers

- Anne: "That [food safety] can be a barrier too, for a small farmer. So, let's say a small farmer wants to get involved in selling his produce to schools, but he can't afford the million dollar liability coverage that's required by school districts, maybe in some areas or even, you know, the GAP process."

School Garden

FDACS Farm to School representatives were asked how school gardens were implemented in the Farm to School Program. They mentioned that school gardens were incorporated into other existing programs, and regional coordinators led the implementation of school gardens.

Regional Coordinators Implement School Gardens

- Anne: "We have five regional coordinators.... They have various districts and within those districts they're to set up school gardens based upon amount of resources that we give them each year of that contract period. And one of the things that we sort of want to educate them on is the last thing that you want to do if you're a school is just go out there and start planting because you're going to set yourself up for failure. And it's really going to a school and sort of talking to a school about what they want from that garden and having that garden fulfill those needs, but [also] making sure that they organize themselves correctly to do that. So, that's one of the most important things is just sort of having someone go out there and help them get set up to do a garden because the garden is the last step in terms of building it."

The Role of FDACS in the Farm to School Program

FDACS Farm to School representatives were asked to describe their role in the Farm to School Program. Both representatives provided a short description of their roles.

Anne

Anne is the state lead for the Farm to School Program. Her job includes providing support to schools (especially with contracts), planning events, and managing state bidding.

Providing Support to Schools

- Anne: “I’m the state lead for Farm to School with the department. One of the main things that we do is try to provide support to schools. So, we help them in terms of looking at their contracts and how they can provide or put local language into that contract to help them in the procurement process.”

Planning Events

- Anne: “We plan events. Like I said, right now we’re doing the regional conference for Farm to School and we work every year to do the Farm to School Week in Florida, that’s in April.... We also work with, you know, just in general, that Farm to School Month that’s in October. So, we kind of push both of those.”

Managing State Bidding

- Anne: “We also have the Farm to School bid too, and I manage that.... We started the statewide bid in 2012,[that] was our first year. We started with, I want to say, 13 products on the statewide bid. That’s when we started working with the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association to develop a harvesting timeline for us so we would know when we would need to go out to bid for certain products.”

Judy

Judy, Bureau Chief, described her role in Florida Farm to School Program.

- Judy: “I’m the, like I said, Bureau Chief, so I work on all different aspects. So, I work with Anne on Farm to School. I also have three other sections.”

Successful Components of the Farm to School Program

FDACS Farm to School representatives were asked what has been successful in the Farm to School Program. They mentioned success differs across counties, but education has been successful throughout the state of Florida.

- Judy: “We’ve had a lot of success with education. So I think that we’ve been pretty consistent on that throughout the state. We’ve given [out] the same amount of education outreach materials so that everybody can be on the same page with what is local in Florida and can be produced here by growers in our state. So I think we’ve kind of met that goal. I mean, obviously we have a lot more to do in order to keep that momentum going and making sure that we’re educating all the time, but procurement, successes with procurement is going to vary.”

Enhancing the Farm to School Program

FDACS Farm to School representatives were asked about what they have done to enhance the Farm to School Program and future ways to enhance the Farm to School Program. FDACS representatives discussed encouraging producer participation and encouraging distributor participation.

Encouraging Producers to Participate

FDACS Farm to School representatives mentioned that they were trying to encourage producers to participate by creating and utilizing Florida Food Connect, partnering with IFAS Extension, promoting the program to distributors and growers, and providing materials to producers.

Florida Food Connect

- Anne: “We’ve also worked with IFAS to develop that Florida Food Connect website. So, I mean, basically it’s like an online marketplace for growers to put their products up there and for consumers to purchase that. It doesn’t have to be just schools, it can be restaurants or anybody who’s looking for local products.”

Partnering with IFAS Extension

- Judy: “I think the most of them [producers] [are] going through our contract with Extension, the IFAS contract. So, I think because they have more direct relationships with those growers in those regions, I think that’s really been beneficial for us to have people out in the state that can go and meet with growers and talk to them about Farm to School.”

Promoting Farm to School to Distributors and Producers

- Judy: “We’ve tried really hard in the last two years to have meetings, consistently have meetings with distributors and with growers. We’ve got our statewide bid for produce, so we know a lot of growers. We meet with them. We’ll go out and do farm tours and things like that, you know, just to go see their operations. We’ve got, I think, annual meetings. We invited the Commissioner and he came and spoke to the distributors to try to show his vision on what Farm to School should look like in our state.”

Providing Materials to Producers

- Judy: “We’ve really tried to get information as far as what the distributors in the state do require of their growers that they work with. So that when we go out and talk to growers we can say, ‘Oh, you’re wanting to work with FreshPoint? Well, here’s what you’re going to have to have in order to work with FreshPoint.’ So, they already have that kind of mindset going in that they know what they need to do in order to accomplish, if that’s a goal for them, to work with that specific county. So, we do have that information.”

Encouraging Distributors to Participate

FDACS Farm to School representatives mentioned marketing the Farm to School Program in a way that does not threaten distributors’ existing businesses.

- Anne: “I think we’re marketing our product or Farm to School towards them [distributors] in a way that makes them feel as though the Farm to School procurement process isn’t threatening to their business. I think that’s important. And I think that was one of the reasons why the Commissioner wanted to talk to them face to face. Because we all have to work together to sort of make Farm to School work in Florida. So I think that one of the issues is that we’re not trying to just have all schools work directly with the grower and have that direct relationship. While yes, that is an option, but they can also work with their distributor and sort of see the whole model of Farm to School and sort of what our goal and vision is for it.”

Improving Schools’ Experiences with the Farm to School Program

FDACS Farm to School representatives discussed what they were doing to improve schools’ experiences with the Farm to School Program. FDACS representatives discussed communicating with school districts, managing contract language, and incorporating Child Nutrition Programs.

Communicating with School Districts

- Judy: “We provided a lot of outreach and education.... We communicate with them [school districts] often on our Thursday updates.... We have our Thursday updates that talk about all program areas, not just Farm to School, but Farm to School is incorporated in there. And in that Thursday update Anne started doing something, telling them what was in season that month or that week, which I thought was really helpful.”

Managing Contract Language

- Anne: “Local foods are increasing because we’re helping schools tighten their contract language to include local foods and write specific information into this contract so that local foods are included automatically. There’s kind of, you know, a lot less hassle in actually getting that local food.”

Empowering School Power with Contract

- Judy: “We [FDACS] don’t have a lot of direct communication with them [schools] other than us trying to have them send their surveys in. Mainly because we’re really trying to get the food service directors to understand that they hold the contract, and that although that distributor is really important in making sure that those relationships are fostered with the growers and state, the schools really have the power to say, ‘this is what I want, make it happen.’”

Incorporating Child Nutrition Programs

- Judy: “We’re getting a new system for our programs. What we currently have is called CNP, Child Nutrition Programs, and they [CNP] do applications, like all the technical non-fun Farm to School stuff goes through that system. We’re getting a new update to that system and one part of it will be a dashboard so we can put alerts and things. Like, hey you have new stuff on the website, go check it out, you know. So we can have that communication with them without having to send them an email because they get a thousand emails from us and a thousand surveys from us as a department, you know, or as a division.”

Educating Students about Local Food

FDACS Farm to School representatives discussed how they have educated students about local food. They discussed educating students on seasonality, using “I’ve Just Tried It” stickers, and providing point-of-origin information about food products.

Educating Students on Seasonality

- Judy: “We have a harvesting timeline that we’ve worked with the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association in Florida to really try to understand when products are in season and being harvested. Obviously, that varies with weather conditions and other exterior things that are going on. But [it is] a general timeline for different regions throughout the state.... So, [we are] trying to educate the kids on that and not only the kids but also the directors...knowing when to purchase your food and when it’s going to be most cost effective for your meal.”

‘I’ve Just Tried It’ Stickers

- Judy: “We also provide, ‘I’ve just tried it’ stickers, so the kids can go through the line and have a fun way to say that they’ve tried a new product today...whether it’s okra...we may have okra in season during the August months... and it’s a fun way for them to do something they wouldn’t do at home. We try to give them information on where fruits and vegetables fit on their plate...so how much of their plate should be fruits and vegetables by making it colorful and identifying how to incorporate that not only in their lunch meal but if they’re going home and making it at home.”

Provide Point-of-Origin Information

- Judy: “We really try to get them to understand where their product’s coming from so the harvesting timeline is one thing for education. The other part is for the students to say ‘I’m eating tomatoes from this grower [and] this grower is in Miami-Dade with a color coded map of where Miami-Dade is,’ so that they can see that product is in their state and that there’s an actual name attached to it so that there’s some recognition of that product.”

Promoting Local Food

FDACS Farm to School representatives discussed how they promoted local food. They discussed promoting local food by providing recipes to students and parents, hosting a Farm to School event, and hosting a “Take Your Farmer to School” Day.

Creating Recipes

- Judy: “We create recipes that not only can be used in school lunches, but on a mass scale because if you’re talking about making meals for thousands of students, you’re not necessarily going to have the same recipe that you would for a parent, you know, so we’ll have recipes for schools and then also recipes to take home for kids to take to their parents [with details on] what to buy, how to cook it, [and] how to use it in their meal.”

Creating a Farm to School Event

- Anne: “We’re doing a taste testing for local foods later in November of this year and then we’re also working on putting [together] a Farm to School [event]....”
- Judy: “Farm to School event is going to be more of an educational opportunity for stakeholders...any kind of stakeholders. It could be school food service directors, growers, distributors, [and] community partners... so they can come and learn about all of these different facets of, you know, eating local and eating healthy.”

Take Your Farmer to School Day

- Judy: “We do ‘Take Your Farmer to School Day.’ So that’s a big event that we tried to really push this year. And we do it throughout the state and we try to track what farmers are going where, what they are talking about, and how many schools that we’ve actually communicated with.”

Promoting the Farm to School Program

FDACS Farm to School representatives discussed other ways they promote the Farm to School Program. The representatives discussed creating educational materials for stakeholders, planting a garden outside of the state building, and attending industry events and conferences.

Creating Educational Materials for Stakeholders

- Judy: “Although we focus on our programs and make sure that we’re including local foods in our [program], for those sponsors that are utilizing our programs, [such as the] National School Lunch Program, Summer Food Service Program, Snack Programs, [and] Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, we’re also trying to create educational outreach materials. So that not only can they utilize that in their programs, but they can also have flyers or just information tools to send out to the parents, so that they [parents] can make more informed decisions when they’re out purchasing for themselves.”

Garden Outside of State Building

- Judy: “It [the garden outside of the state building] started for a couple different reasons. First is, it’s supposed to be an educational tool for kids to come and see kind of what a garden looks like, how to implement one, and how they can use it. If you notice there’s like a little seating area that we have an outdoor classroom out there, so kids can come in and learn about the garden.”

Attending Events and Conferences

- Judy: “We talk at conferences. We speak at a lot of conferences about Farm to School. I’m sure they’re tired of hearing from us...like, ‘God, it’s those people from Farm to School.’”

- Anne: “We do all the promotional activities and events throughout the year. As a department, we travel all over to try to learn the most that we can and provide the best service to our sponsors and to stakeholders in Farm to School...just learning from other states in terms of what they’re doing.”

The Future of the Farm to School Program

FDACS Farm to School representatives were asked how they envisioned the Farm to School Program in the future. The representatives discussed increased consumption of local food and establishing a system to measure the impact of the Farm to School Program.

Increased Consumption of Local Food

- Anne: “In five years I think that, we’ll see an increased consumption with kids in terms of more fruits and vegetables and that kids know more about where their food comes from and they’re making healthier choices on their own, you know, we’ll all be eating local.”

Measuring the Impact of Farm to School

- Judy: “I also hope [in the future] that we can measure how much product is actually getting into the school system through the programs that we offer.”

Overarching Findings

Throughout the course of the interviews, several themes repeatedly surfaced at varying points in the discussion. The comprehensive themes discussed by participants included

- **Providing Better Nutrition to Students** — One of the most frequently mentioned benefits of the Farm to School Program was that the program provided nutritious food to students. Participants discussed that the Farm to School Program has provided local fruits and vegetables, which were fresher and more nutritious, to the school children.
- **Educational Value** — Participants discussed the educational value of the Farm to School Program. Participants discussed that the Farm to School Program has promoted education about agriculture through a variety of school programs, including school gardens and Agriculture in the Classroom. These educational programs and activities taught students where the food was from and provided firsthand experience with agriculture and gardening.
- **Supporting the Local Economy** — Throughout the discussion participants discussed the Farm to School Program's role in supporting the local economy. Participants discussed that the program promoted local produce to schools, provided more job opportunities in the local community, and that the program kept more money in the local area.
- **Communication** — Participants discussed a lack of communication as a barrier between producers and schools. Both producers and schools discussed the lack of understanding by the each other and the problems it has caused. Changing the bidding process, redesigning school lunch menus, and creating a common language for both sides could improve communication between producers and schools. Participants also suggested inviting local producers to visit school cafeterias, planning field trips with school officials, and creating more effective Farm to School communication materials.
- **Distribution** — Participants identified that a lack of incentives for distributors has been a barrier for the Farm to School Program. When making purchasing decisions, distributors search for the lowest bid from other states or overseas rather than source from local producers. Small farmers can have difficulties when working with distributors due to the limited amount of produce they are able to grow. Funding also was a challenge for the distributors since USDA funding has only been used to support schools, not distributors.
- **Economic Impacts** — Participants discussed the influence of economics on the Farm to School Program. Schools discussed the challenge of purchasing quality produce with a limited budget, while producers discussed that other markets are more profitable. Participants recommended that monetary incentives be enhanced to aid in the transition from standard food procurement to local food procurement.
- **Food Safety** — Throughout the discussion, participants continued to discuss barriers and challenges associated with food safety requirements. Food safety has served as a critical component of the program since shortcomings or failure to comply with these requirements could terminate the program or damage producer and distributor businesses. Participants discussed that to comply with food safety requirements, a large burden is placed on producers in the form of documentation and liability insurance. This has created a barrier for small-scale and local producers that would like to participate, but have been unable to do so due to these requirements.

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