

Procurement Partnerships: How to Support a School District

“Getting Started” is based on lessons learned from the Upper Midwest Regional Learning Lab (UMRLL): seven school districts in the Midwest that are leveraging buying power to bring more healthful, regionally sourced and sustainably produced foods to their schools. The FOCUS approach to improving school food begins with relationship building between districts and community partners. In this section, geared towards community partners, we show how partnerships can help improve school food, give tips and templates for initial conversations with a school district, and suggest strategies for collecting purchasing data. We encourage you to reference these tools and modify to best suit your needs.

When it comes to school food procurement, many districts have found success working with a procurement partner who can offer expertise in regional food systems. You may already partner with a school district and wish to expand your relationship into procurement, or perhaps as a potential partner you are interested in connecting with a district in your community. Procurement partners to FOCUS districts provide support in many ways, including:

- Connecting districts with farmers, processors, vendors and other key players in supply chains; building the necessary relationships for procurement change
- Working out supply chain and food hub issues such as product aggregation, distribution logistics, production volumes, and food safety concerns
- Convening farmers to inform them about school food procurement opportunities and protocols
- Assisting with competitive bidding processes, e.g. helping to write a Request for Information (RFI) or Request for Proposal (RFP) with detailed product specifications.

Partner with a school district that you can envision working with over time to help redirect food procurement practices. Together you can build a network of support and foster innovative strategies for change.



Multi-District Procurement Partnerships

Procurement partnerships may involve multiple districts and community partners coming together to achieve shared goals. The FOCUS Upper Midwest Regional Learning Lab (UMRLL) is a great example of how multi-district partnerships can leverage buying power and influence regional supply chains. [More](#).

Creating a strong relationship from the start is crucial to any partnership. FOCUS has seen the most success in healthful, regional, sustainable food procurement when districts and partners come to the table well informed and ready to listen, learn and communicate. A strong procurement partner will be knowledgeable about some or all of the following:

- The district’s contracted vendors/distributors and their relationship to producers/processors
- USDA Foods Program
- Local and regional production, aggregation and processing opportunities
- Competitive bidding practices used in school food (e.g. geographic preference, RFIs, bids, product specifications)
- Food safety practices, Good Agricultural Practices (GAP)/Good Handling Practices (GHP) certification
- Supply chain operations and management (e.g. distribution logistics, contracting)
- School food service operations (e.g. staff training, menu development).

Successful Procurement Partnerships

- Slow Food Denver partnered with Jeffco Public Schools to assist in the procurement of local, raised without antibiotics chicken from Boulder Natural Meats. Slow Food Denver visited the farm and processing plant on behalf of Jeffco and helped leverage the district’s buying power. Serving as the link between producers and district, Slow Food Denver facilitated communication and negotiated the price for the monthly purchase of 7,000 pounds of drumsticks for the 2013–2014 school year.
- Ecotrust holds an annual Farm to School Showcase to highlight Oregon farmers and food suppliers. The Showcase creates a space for school food buyers to build relationships with local farmers, food processors, and distributors. Learn how to put on a showcase in your region with Ecotrust’s [Farm to Showcase Toolkit](#).
- Louisville Farm to Table helped Jefferson County Public Schools connect with Marksbury Farm, a meat company whose chickens have been raised on pasture without antibiotics, and facilitated the purchase of 33,000 servings of chicken drumsticks, thighs and wings for the 2013–2014 school year.

Tools for Building Procurement Partnerships

The tools provided in this section will help with initial steps of building a procurement partnership. Use them as a guide for your work together.

BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP: TIPS AND STRATEGIES FOR PROCUREMENT PARTNERS

A general framework for approaching a school district partnership, this tool highlights strategies for engaging a school district.

LETTER OF AGREEMENT

The document offers a model for a “get-give” understanding of a partnership, making clear each party’s responsibilities and expectations.

BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP: TIPS AND STRATEGIES FOR PROCUREMENT PARTNERS

The tips and strategies below provide a framework for school district and procurement partner collaboration. With any partnership, you want to stay adaptable and flexible. Motivate each other to keep moving forward. Remember, this is a collaborative engagement, and every voice is important. Read on to learn more about how you can best support your partnership.

Prepare yourself well

Many partners come to the table with ideas for change but limited understanding of why school food is the way it is and what it takes to make it more healthful, regional and sustainable. Educate yourself on the challenges and opportunities in the world of school food. Read “The Basics” and “Resources” sections of this Toolkit to get informed.

Build a respectful professional relationship right from the start

Take the necessary time right from the start to create trust, respect and sound working relationships between the partners. Get to know the people, context and capacity of your district. Learn the realities and challenges of your district’s school food environment. Don’t minimize the importance of this work; it is critical to success. And don’t underestimate the added value of in-person meetings and visits. Read “Getting to Know Your School District” to learn more about this process.

Treat school food professionals like the experts they are

Start with the district’s goals—ask the school food professionals how you can help them overcome challenges and capitalize on opportunities to make the changes they want. Be sure to really listen and absorb their response.

Change takes time

Start with an easy change and work your way towards more complex goals. There are many pathways to procurement change, and it can take time to find solutions that best suit your efforts. You are working within a complex system and changes take place in small steps. Patience is important; pay attention to when to push forward and when to slow down.

Prepare the necessary resources

Do not underestimate the human, financial and technical resources needed to operate a successful collaborative food procurement change effort. Knowledge about and experience in the complex world of school food is critical. Working with partners skilled in project management, group facilitation, community organizing and/or database management will be helpful.

Create a culture of collaborative communication

When multiple voices come together, it can be challenging for any one person to make his/her thoughts heard. Create a safe, respectful and honest space for interaction. FOCUS has found it helpful to use the [VISIONS Inc. Multicultural Guidelines for Engaging Across Difference](#) during its own discussions.

LETTER OF AGREEMENT

Once a partnership has been established, it may be helpful to put an agreement in place to establish expectations and commitment from each party. Start with a conversation, using the opportunity to address any initial concerns and agree on what each partner ‘gets’ and what each partner ‘gives.’ The FOCUS Letter of Agreement was first used to define the reciprocal working relationship between partners, school districts and FOCUS in the UMRL. You can make your agreement more or less formal. Use the sample provided as reference.

UPPER MIDWEST REGIONAL LEARNING LAB

LETTER OF AGREEMENT

The School Food FOCUS Upper Midwest Learning Lab (UMRL) engages school districts to redirect purchasing practices to access more wholesome food. As we move forward together in this work, we want to be clear about the projected benefits the UMRL offers school districts and their partners (the “get”), as well as our expectations of the Learning Lab participants (the “give”). This agreement outlines the Give-Get exchanges between school district staff, community partners, and FOCUS.

THE “GIVE” SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND THEIR CHOSEN PARTNERS PARTICIPATING IN THE UMRL WILL:

1. Attend annual in-person and multiple virtual meetings
2. Work collaboratively to reach consensus on priority food items and specifications for those items
3. Participate in work groups and in supply chain research and discovery
4. Provide specific procurement-related data needed to track the UMRL change process (the process for collection, use and confidentiality of data will be discussed at a later date)
5. Commit staff time to complete tasks identified by the UMRL work groups
6. Agree to work with distributors to streamline procurement of UMRL-specified foods
7. Menu UMRL priority food items selected and specified with agreed upon frequency (districts only)
8. Support school districts’ implementation of UMRL procurement change goals (partners only).

THE “GET” FOCUS PROVIDES TO UMRL PARTICIPATING DISTRICTS AND THEIR CHOSEN PARTNERS:

1. Facilitation of the UMRL community of practice as a safe and supportive place for peer learning and support, problem identification, and shared solution seeking
2. Development of a broader community of practice with school food service peers, district partners, regional and national allies, and representatives from industry, NGOs, and governmental agencies
3. Subject to available funding, assistance for school district personnel and staff from their selected partners to attend key meetings
4. Alignment of multiple districts and their partners around procurement goals and the leveraging of collective market power in conversations with industry, supply chain actors, and USDA
5. Supply chain/procurement policy research and analysis that informs shared decision-making
6. Subject to available resources, legal research and district-specific recommendations for procurement tools (e.g. Requests for Proposal, Invitations for Bid) and contracts
7. Integration of work on a regional and national level with divisions of USDA including FNS, AMS, and Rural Development as well as state and regional agencies
8. Real-time communication about work and progress on specifications of selected food items