



HOW TO BUY MONTANA FOOD FOR YOUR SCHOOL

Incorporating local foods into your school meals can start with a few simple changes. By starting small and building relationships with Montana farmers, ranchers, food hubs, and aggregators, you can bring fresh, seasonal ingredients into your kitchen in a way that works for your budget and team. This guide offers practical steps to help you confidently purchase and serve Montana-grown food to your students.



01 Look at your menu to identify what you're already sourcing that could be swapped for a local ingredient.

02 Start small! Swap one item at a time, starting with the "low-hanging fruit". Is there a ranch or farm down the road you know of? Does your distributor offer a local option, or does a Montana food hub deliver to your school? Don't try to recreate your entire menu at once.

03 Use the Abundant Montana Farm to Wholesale Map to find local products near you: abundantmontana.com/wholesale

Tip: Producers who sell at farmers' markets and grocery stores already have wholesale licenses and proper insurance, so you're safe to purchase from them.

04 Gather a team and collaborate. Don't take on local purchasing by yourself! Establish one or two attainable goals for local purchasing to get started, and work with school nutrition staff and administrators to get on the same page.

05 You can use produce from your school's garden if GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) are being followed. No certification is required, so you must determine whether safe growing practices are being followed. Reach out to your county's MSU Extension agent or local Montana Farmers' Union contact for help.

06 Let producers know your price points up front.

- \$0.30-40 for .5 cup of fruit
- \$0.30-40 for .5 cup of vegetables
- \$0.60-70 for a 3-ounce portion of protein
- \$0.25-39 for a 2-ounce portion of whole grain or grain product

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Get to know your farmer. Common questions for schools to ask a producer:

- Do they specialize in certain crops?
- When is their product available?
- Can they bring it to you, or can you get it through a food hub, aggregator, or distributor?
- Would they be interested in doing classroom/cafeteria visits or hosting a field trip?
- How far in advance would they need to know your order? They may plant a crop just for your school, which takes a whole growing season.

During the growing season (March-September), farmers are in the field from sunup to sundown and might not return your call immediately.

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If you're going to be cutting/slicing up an ingredient, let producers know you don't mind B quality. It's cheaper!

Tip: If you have a way to process and store product, buy late-season bulk amounts and store for future use.

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Food Service Management schools can still purchase locally. Work with your school board to ensure there is language about purchasing local food in the contract. SFAs may request within the RFP for FSMC companies to provide information on how they will support local purchases.

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Local products may already be sold by your distributors and vendors. Ask about the local products, processors, and value-added operations that they have to offer.

Tip: If students have a connection to their food, such as helping to grow or prepare the food, they're more likely to eat it!

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Create seasonal cycle menus, rather than cycle menus, that showcase what's available at that time of year.



Celebrate!

Let your community know about your success by inviting the press and posting about the partnership on your website or social media page. Promote your efforts; it will create more opportunities.

For more information, scan the QR code, or reach out to:

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