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**King County Schools Seize Opportunities to Serve Local Foods**

King County, WA - With fall harvest in full swing, King County Child Nutrition Directors are identifying opportunities and developing partnerships with Pacific Northwest companies and farms to bring local foods to students in King County schools.

At a time when food often travels farther than ever, the appeal of serving students local foods is obvious: tastier and fresher fare, as well as the opportunity to support neighboring businesses and sustainable agricultural practices. A majority of school districts in King County already serve local foods; many of these districts have been providing locally grown food for over 30 years.

“The economic viability of purchasing locally grown food is very important to Child Nutrition Directors in King County,” says Anita Finch, Seattle Public Schools Child Nutrition Director. “In fact, serving locally grown produce in King County Schools has been a valuable way to not only support local farmers and supplement contracted food services, but also to emphasize what students are learning about healthy lifestyles and nutrition in the classroom.” In addition, buying from local farmers reduces long-distance transportation and handling of foods. Most importantly, child nutrition directors appreciate the opportunity to provide nutritious, fresh and great tasting produce to students in King County.

King County school districts obtain local foods through a variety of channels. One method has been to partner directly with local farms. Auburn Public Schools has established partnerships with Tolt Hill Farms - a certified organic grower with a stall at the University District Saturday Farmer's Market - where Farmer Steve Hallstorm has planted carrots specifically for use in Auburn schools. “We also have purchased fresh fruits and vegetables from the Whistling Train Farm in Kent and the Growing Things Farm in Carnation for school meals. In addition, we take out ads in our community newspapers soliciting local farmers to partner with us to provide fresh fruits and vegetables in the schools”, says Eric Boutin, Auburn Public Schools Child Nutrition Director.

One local farm, American Produce Express, LLC has successfully served multiple King County school districts, including Federal Way, Highline, Kent and Northshore for several years. This Eastern Washington orchard supplies Kent School District with fresh apples whole for secondary menus and sliced apples both individually portioned and in bulk pack for salads. Slicing the fruit has increased the consumption of produce, especially with elementary students. “This direct partnership with the grower, John Butler and American Produce Express, has been a terrific and mutually beneficial experience for both the Kent District and the grower,” according to Kent Child Nutrition Director Dan Johnson, “and it helps us stretch our produce dollars to purchase more fresh local products”. Linda Hoel, Northshore School District Child Nutrition Director, agrees, “This partnership is win-win; making the most of our produce dollars”.

Currently, Northshore School District has salad bars at all elementary schools promoting a “Fruits & Vegetables: More Matter” campaign. “We look forward to expanding our fresh choices through our partnership with American Produce to include sliced apples, pears and pluots,” Hoel adds.

Another way in which King County child nutrition directors can provide locally grown produce is to utilize existing distribution strategies, requesting that produce be supplied by local vendors. Both Seattle Public Schools and Highline Public Schools have found success using this approach. Vendors that have pre-existing relationships with local producers can often procure seasonal local products at competitive prices. “This has been a great way to maintain relationships with our regular supplier through the school year, but also support small farms in Washington State,” says Chris Neal, Highline Public Schools Child Nutrition Director.

Seattle Public Schools labels all locally grown produce on the monthly menus with a space needle symbol, and has served a variety of local foods during the month of September, including cucumbers, pears, plums and carrots. Similarly, Highline Public Schools features a “Harvest of the Month”, in which a locally grown fruit or vegetable is featured on the lunch menu and highlighted on the menu back. Fruits and vegetables are not the only local foods that school district provide. Seattle Public Schools also purchases Darigold milk and yogurt, which come from a local farm. In addition, Seattle Public Schools fish products come from Trident, a Pacific Northwest company.

Despite the success of serving locally grown produce in King County Schools, child nutrition directors have discovered that there can be significant barriers to creating effective relationships with local farms. Challenges such as growing seasons, ensuring an adequate supply and uniformity of product, bid laws, delivery and payment procedures are issues that can create difficulty in making and sustaining effective partnerships. “Good communication at the beginning of the process, ensuring growers-suppliers can provide sufficient volume as well as designing menus that to reflect the seasonality of locally grown foods are all crucial for successful partnerships,” says Mary Asplund, Federal Way Public Schools Child Nutrition Director.

Purchasing local foods for use in King County school districts is mutually beneficial for both schools and farms. Local farmers benefit when increased demand for locally grown produce creates new market opportunities. Students in King County Schools benefit when school lunches provide them with opportunities to not only develop healthy eating habits, but to learn where food comes from through cafeteria-to-classroom connections. And Child Nutrition Directors benefit by supporting local companies and serving up tasty and seasonal produce.

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***Note: Photo opportunities in school lunchrooms and with local food producers can be arranged at your request.***