



Center for Research in
Education & Social Policy

BRIEF

Growing Together: Cultivating Local Food Procurement in Delaware Schools

In early 2024 the Delaware Council on Farm and Food Policy connected with the University of Delaware Center for Research in Education and Social Policy (CRESP) in order to investigate mechanisms to improve the connections between Delaware grown products and institutions in the state, starting with schools. The effort was in part simulated by SCR 90, which encourages institutions, agencies, entities, and businesses that operate within Delaware, to purchase Delaware-grown food and value-added items and to better understand current purchasing levels and need.

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Submitted to: Farm and Food Policy Council Representative Nikko Brady

Project Background

Given the scope of the number and types of institutions in Delaware and the existing momentum and support for advancing efforts around farm to school purchasing, the decision was made early on to focus on K-12 schools as an initial way to better understand the needs and untapped opportunities for local food purchasing in the state. Beyond understanding current activities, the driving goal in our approach was to identify where there were critical hurdles that prevented progress - either hurdles faced by schools or those faced by farmers - and to identify solutions that would mitigate the complexities of navigating the system(s).

Research Methods

Initially, the research team reached out to experts, both locally and nationally, to gather a better understanding of the state of the field. Specifically, the research team aimed to 1) understand existing resources that state and Farm to School leaders have developed to support program procurement, and 2) understand how states across the U.S. benchmark the amount of local product they are buying. This search yielded several procurement-related resources, reports, and RFPs from across the U.S., which can be found [here](#).

The research team also led bi-monthly meetings with a sub-committee of the Delaware Council on Farm and Food Policy to discuss project progress and obtain guidance and feedback on next steps. Furthermore, the research team met with the Delaware Farm to School Coordinator and the Director of Nutrition Programs to better understand current efforts, gaps, and opportunities related to Farm to School in the state. The research team also met with the Policy Specialist for the National Farm to School Network to better understand Farm to School efforts nationally (a summary of this conversation is provided in the Appendix, and includes feedback on minimum percent local threshold policies). Furthermore, the team attended the DoD Fresh overview/orientation session for school food authorities (SFAs) which was held online as part of the monthly SFA meeting.

Between January-May, 2025, CRESP conducted focus groups and interviews with over 20 producers, SFAs, distributors, state leaders, and intermediaries in Delaware to better understand the barriers and facilitators to participation in the state's Farm to School Program. Semi-structured discussion guides for the farmer focus group and SFA interviews (see Appendices A & B, respectively) were drafted, reviewed by a sub-committee of the Delaware Council on Farm and Food Policy, and submitted to the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board for review and exempt determination. All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed (see Appendices C & D for producer and SFA transcriptions, respectively).

Interview Participants

SFA Interviews

The following school districts were represented in the SFA interviews:

1. New Castle County Vo-Tech School District
2. Lake Forest School District
3. Indian River School District
4. Colonial School District
5. Sussex Technical School District
6. Odyssey Charter School
7. Academy of Dover Charter School
8. Smyrna School District

Producer Interviews

The following producers were represented in the focus group:

1. Fifer Orchards
2. Marvelous Produce
3. Penn Farm/Colonial School District
4. Dittmar Farms

CRESP also conducted an individual, semi-structured interview with a representative from Hy-Point Dairy Farms.

Distributor Interviews

The following individuals from Seashore Fruit & Produce, Co. were represented in the distributor interviews:

1. Lauren DeWoody
2. Edward Farace

Delaware Farm To School Overview

Unlike most other states in the U.S., Delaware uses a self-operated food service model in which each SFA is responsible for procuring their own product using both federal and state procurement guidelines. A few charter schools in Delaware differ from this model, and in these instances, they go out to bid for a food service management company (e.g., Aramark, U.S. Foods) who then is responsible for all food-related tasks, including procurement.

There are several ways that a SFA in Delaware can go about procuring local products. A snapshot of the Delaware specifications are below, and additional details can be found [here](#).

1 Purchasing through the USDA Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (DoD Fresh)

Schools can use USDA Foods entitlement program dollars to buy fresh produce through the DoD Fresh program. Seashore Fruit & Produce, Co., which is based in Vineland, New Jersey, is the DoD Contractor for Delaware (selected by USDA) and surrounding states (e.g., New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York). Seashore has the capacity to buy Delaware-grown products and distribute them to DE schools through the DoD Fresh program, which they have an existing contract to service.

2 Purchasing less than \$10,000 per year from a single vendor

This is called the micro-purchase threshold and is considered an informal method of purchasing. A single vendor selling less than \$10,000 to any SFA may do so without the SFA requiring a competitive bidding process.

3 Purchasing between \$10,000 and \$99,999

This is called the federal simplified acquisition threshold, formerly called the small purchase threshold, and is considered an informal method of purchasing. In 2019, the federal simplified acquisition threshold was increased to \$250,000; however, Delaware has continued to use a lower threshold of \$99,999. For an SFA to be compliant under this federal simplified acquisition threshold, he or she must solicit three quotes for the local product, but does not need to issue a formal bid or request.

4 Purchasing over \$100,000

This is called the formal procurement method. This method requires a structured bid solicitation of one of three forms: 1) Request for Proposal (RFP), 2) Invitation for Bid (IFB), and 3) Non-Competitive Proposal.

A reference to the federal specifications is available [here](#).

School Food Authority Findings

We identified five key findings in the SFA interviews:



SFAs want to buy more local food, but they found the bidding process daunting.



Most SFAs are uncomfortable going above the \$10,000 micro-purchase threshold, despite interest in buying more local products.



Some SFAs don't know what farmers to contact to get bids; however, they are open to meeting more farmers and forming new partnerships.



Food processing capacity is the primary concern for SFAs and outweighs concerns about product cost.



SFAs are skeptical of an incentive program for purchasing local foods. Instead, they would prefer a state procurement specialist resource.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with eight school food authorities (SFAs) to better understand their experiences and hurdles faced when procuring local foods. More detail for each finding can be found below.

SFA Finding Details

Finding 1: SFAs want to buy more local food, but they found the bidding process daunting.

All SFAs expressed interest in purchasing food from local farms, and five already do so regularly.

"We do the best we can, again, to support our local community and our amazing farmers and what they do." - New Castle County Vo-Tech School District

"I'm all about using as much local stuff in general... To me it's like you're helping out the mom and pop, you're helping your state, you're helping your community." - Odyssey Charter School

However, whether the SFA had experience purchasing local foods or not, all interviewees found the procurement process confusing and/or burdensome.

Finding 2: Most SFAs are uncomfortable going above the \$10,000 micro-purchase threshold, despite interest in buying more local products.

Even for small districts, SFAs expressed that they have the interest in purchasing more than \$10,000 (exceeding the micro-purchase threshold), but often avoid doing so because it would require a three bid process.

"Well, number one, the whole procurement piece is a huge sticking point with USDA. You passed a \$10,000 threshold, which is not hard to do." - Indian River School District

Finding 3: Some SFAs don't know what farmers to contact to get bids; however, they are open to meeting more farmers and forming new partnerships

Most SFAs are aware of certain vendors where they can purchase certain products (e.g., Fifer Orchards for purchasing apples). However, beyond those vendors, SFAs are unsure of which farmers to contact for what local products.

"I think it's just hard to find farmers that can produce and package up the volume you'd need first, you know, for an entire district, even ours, as small as it is." - Lake Forest School District

"No one's ever said, go to this website and all your questions will be answered." - Sussex Technical School District

"It would be really great to start communicating with local farmers more often get them in the conversation more. I think that would help everybody." - Lake Forest School District.

SFA Finding Details (Continued)

Finding 4: Food processing capacity is the primary concern for SFAs and outweighs concerns about product cost.

The main procurement challenge cited by SFAs was the capacity to process local products. Many SFAs face limitations regarding kitchen facilities, equipment, and staffing needed to handle and prepare diverse local products, often requiring significantly more resources compared to pre-packaged or pre-cut goods.

"Most of the Delaware growers are not doing a whole lot of processing to it. They're growing it, and then it's just, here it is. You take it, you cut it up, you clean it. And so the produce vendor that we were looking at using some in Lancaster, they had some processing that they would do within for us." New Castle County Vo-Tech School District

Surprisingly, cost did not emerge as one of the most significant barriers to procurement of local products among SFAs. In fact, most SFAs reported that although local foods cost a bit more, it was an extra expense they were willing to pay. One SFA even noted that when the product is local and in season, it can be less expensive than its non-local alternative.

"So it is a little bit more expensive, not crazy though. You're supporting a local community locally growing produce. That's a cost that I'm willing to absorb within reason." - Indian River School District

Finding 5: SFAs are skeptical of an incentive program for purchasing local foods. Instead, they would prefer a state procurement specialist resource.

To help offset the often higher costs of procuring local foods, many states have started incentive programs that reimburse a fraction of the local food cost. When asked for feedback on a similar program enacted in Delaware, the majority of SFAs expressed that the additional work to track and report local products would outweigh the minor rebate received from the incentive program.

"If there was money, sometimes money comes with a lot of extra auditing, documentation, and tracking of that... The whole world is short-staffed right now, so even though, hey, I've got money to pay you, you don't want to work for me anyway." - New Castle County Vo-Tech School District

SFAs instead communicated their preference for support in the form of a state procurement specialist. This specialist would offer expertise in procurement laws, help establish direct relationships and contracts with local producers, and assist in navigating program regulations.

"They could help in finding those local farmers and creating that partnership and that relationship."- Colonial School District

"We would absolutely welcome opportunities like [a state procurement specialist]. Someone helping with the procurement part of that would help with that challenge of [aligning federal and state guidelines which differ] because it's challenging. If the procurement part was taken care of to make sure that we could have that connection, then that would be awesome." - Colonial School District

Producer Findings

We identified six key findings in the producer focus group and interviews:



Producers are intimidated by the bidding process and are reluctant to either enter into Farm to School sales or exceed sales of \$10,000.



Good relationships between producers and SFAs are marked by consistent, positive, and proactive communication.



Producers see an opportunity to sell summer-grown produce during the school year via value-added products, but don't currently have access to processing mechanisms.



Once a producer has decided to enter into Farm to School sales, logistics such as product processing and distribution are hurdles.



Producers find it challenging to manage Farm to School orders, which are often on an individual basis and are inconsistent over the course of the month.



As more producers receive orders from schools, a centralized person or system for purchasing is needed.

Producer Finding Details

1

Finding 1: Producers are intimidated by the bidding process

Many of the producers found the \$10,000 micro-purchase threshold intimidating and reported that it deterred them from seeking larger partnerships with schools, despite sufficient supply to do so.

"As a small farmer, that's a big hurdle is doing that big [bidding] package [over \$10,000]. [...] There's opportunities there [for me to produce more], but I haven't delved into that because of the intimidation factor of the package that is required from the State. [...] The whole process feels daunting, and a lot of us are one or two people. So just an intimidation factor. I've just steered clear away from it and stayed small." - Penn Farm/Colonial School District

2

Finding 2: Logistics are significant hurdles

All of the producers reported that school staff shortages and limited capacity to process local products were significant challenges. Many producers felt that because their local products require more processing time, school staff felt burdened by their products and instead preferred pre-cut and processed products.

"Some [of the cafeteria workers are not excited to see us]. They see it as additional work where they're actually gonna have to cut and prepare and think of a way to use fresh product. It's a lot easier to take frozen stuff out of the bag and throw it in the oven, or reheat it, or whatever." - Fifer Orchards

3

Finding 3: Communication is key to good relationships

All producers agreed that positive relationships with SFAs and cafeteria staff were crucial for maintaining long standing partnerships. Producers appreciated proactive communication from both SFAs and cafeteria staff about weekly orders and expectations.

"[The strongest partnerships are with] the folks that are proactive that are excited about it. I'll start getting emails now about when's asparagus coming? Is it almost here? When does strawberry [harvest] start? So you know they're excited about it that they're passionate. It means something to them. [...] I think it's just passion and people that see a value in it." - Fifer Orchards

4

Finding 4: Order management is challenging

A few producers stated that managing orders from SFAs was challenging because they are entered on an individual basis and were often unpredictable. Additionally, many producers said the orders they received from SFAs were inconsistent over the course of the month due to budget constraints.

"We communicate basically through email with all of the cafeteria leadership and send them what we have available each week. Then they individually put their orders in. That can be sort of time consuming and a bit of a challenge at times to collect all the orders, pull all the orders, and load the trucks." - Fifer Orchards

Producer Finding Details (Continued)

Finding 5: Value-added products present an opportunity

Another concern raised by the farmers is the low demand for their products whose yields may peak during the summer months when school is not in session.

"In the summer, of course, we have all kinds of things, but most of the time there's no demand from the schools during the summer, or very little." - Fifer Orchards

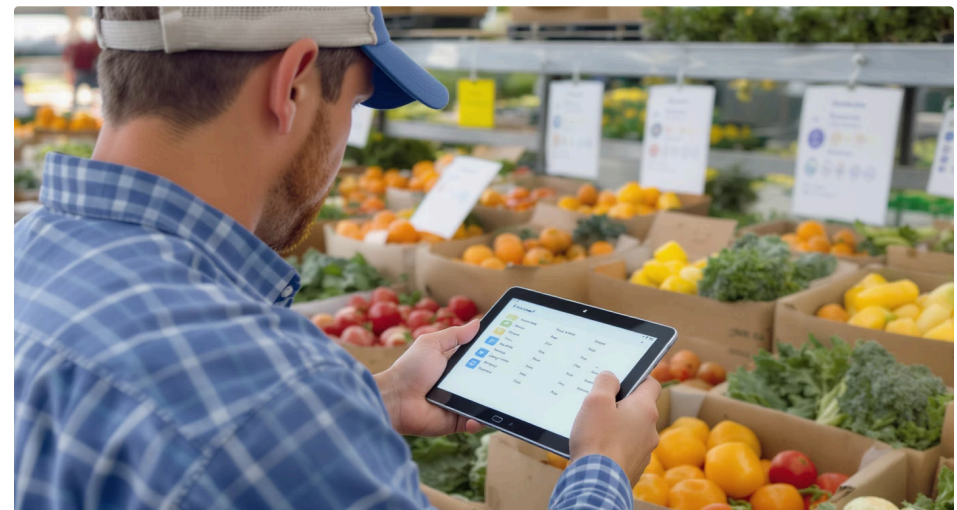
A few farmers mentioned positive partnerships with culinary programs in the state, reporting that they helped to reduce processing barriers. One farmer noted that these programs could potentially serve as a centralized hub through which their local products could be processed and stored, ensuring that they could be distributed to schools year-round.

"Maybe a culinary program in the State could step up and be like a centralized hub where they could take product and either freeze it or process it in some way. [For example], put it in food safe containers so it could be stored at a local freezer facility and be used year-round when the kids are in school." - Fifer Orchards

Finding 6: A centralized system is needed

As more producers receive orders from schools, the need for a centralized ordering system becomes more apparent. This would help streamline the process and make it more efficient for both producers and SFAs.

"On the ordering side there's always room for improvement in efficiency in the time it takes. To collect the orders [I would recommend] a centralized system that is easier for all of the people placing the orders to navigate. But also it seems like there's a lot of times where there's a deadline and you email and then you wait, and you don't get responses. And then you start your orders, and then they come in after the fact. I think a lot of that could be streamlined with just a better, centralized ordering system, versus emails." - Fifer Orchards



Distributor Findings

The DoD Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program enables schools to purchase fresh, high-quality produce through an established online ordering system which pulls from local products purchased through the distributor's network of farmers. Funding for the program comes from USDA commodity funding which is based on meals served multiplied by the USDA meal rate (\$0.45 for SY2024-2025).

Schools may elect to use a portion of their USDA commodity funding to spend on the DOD Fresh program. When schools do not use their DoD Fresh entitlement, the funds are lost and do not roll over between school years.

DoD Fresh Program Funding 2021-2025	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025
Funding Amount	\$83,000	\$324,000	\$600,000 (expected)	\$492,000 (expected)

We identified two key findings in the distributor interviews with individuals from Seashore:

- 1

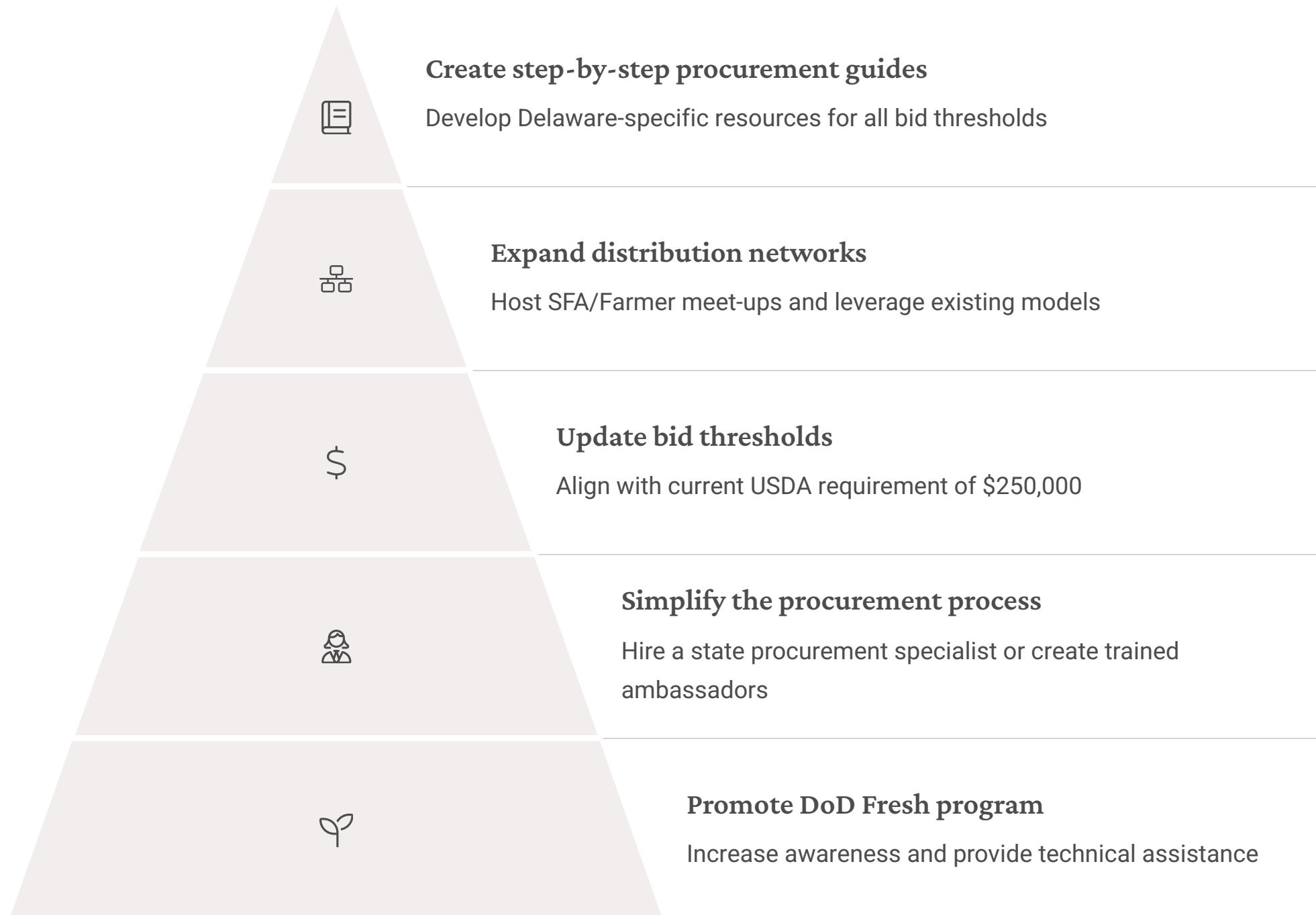
Seashore Fruit & Produce Co. has the capacity and interest to form stronger relationships in Delaware, buy Delaware-grown products, and distribute them to Delaware schools.

"If you guys are able to connect us with some of your local farms in Delaware, more than what we already have, we are 100% happy and open to it. So we'll definitely connect about that."
- 2

Seashore also serves as a DoD Fresh distributor in several surrounding states, providing a model that remedies many of the logistical challenges farmers and SFAs mentioned.

"We do have, you know, distribution down into Maryland, and we're already, you know, pretty much throughout most [of] Delaware, too. So there shouldn't be any issues getting to schools for delivery."

Recommendations



Additional recommendations include hosting annual SFA/Farmer Meet Ups to foster relationships, looking toward Hy-Point Dairy Farms and Fifer Orchards as models for Farm to School in the state, and providing example Bid Proposal Solicitation language for Charter Schools or School Districts interested in contracting with a food service management company (FSMC) that encourages procurement of local products.

Conclusion

This research has identified several key barriers and opportunities for expanding farm to school procurement in Delaware. The findings highlight that both SFAs and producers are interested in increasing local food in schools but face significant hurdles in the procurement process, logistics, and communication.

By implementing the recommendations outlined in this report, Delaware can create a more streamlined and accessible system for farm to school procurement. Updating bid thresholds, providing technical assistance, creating centralized resources, and fostering relationships between farmers and schools will help overcome the current barriers and create a more robust farm to school program in the state.

Ultimately, these efforts will not only support local agriculture and strengthen Delaware's food system but also provide students with access to fresh, nutritious local foods, creating a win-win situation for all stakeholders involved.

Suggested Citation

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