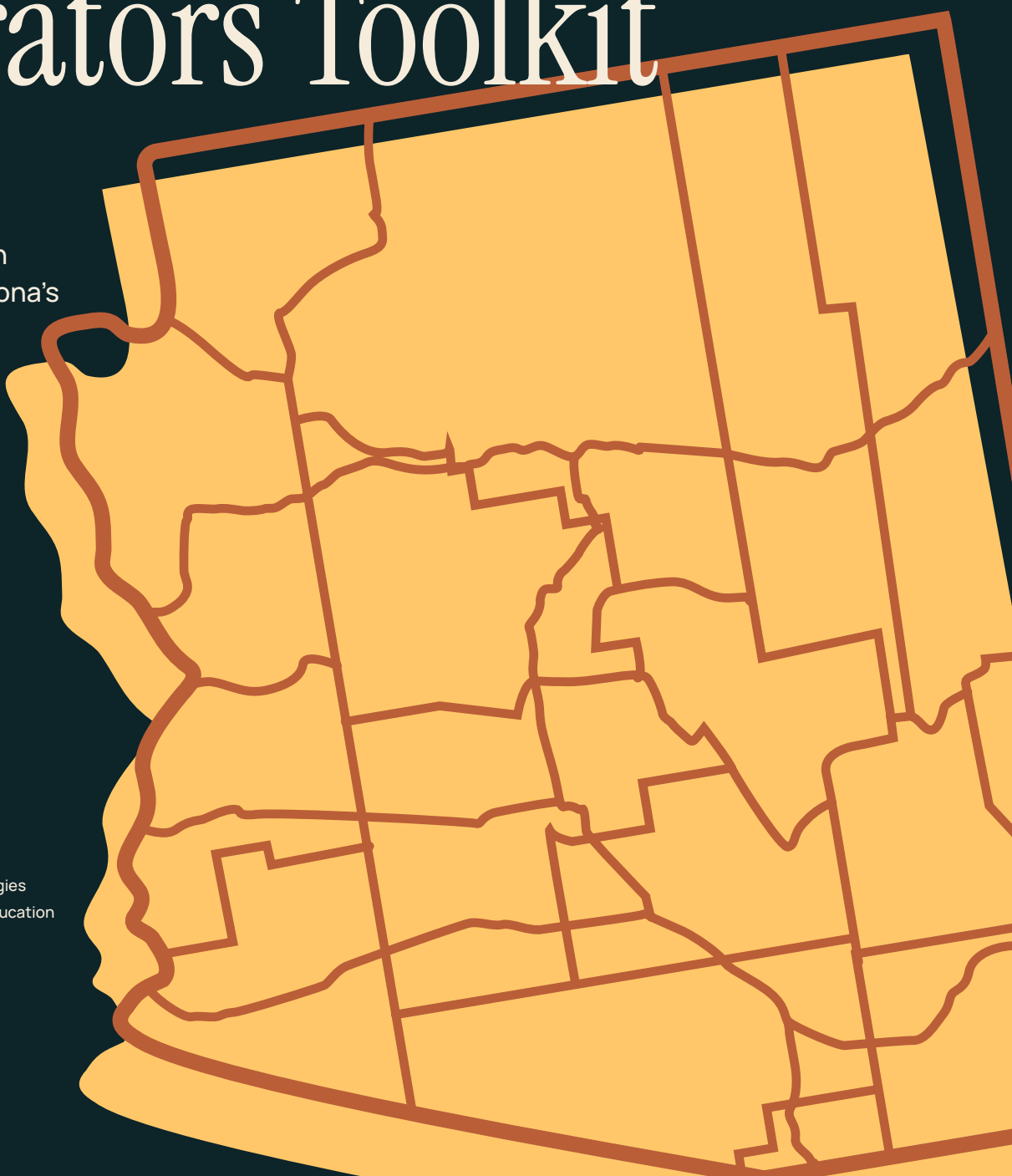
KITCHEN SYNC STRATEGIES

Arizona Farm-to-CNP Operators Toolkit

Practitioner Toolkit For School Nutrition Programs and Arizona's Producers & Food Businesses



Prepared by Kitchen Sync Strategies
for the Arizona Department of Education

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Introduction

This Toolkit gives Child Nutrition Program (CNP) operators (including SFAs and ECE sites) and Arizona farm and food businesses a short, easy-to-use set of resources to make local purchasing easier. It is not meant to be exhaustive or to account for every nuance across Arizona's farm and CNP landscapes. Instead, it focuses on practical, customizable tools and templates that can be adapted by nearly any SFA or supply-side partner in the state, from a large Phoenix-metro district with a central warehouse to a small rural district served by only a broadline distributor.

The guidance here is grounded in conversations with Arizona's school food service directors and producers, food hubs, and distributors about how to source local food in the state today: what works, where each gets stuck, and what would help both ends of the transaction (buyers and sellers alike). Several themes came up again and again, and they shape this Toolkit:

- **Logistics are often the biggest hurdle.** Delivery, storage, and getting product to many sites are often bigger hurdles than the procurement rules themselves. Many districts are site-based or lack a warehouse for receiving and need suppliers who can deliver to several or all of their school sites regularly. This all requires infrastructure that many local suppliers do not have.
- **Many districts only purchase local at the micropurchase level.** Many Directors want to move to "3 quotes and a purchase" but need support crafting bid language, product specs, and templates their business office will accept.
- **Local purchase planning is hard when ordering is last-minute.** Directors want availability they can see a month or more ahead so they can put local items on the menu by name.
- **Directors don't always know who to call.** Many have rarely (if at all) worked with a farm or food hub, and many don't know where to start with local farms.
- **Local product availability lists are available on request.** Some large distributors and cooperatives- and most food hubs- can provide SFAs with a list of locally-grown items upon request.
- **Large distributors often do not highlight local.** Large distributors can carry Arizona-grown products, but typically do so only in seasons when large growers have production in Yuma. Even during those times they rarely highlight what is locally grown so buyers have to ask.
- **Food hubs can simplify local purchasing.** Arizona's food hubs offer schools locally-grown produce year-round and can simplify procurement for SFAs in their delivery zones.
- **Price and funding drive decisions.** Price drives most decisions, especially for districts that are not electing to participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).[1] Try It Local reimbursements helped, and many school districts want to keep buying local as their budgets allow, starting with the items that make financial sense.

Thank you to all those who supported the creation of this Toolkit, especially the Arizona Department of Education's Health & Nutrition Services.

[1] See glossary of terms for more information.

How to Use this Toolkit

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A

Buying Local for School Nutrition Programs

Guidance and tools for SFAs, school nutrition staff, and the procurement offices that support them.

A1. Options to Work with Values-Aligned Suppliers

Start with what's closest and most feasible

If you're looking to buy local food in Arizona, we recommend you start with what's closest and most logistically realistic for your operation. Local products are likely available to you through many channels, including:

- Your current broadline and produce distributors (ask for the local items they may already carry)
- Your DoD Fresh vendor
- Purchasing cooperatives, such as ASPIN or others
- Food hubs and aggregators, such as Sun Produce Cooperative in central Arizona and Pivot Produce in southern Arizona
- Direct-to-farm and ranch outreach, including through Local First Arizona's Good Food Finder



Use availability lists to plan ahead

Not sure who grows what, or when? Arizona food hubs publish local product availability lists showing what's in season each month, with case sizes, producer information, and estimated prices. Use them to see what you could menu in your upcoming menu cycle, compare prices before you request quotes, and refer to a source of quotes for a simplified acquisition (see section A2). The Arizona Food Hubs Annual Availability Guide below combines lists from several hubs in one place.

Work with your existing distributor

Arizona-grown products are often already moving through your distributor's warehouse, especially produce from Yuma and Nogales, but most distributors won't point it out as local unless you ask. Ask your distributor for:

- A local order guide or "local list" of Arizona-grown items, updated seasonally
- Farm, county, or state of origin printed on invoices or velocity reports, so you can document what you're already buying
- Advance notice when a local item comes into season, so you can plan menus around it

If a product shows up without clear origin (for example, a case of produce that turns out to be imported when you expected local), you can make place of origin requirements in future contracts with the vendor, and consider a different vendor when your contract allows.

Use your DoD Fresh allocation

Charlie's Produce (which acquired Stern Produce in 2024) is Arizona's currently contracted USDA DoD Fresh vendor. They should be able to share which items in their catalog are sourced from Arizona producers. Ask your rep for Charlie's local availability list each season. And when you have spent down your DoD entitlement funds, ask them whether those local items are available through their standard catalog. If they are a produce vendor of your district beyond DoD Fresh, you can continue buying from them that way!

Purchasing cooperatives (ASPIN and others)

Cooperatives are designed to give small and mid-sized SFAs buying power they otherwise couldn't get alone. At the same time, they can also make local purchasing more challenging if local items are not an explicit focus of the cooperative. Some tips from other Arizona directors about how to leverage cooperatives:



- Ask (regularly) for the cooperative's local list. ASPIN should be able to identify items it knows come from Arizona farms, but since their primary item list does not consider place of origin you will need to ask for this list on a regular basis.
- Get local items onto the bid, not just special orders. A special order can be added quickly, but it isn't priced or guaranteed like a bid item. We encourage you to request that all school food cooperatives in the State include local items in their solicitations, and ask for pricing before committing to volumes.
- Ask together. Cooperatives like ASPIN- in their own words- are responsive to their members. A request from several member SFAs carries more weight than a request from one.
- Know your options outside the co-op. You can still make use of micropurchases and simplified acquisitions from local suppliers outside of your cooperative contract.

Buying direct from a farm, ranch, or food business

Buying direct often means more coordination at first: things like vendor verification, gathering food safety documentation, agreeing on invoice formats, and double-checking procurement rules. It also gives you direct communication and stronger relationships with Arizona producers. Some Arizona ranches already sell ground beef and beef tips to schools, and some small SFAs pick up product themselves when the volume of their orders is small. Confirm that any new supplier meets your SFA's requirements before your first purchase, and plan for delivery (see A4).

Purchase through your local food hub

If you'd like to skip some of the leg work associated with buying direct from a producer, you can engage with the local food hub in your area. A food hub is a business or organization that aggregates, markets, and distributes locally produced food. They generally carry only local and regionally sourced food items and readily provide origin/source information, so you know where the food is coming from at the time of order and that it meets your SFA's definition of "local". Most food hubs also operate as cooperatives or nonprofits, supporting small, independent producers. They enable values-based purchasing and help keep your food dollars in the local economy.

A1 Tools

Who Should I Call?

A primer to help CNP operators understand where and how to reach local suppliers. It helps buyers prepare for initial outreach, identify good supplier fits, and gather the information and documents they need from suppliers.

Arizona Food Hubs Annual Availability Guide

Month-by-month availability, units, and estimated prices for local fruits, vegetables, and more from Arizona food hubs.

A2. How to Procure Compliantly

Know your procurement tier

There are three tiers, each with its own process, and all three can be used to buy local food. Arizona sets a lower threshold than the federal government for formal procurement in school districts, and your district may set lower limits still. When federal, state, and local rules differ, you must follow the most restrictive one. Not sure which applies to you? Check with your business office and ADE Health and Nutrition Services (see Key Contacts). At a glance:

- **Micropurchase:** No quotes required. Spread purchases among qualified vendors and keep simple records.
- **Simplified Acquisition (informal, "3 quotes and a purchase"):** Attempt to get quotes from at least 3 vendors. Document and award.
- **Formal (sealed bid or RFP):** For larger purchases, a full IFB or RFP process is required.

A2 Reference Table

Procurement Method	Federal Threshold	Arizona Threshold
Micro-Purchase	Less than $15,000 (2 CFR 200.320(a)(1)); SFAs can self-certify a higher threshold up to $50,000	ADE applies the federal threshold of less than $15,000 (ADE Procurement Basics). Many districts set a lower limit in local policy.
Simplified Acquisition (formerly Small Purchase)	Less than $350,000 (2 CFR 200.320(a)(2))	School districts: $100,000 or less, with quotes from at least 3 vendors (Arizona School District Procurement Rules, A.A.C. R7-2-1001 et seq.). Charter schools: $100,000, or up to $350,000 with a procurement exception (A.R.S. § 15-183(E)(6)).
Formal (IFB/RFP)	$350,000 or more (2 CFR 200.320(b))	School districts: more than $100,000 requires competitive sealed bids or proposals.

Note: your CNP's thresholds may differ. Track them here!

Other Arizona school types: Private schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program or School Breakfast Program and Resident Child Care Institutions are subject to Federal procurement thresholds, as are Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools for those that are Bureau-operated. BIE schools that are Tribally controlled vary in their thresholds (from $5,000 to $100,000) based on individual tribal or local board policies, so those must be verified on an individual basis. Source: ADE Procurement Basics.

Geographic preference may be used in any procurement method. Under the expanded geographic preference option (effective July 1, 2024), you define "local" for your operation (for example, within a set number of miles, within your county, or within Arizona) and can use it as a product specification or as a scoring advantage for unprocessed agricultural products, as long as it doesn't restrict full and open competition.

Micropurchases: an easy place to start

Most first-time local purchases fall here, and many Arizona districts have done all of their local buying this way so far. Micropurchases are the quickest and simplest option, but for a large district the threshold can be too small to cover more than a few meals or a single menu run. Ask the vendor for the item you want (remember to be clear on your product specs), keep your records, and rotate among qualified vendors.

Simplified acquisition ("3 quotes and a purchase")

The simplified acquisition is the next step up in terms of volume, and directors who have tried it say it is easier than they expected. It lets you plan a semester or year of local purchases with one vendor, and it can be practical even below the micropurchase threshold. The Arizona Farm-to-School Simplified Acquisition Toolkit below walks through it in four steps:

- **Forecast your needs.** Decide which local products you want and estimate how much you'll need for the purchase period.
- **Write product specifications and vendor requirements.** You can start from the Arizona sample specifications provided below, use the handy specs calculator to estimate quantities per delivery, and document your definition of local. Then outline your vendor requirements, including delivery, food safety, and insurances your district might require. All that's left is to decide the award method (for example, the winner is the vendor with the 'most items at the lowest price') before you send out your request for quotes.
- **Seek quotes from at least three vendors.** Quotes can come from email, phone, websites, or your review of current availability lists. Because you choose who you'd like to request quotes from, you are able to contact vendors that offer local products exclusively, such as local farms who and food hubs. Record each response in the Quote Comparison Table provided below.
- **Select a vendor and purchase.** Lastly, award to the qualified vendor with the best price under your award method that meets your vendor requirements. Maintain documentation of your acquisition process.

Common questions from SFAs with responses:

- **Can I request a quote from a vendor that winds up unable to deliver to us?** Yes. Asking a vendor who you believe could serve you is part of a good-faith effort. A vendor that winds up unable to meet your delivery requirements would be considered an unqualified vendor and thus can't be awarded, so be sure to note that on your comparison table. If fewer than three qualified vendors respond, document your efforts and you can still award to a qualified vendor. A Statement of No Bid can document vendors that decline to respond.
- **Can I repeat a simplified acquisition every year?** Generally yes, as long as each year's estimated total stays within your simplified acquisition threshold and you don't split your purchases to stay under that threshold artificially. If your local purchasing grows past the threshold, it's time move to a formal procurement. When in doubt, confirm your plan with your business office and ADE.

Formal procurement: IFB and RFP

In broad terms, we recommend an RFP rather than an IFB when you want to evaluate vendors on criteria beyond price (local sourcing percentage, producer engagement, sustainability). Because IFBs require your district to consider vendors and products exclusively on the basis of price, your district misses the chance to consider values it might prioritize- including but not limited to local sourcing. The evaluation criteria example below provides a very robust list of values-based procurement criteria used by districts across the US, and your district can consider and adapt them to match your operation and its values.

Split your produce bid to make room for local

Larger districts sometimes ask whether they need to issue a separate local produce bid from their main product bid. One large Arizona district has found success by doing this, making room for local suppliers by breaking its single produce bid into two awards:

- A **large-volume produce RFP** for direct delivery to all schools, typically awarded to a broadline produce distributor to serve produce from any provenance
- A **smaller-volume specialty crop / local produce RFP** that asks for Arizona-grown product from within a set radius, with quantities and prices, typically awarded to a regional food hub that aggregates items from many local farms

The food hub shares a list of farms, products, harvest windows, estimated quantities, and prices each November. The district reviews it against budget, menus, and student acceptance, and the plan is finalized by February or March. The district also writes menu items so they can flex when a local crop comes up short.

Write solicitations others can use

It is common for foodservice teams at Arizona's school districts to share solicitations with one another, and many SFAs "piggyback" on another district's competitively-awarded contract via purchasing consortia like GPPCS, the SAVE Alliance, and other formal purchasing collectives. Piggybacking like this is allowed only when the original contract language explicitly permits it, so be sure this pathway is ADE-approved before engaging vendors. If you're issuing a bid that neighboring SFAs might want to use, you can include cooperative purchasing language and estimated volumes for potential participants.



For more information on this approach, we encourage you to reach out to Chef Ann Foundation, a national nonprofit coordinating a so-called 'values-aligned purchasing collective' in Arizona. Email VAPC@chefannfoudnation.org for more information.

Write specs that work for local suppliers

Avoid specs that require pack sizes, formats, or certifications that only large, non-local operations can meet, unless those specs are specifically what your district needs. Many local suppliers lack the equipment needed to create items that are lightly processed, IQF frozen, or other infrastructure-intensive processing methods. That said, many may be able to offer a format that still works for your kitchen. Unsure? Ask potential vendors before you write the spec and issue your solicitation!

A2 Tools

General Procurement Tier Decision Tree
This section of USDA's Farm to School Procurement Guide (June 2022) gives a high-level overview of the three primary procurement methods.

Arizona Farm-to-School Simplified Acquisition Toolkit
This link takes you to a full folder of tools 1-7 listed below, ready to copy and adapt.

1. AZ Farm-to-School Simplified Acquisition Procurement Guide
A four-step walkthrough of "3 quotes and a purchase" for Arizona SFAs, with a worked example.

2. AZ Sample Farm-to-School Specifications
Pre-written specifications for common local items that you can copy, adjust, or use as a model for your own.

3. Vendor Requirements Template
Documents your vendor requirements (food safety, insurance, delivery) and award method, and can be sent to vendors with your specs.

4. Quote Comparison Table
An internal tool to record and compare quotes and document your award decision.

5. Statement of No Bid
An optional form vendors can complete if they choose not to provide a quote, to document your good-faith effort.

6. Farm to School Sample Specs Calculator
Pick a product and serving size, enter servings per delivery, and the calculator fills in the sample spec, purchase unit, and quantity to order.

7. Checklist for Local Fresh Produce
This handy tool from Iowa State Extension helps you document for each vendor and/or producer on-farm food safety practices and product handling practices for additional assurance.

RFP Evaluation Framework with Values-Based Criteria
An editable example of evaluation criteria for formal procurement that supports values-based purchasing.

How do I define "local"?
USDA's 2022 Procurement Guide section on defining "local" in any procurement method.

A3. Plan Ahead and Document Your Local Purchases

Plan ahead with producers



Many SFAs have highlighted that ordering products from suppliers who are accustomed to just-in-time availability (i.e. who can only provide current or near-future availability of products) makes it hard to put local items on the menu by name, so many end up menuing a category of product (i.e. "red/orange local vegetable" or "local leafy green") as a way to remain flexible and adapt to the seasonality of produce from such local suppliers. Of course, planning ahead fixes this. Share your anticipated needs with suppliers early, ideally before planting season, so food hubs and producers can plan production with your menus in mind. Some Arizona hubs offer crop planning with institutional buyers: the hub shares what its farms can grow, you confirm what you'll buy, and both sides plan for the year.

Arizona's growing seasons can differ sharply by region: low-desert farms produce through the cool months, while northern Arizona's season runs through summer and early fall. Arizona's local food hubs connect growers from throughout the state via an informal purchasing network, so ask your local hub what is available through the network in addition to their member growers to expand your local food purchasing options throughout the year.

Track what you buy

Set up a simple tracking system with every vendor that supplies local products: vendor name, product, farm or state of origin, date, and amount. Ask distributors to show origin on invoices or velocity reports. Good records help you report local spend to your board and community, set goals (for example, 10 to 15 percent local), and respond quickly when a local incentive or grant opportunity becomes available.

Build from what you already buy

Review your current velocity reports and look for items you already purchase that could be swapped for an Arizona-grown version, such as lettuce, citrus, melons, or beef. Some local items may be cost prohibitive for regular menuing, but many others will be competitive. If you're early in your local purchasing journey, we commend you start with these items.

A4. Making it Stick: Menu, Logistics & Community

Match local products to your kitchen capacity

Scratch-cooking capacity, equipment, and labor always shape what you can realistically (and/or sustainably) purchase. Many Arizona districts are expanding scratch cooking, adding central kitchens, and using national local food in schools best practices like making more sauces and toppings in-house, all of which open up more local options. Below are some tips and tricks we encourage for SFAs of a range of capacities, scales, and localities:

- If you run heat-and-serve kitchens, pre-cut, frozen, or minimally processed Arizona products will likely work better than whole raw products. **Ask local suppliers if they already -or would be willing to- manufacture lightly processed, pre-cut produce items grown in-state.**
- If you have more scratch-cooking capacity (like a central kitchen, staff with intermediate knife and processing skills, food processors like Robot Coupes, or large-volume tilt skillets), whole produce and unprocessed proteins open up more local options. **Plan your processing schedule and staffing around when these whole items are in-season, and process/freeze items for service year-round.**
- Items you serve every day like the lettuce, carrots, tomatoes, and onion on sandwiches and burgers, are good candidates for a regular local order. **Convey your velocities to local suppliers of these items to help them gauge the size of your demand. This can help them provide you with cost-competitive products.**
- Salad bars and fruit and vegetable bars are an easy way to feature local produce with little prep. Recipes from Arizona partners (below) can help.

Start small: pilot sites, FFVP, and one featured item

You don't need to supply every school at once. Arizona directors suggested several ways to start:

- **Rotate pilot sites.** Buy local for two or three schools at a time and rotate which schools get it, planning the sites around a supplier's delivery route.
- **Use the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP).** FFVP sites need fresh produce several times a week, which makes them a natural first local order. Tell the vendor what you need for the month, how often, and which sites.
- **Feature one item district-wide.** A Harvest of the Month item, or one local item served at every school on the same day, is easier to source than a full menu.

Order and delivery coordination

Local deliveries take more active management than broadline orders. Lead times vary, minimums differ, and substitutions happen more often. Delivery is often the deciding factor:

- If you have a central warehouse or kitchen, have local suppliers deliver there and redistribute with your own trucks.
- If you're site-based without produce storage, ask suppliers whether they can deliver to a few sites per week, or have one site receive and your staff move product to the others.
- Some small SFAs pick up low-volume orders, like beef, directly from the producer.

Tell your community about your sourcing

A simple menu callout, Harvest of the Month card, or newsletter note builds community support and makes the case for continued investment in local food. Share farm information with students, families, and your school community, and connect it to district priorities such as wellness and community health initiatives.

A4 Tools

The Lunch Box Recipes
This resource has a plethora of school-scaled scratch recipes and menus from Chef Ann Foundation.

Blue Watermelon Project Recipes and Videos
Recipes and how-to videos from a leading Arizona nonprofit that supports scratch cooking and local food in schools.

Example Farmer Story Sheets
A few example marketing sheets to help you share with students and the community who produced the food you serve.

A5. Tailor Your Approach to Your District

Arizona's SFAs range from districts with more than 50 schools to charter schools with a single kitchen. The right starting point depends on your size, location, and how your food service is run.

For large and urban districts

- The micropurchase threshold may not go far for farm to school purchasing at your scale. A simplified acquisition, a dedicated local produce bid, or a dual award is usually what is needed to make clear impact.
- If you have one, your central warehouse or central kitchen may be equipped to receive and redistribute local products- this is often important to help solve the delivery problem for smaller aggregators like food hubs or other local suppliers (especially if, without this central facility, a vendor might need to deliver to 20+ locations).
- There tends to be a challenge with matching the scale of local producers with SFAs at this size: Arizona's small and mid-sized farms may only be able to supply a few of your schools at a time (either because availability is low or because logistics challenges are high).
- If you do not have a central facility like this, we recommend pilots for local purchases at a subset of sites, then grow district-wide.
- Share your solicitations with smaller neighbors. Your RFP may provide just the template they need to advance their local sourcing. And remember: when local producers can depend on your demand, they oftentimes can lower prices because of the assurance of your orders!

For small, charter, and rural SFAs

- Micropurchases and simplified acquisitions can likely cover a big chunk of your local purchases- don't be shy with simplified acquisitions (see tools above), and be sure you budget for local purchasing when your district's set entitlement budgets. This ensures you reserve the budget needed for local items in the upcoming school year.
- If you're far from Arizona's urban centers (especially Phoenix or Tucson), many small aggregators or farms may struggle to deliver to you, and you may have limited access to broadline distributors. Ask your current distributor(s) for a local products list and search for producers in your own county who can deliver directly. Tools like Local First Arizona's Farm Finder can help you identify where some producers are.
- Cooperatives (like ASPIN or regional purchasing consortia) can help you access large volume items at low prices, but most do not proactively source local products. To shift their member-driven processes, we encourage districts to ask them- regularly- to include local items on their product lists.
- Connect with directors' peer groups for shared solicitations and supplier contacts. Experienced directors are often willing to help.

For Districts with a Food Service Management Company (FSMC)

- New vendor relationships usually have to go through your FSMC, often creating a procedural hurdle for your SFA. Bring local suppliers to your FSMC contact early and ask what it takes to get a vendor approved.
- Ask your FSMC for source-of-origin data on what it buys for your district- and when contracts are up for renewal, consider requiring a certain % of local sourcing in that agreement. Some FSMCs have struggled to get this data from distributors, so making it a contract expectation can ensure your district actually knows what its local purchasing impact is.
- After the FSMC onboards the new vendor, we recommend starting with a contained pilot-like implementing FFVP or serving local staples at a handful of sites- so the FSMC and supplier can work out logistics.
- When you rebid your FSMC contract, include local purchasing targets and data reporting requirements in the RFP each year.

Tribal communities and Tribally affiliated schools

- Procurement thresholds for schools managed by the Bureau of Indian Education follow the same procurement standards as the Federal government (outlined in 2 CFR 200). The tribe may establish more restrictive thresholds, so check with the Tribal authority and ADE's Office of Indian Education for more support (they can be reached at IndianEducation@azed.gov).
- Tribal producers and Tribal agricultural enterprises can also be strong partners, and many are positioned to serve schools in their region. We recommend starting with one or a few products at volumes they can supply reliably, and growing the size of these orders by working together.
- Delivery across long distances is often a major constraint across tribal lands. Where your district or school is able, plan for consolidated deliveries and adequate storage at your school to decrease the impact of the lack of regular service from distributors or aggregators.

B

Selling to Schools (for Arizona Farms & Food Businesses)

You grow it or make it. Here's how to get it onto school and childcare trays and get paid fairly.

B1. Is the School Market Right for You?

What schools and ECEs buy, and when

Schools need consistent product, predictable delivery, and a degree of documentation that meets federal, state, and district procurement and food safety and quality standards. For the right farm or food business, schools can be a reliable, multi-year source of revenue- but for others, this could be more of a burden than a benefit. Here are some essential truths that may help you decide if your farm or food business should pursue sales to schools and school districts.

- Most Arizona schools operate from late July or August through May; childcare sites (often much smaller in size) typically run year-round. Demand for Arizona-grown products aligns with their calendars.
- Buying decisions often happen in early spring for the following school year, earlier than many producers expect. Some districts plan local produce with suppliers as early as December for the following school year. If you struggle with production planning and/or are unwilling to convey product availability (including estimated pricing) that far in advance, some schools may find it harder to build you into their procurement processes.
- Arizona's state and school fiscal year begins July 1- this influences some contracts (though likely not so-called micropurchases).
- Many districts buy food through large, heavily consolidated cooperatives such as ASPIN, through corporate 'broadline' distributors, or through a contracted vendor serving the state's DoD Fresh contract (as of this report's writing, Charlie's Produce). Getting your product onto a distributor's or cooperative's list can reach many districts at once, although this process obligates you to have third-party food safety certifications, high insurance requirements, and production volume thresholds are often prohibitive for small and independent producers.
- Product formats matter: districts that have high scratch-cooking capacity can often purchase whole produce or raw proteins, while districts that have limited scratch-cooking capacity or operate heat-and-serve kitchens may require pre-cut, pre-cooked, and/or frozen forms of product.

What school buyers consistently cite as needs

- Availability that is dependable and around which they can plan. A list showing what you'll have for at least the next month - with product format, units, and prices - helps a director be able put your product on the menu by name (provided the product price works). Without this degree of forward planning, schools may be reluctant to commit to large orders.
- Delivery that fits their sites. In your outreach to schools, ask whether the district has a central receiving warehouse or if they require delivery to individual schools. Know how many sites you could reach per week, and plan your distribution pathway accordingly. Remember that suppliers like food hubs can often lower your distribution burdens by aggregating your products with other items schools may also be purchasing.
- Quotes they can document. Many districts use a procurement process called a "simplified acquisition" to allow them to spend over $10,000 with vendors like you. For this, the school will need written price quotes or a published price list.

What to sell: formats and specs schools need

Ask about kitchen capacity before you pitch any product. Districts with strong scratch-cooking capacity can handle whole raw vegetables and unprocessed proteins, while lower-scratch kitchens need product that's closer to ready to heat and serve. Value-added products need a Child Nutrition label or Product Formulation Statement for meal crediting. Not sure if you have what a CNP operator needs? Ask!

B1 Tools

An Overview of Selling to Schools & ECEs
This USDA-FNS resource outlines the pathways to sell into schools, key topics you'll encounter, and the standard information you'll need to share.

School Market Readiness Assessment
This self-evaluation form created by Oregon's Department of Agriculture helps producers new to school sales make better, more informed business decisions, and helps them test their ability to meet this market's needs.

Product Format Guide
USDA-FNS's Food Industry Toolkit provides templates for Child Nutrition labels, Product Formulation Statements, and more.

Communicating with School Nutrition Directors
This tool- also from Oregon's Department of Agriculture- gives a good summary of how producers can approach and communicate with school district nutrition directors.

B2. How to Sell

Selling direct to a school or district

Selling direct to schools gives you access to the full relationship with that buyer: it also gives you the full responsibility of distribution, payment terms, and liability. You'll need to understand the school's procurement process, provide them with requested food safety documentation, provide invoices with product origin information, and plan delivery around their specific needs. If a district asks you for a quote, respond even if you can't meet every requirement; this is not just good practice for your business, it give you the change to tell them what you can do and helps them complete their procurement process. If going it alone feels overwhelming, a food hub or distributor may be a better fit for your farm or food business.

Selling through a food hub or distributor

A food hub or distributor can handle logistics and manage the customer relationship, usually by adding a markup to your product price. That generally means less work for you per sale, but a higher price for the buyer (to pay for the storage, handling, and delivery costs). For most small producers, this is the more sustainable path to school sales at volume.



Selling through a food hub:

- Arizona food hubs, such as Sun Produce Cooperative, Rosebird Farms, and Pivot Produce, aggregate from small and mid-sized farms, publish availability lists, and handle sales to schools. Food hubs that sell to schools usually have food safety standards and requirements for their producers. Make sure you understand and can meet their requirements. The hub may have resources to help you improve your food safety plan to be compliant with their requirements, so be sure to ask them if you don't already meet their standards.
- Know the price you need and the markup the hub will add before agreeing to a distribution relationship. Consider offering wholesale quantities (e.g., case pack sizes instead of retail formats like bunches, of individual items) at lower price points than your direct-to-consumer rates.

Selling through a distributor:

- Distributors tend to provide similar marketing and sales services as food hubs but focus on larger, more established producers and appeal to larger buyers.
- Most large distributors require advanced, third-party food safety certifications, such as Good Agricultural Practices (GAP certification), PRIMUS, or SQF. These may be cost prohibitive for small producers, so be sure to understand the requirements along with their processes, costs, and benefits when evaluating a potential distributor relationship.
- Many distributors don't share their markups with producers so it's especially important to set a price that is viable for your business.

- Ask your distributor to identify your product as Arizona-grown on its order guide and invoices. Buyers told us they often can't tell which items are local when working with distributors.

Food safety and certification tips

- Food safety is critical for any institutional sale, especially to K-12 schools and ECE sites. Every producer, aggregator, food hub, and vendor should know how they guarantee safe, high-quality food and be able to document it.
- GAP/GHP certification: required by most large-volume distributors. This USDA-approved and Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) benchmarked food safety scheme requires an audit of your farm and/or warehouse and is often costly.
- Written food safety plan: while this option is less standardized, it is often required by school districts for direct-from-farm purchases as well as from food hubs.

B2 Toolkit

Arizona Food Hubs Annual Availability Guide
An example of how Arizona hubs share month-by-month availability, units, and prices with school buyers. Use it as a model for your own list.

Checklist for Local Fresh Produce
This tool from Iowa State Extension helps schools document food safety practices for vendors. Use it as a guide for what info your own farm or food business may need.

Food Safety Compliance Guide for Food Hubs
This guide from the Center for Agriculture and Food Systems explains how aggregators and food hubs can prepare food safety protocols to serve schools and other institutions.

B3. Build Long-Term Relationships with Buyers

Support your buyers with documentation

Your invoice is the foundation of your buyer's local purchasing records. Include all farm names, places of origin within Arizona, product description, date of purchase, and purchase amount on every invoice. Buyers who have to chase origin documentation are less likely to reorder.

What makes a school partnership work

The most successful farm to school relationships are built on communication, flexibility, and mutual understanding. Schools have real constraints including menus that are planned months in advance, extremely tight budgets, and limited storage and staffing. Here are some key tips to remember when working with schools:

- Communicate early about availability changes, delivery issues, or substitutions. A minimum of 24-hour notice is standard. If weather or wildlife damages a crop, tell your buyer right away and offer an alternative- this is best practice for customer service and builds trust.
- Be flexible on product format where you can be: a custom pack size or grower's-choice box can open doors that a standard offering won't.
- Build relationships with the program, not just the person. Contacts change, so be sure multiple people at each school account know who you are and what you provide.
- Be ready to start small. A district may pilot your product at a few schools or its FFVP sites before expanding.



Plan forward with your buyers

Ask buyers what they expect to need next season. Even an informal fall or spring conversation about anticipated volumes helps you plan production with more confidence. The K-12 Purchase Planning Worksheet in Section A3 gives you and the buyer a shared format.

B3 Toolkit

K-12 Purchase Planning Worksheet
This technical worksheet lets a buyer share monthly volumes and delivery needs and lets you respond with availability, pack sizes, and pricing. See page 1 of this sheet for instructions on how to use it.

Example Farmer Story Sheets
Included above for schools, these ten examples can also help you tell your story to buyers. Brand them to match your farm or food business.

Reference Section

C

Glossary of Terms

ASPIN: Arizona School Partners in Nutrition (ASPIN) is a purchasing cooperative managed by Mohave Educational Services Cooperative and used by many Arizona school districts for food and supplies.

CACFP: Child and Adult Care Food Program, the USDA program that reimburses meals in childcare and Early Child Education settings.

CEP: Community Eligibility Provision, which allows schools in low-income areas that meet certain eligibility requirements to serve free meals to all students.

CNP: Child Nutrition Programs, including the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, CACFP, and Summer Food Service Program.

DoD Fresh: The USDA Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, which lets schools use USDA Foods entitlement to buy fresh produce. This is a competitive contract awarded to a number of vendors by each State.

FFVP: The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, which funds fresh fruit and vegetable snacks at eligible elementary schools.

FSMC: Food Service Management Company, a contractor that operates a district's food service.

Geographic preference: A federal option that lets CNP operators give preference to locally grown or raised unprocessed agricultural products in procurement.

IFB / RFP: Invitation for Bid (award on price) and Request for Proposals (award on price and other criteria).

Piggybacking: Buying from another entity's contract, allowed only when the contract permits it.

SFA: School Food Authority, the entity responsible for operating school meal programs.

Simplified acquisition: The informal procurement method between the micropurchase and formal thresholds, also called "3 quotes and a purchase."

Statement of No Bid: A form a vendor completes to decline to quote, which helps the buyer document a good-faith effort.

Try It Local (TIL): ADE's local food reimbursement program for schools, funded through USDA's Local Food for Schools.

Reference Section

C

Key Contacts

Arizona Department of Education, Health and Nutrition Services (HNS)

State agency for NSLP, CACFP, and procurement guidance

Main phone contact: 602-542-8700
For contract questions, reach out to: HNScontracts@azed.gov;
azed.gov/hns

ADE Health and Nutrition Services Farm to School Specialist

Statewide Farm to School support

Lisa Castrichini
Lisa.Castrichini@azed.gov
602-364-0363

Sun Produce Cooperative

Food hub serving Central Arizona focused on supplying local food to schools

Billing and Logistics contact:
Management: Cindy Gentry
info@sunproducecoop.org

Pivot Produce

Food hub serving Southern Arizona focused on supplying local food to schools

Billing and Logistics contact:
Management: Erik Stanford
pivotproduce@gmail.com

Rosebird Farms

Food hub serving Northern Arizona focused on supplying local food to schools

Billing and Logistics contact:
Management: Andrea McAdow
hello@rosebirdfarms.com

For sales inquiries for any of these food hubs, contact their K-12 sales lead:

Lizzy Schmitter
lizzy@kitchensyncstrategies.com
(720) 234-3111

Local First Arizona

Good Food Finder directory of farmers and markets

www.localfirstaz.com

Blue Watermelon Project

Scratch cooking and local food resources for schools

www.bluewatermelonproject.org

Kitchen Sync Strategies

Toolkit authors; training and technical assistance providers

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