

CONNECTOR EVENT GUIDE



**BRINGING
THE FARM
TO SCHOOL**

through New Connections

Funded, in part, by the USDA Food and Nutrition Administration



NATIONAL CENTER
FOR APPROPRIATE
TECHNOLOGY



NATIONAL
FARM to SCHOOL
NETWORK

Bringing the Farm to School through New Connections:

A GUIDE TO IMPLEMENTING PRODUCER AND SCHOOL FOOD BUYER CONNECTOR EVENTS

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Introduction

Nearly 70 years after the passage of the National School Lunch Act in 1946, school meal operators across the United States continue to seek new and innovative techniques that incorporate fresh, local food products into the meals of millions of students. Within the community of school meal program operators and policy makers, we now have a greater collective appreciation of the critical role school meals play in combating childhood hunger in America, and we appreciate the value that fresh, local, and minimally processed fruits, vegetables, and proteins bring to the meals served each school day.

Today, the use of local food products is increasingly commonplace as 74 percent of School Food Authorities (SFAs) reported serving local food, and 81 percent of SFAs serving local food report serving local food products at least weekly. With school food purchases of local food products reaching an estimated \$1.8 billion in school year 2022-2023, school buyers understand the value of farm to school – where kids win, farmers win, and communities win.¹

However, while local procurement is increasingly common, schools continue to look for new ways to scale up their local food purchases. As their appreciation of, and comfort with, using local food products grows, they continue to seek out new sources of fresh fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy, and proteins.

Producer and School Food Buyer Connector Events – referred to in this guide as Connector Event(s) – held in-person or virtually, enable school buyers to explore the potential of local food products available in their region and meet farms, ranches, and fishing operations that may be looking to expand their markets to school meal programs.

WHAT ARE CONNECTOR EVENTS?

Connector Events provide opportunities for producers and school food buyers to meet each other and understand how to move forward with a purchasing relationship. This can take the form of “speed dating,” an informal meet-and-greet, or formalized purchasing discussions. This manual outlines different approaches to connect school food buyers and producers. It also shares best practices that we have learned from holding Connector Events throughout the country as part of the Bringing the Farm to School Through New Connections project. Additional resources beyond this guide are available in *Appendix A: Resources for Connector Event Organizers*.

HOW “BRINGING THE FARM TO SCHOOL” FITS

Bringing the Farm to School (BTFS) is a suite of training resources created to help producers build their capacity to sell to schools. The program includes a highly adaptable curriculum toolkit that can be used to implement state or regional BTFS producer trainings. These materials were developed in 2020 as part of a collaboration between the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Administration (FNA) Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program (USDA Farm to School Program), the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT), and the National Farm to School Network (NFSN).

According to BTFS facilitators, producers found informal networking with school food buyers to be a valuable component of the training. The BTFS team wanted to explore how to formalize these opportunities. Since 2023 – through a cooperative agreement with the USDA – NCAT and NFSN have collaborated with 10 producer-support organizations throughout the country to hold Connector Events across USDA FNA regions. We recognize that networking and Connector Events are not new concepts. However, together with these producer organizations, we explored best practices through several different formats, including producer conference add-on events, stand-alone site visits, and networking at schools. We also worked with Farm to School Institutes to adapt their typical procurement-focused program for school food buyers to include a producer track and Connector Event. This manual shares the lessons learned from the New Connections project along with resources from a wide range of similar projects happening throughout the country. We are thankful to the individuals who shared their experience, expertise, and feedback with our team.

1 USDA, “2023 Farm to School Census Final Report” (www.fns.usda.gov/research/f2s/census2023)

We invite you to explore the many resources developed for trainers and facilitators at the [BTFS website](#). These resources could be used as educational materials and training resources to supplement your Connector Events. The website includes tools such as producer-training slide decks, a Facilitator Guide, and a Producer Workbook. Case studies help illustrate examples of producers and school food buyers engaged in successful farm to school programs. While you are encouraged to explore the BTFS curriculum, it is not a prerequisite for organizing a Connector Event.

Planning

To hold a successful Connector Event, you should expect preparation and planning to take several months. A summary of organizational steps is outlined in *Appendix B: Planning Timeline for Connector Event Organizers*.

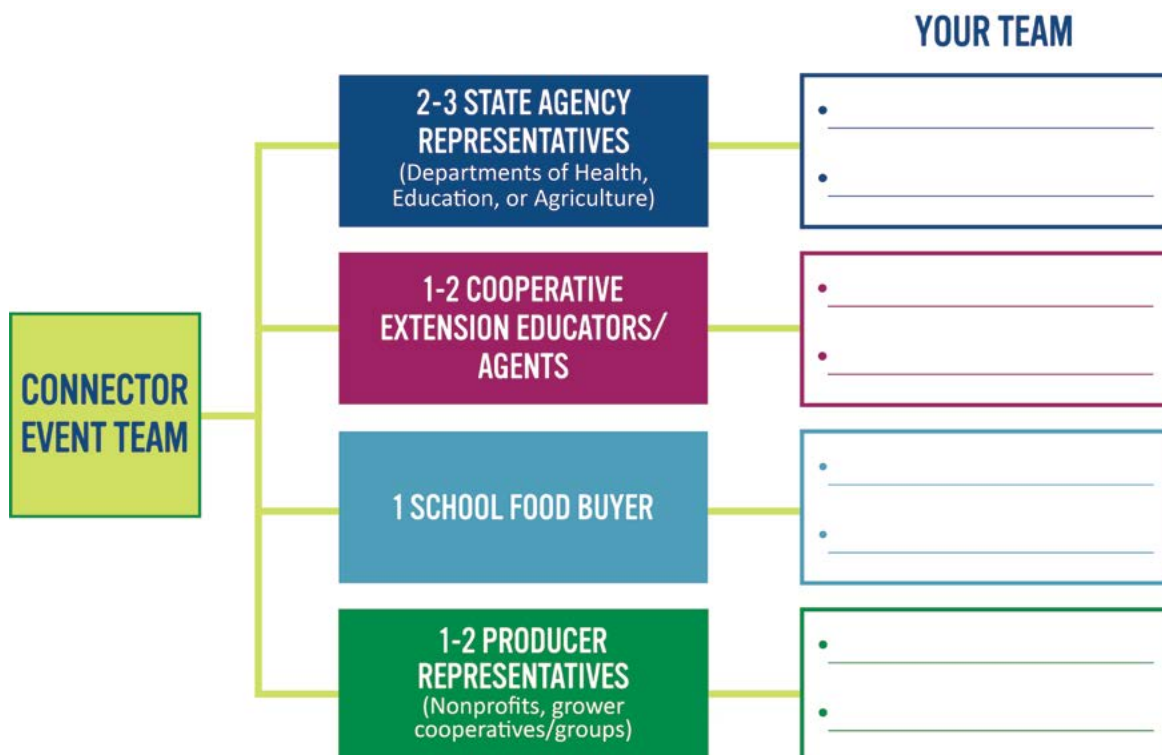
BUILDING YOUR TEAM

A successful Connector Event requires buy-in from a broad spectrum of partners and participants. We recommend reaching out to State Departments of Education and Agriculture; University Cooperative Extension offices; any producer-centered organizations in your area; local farm to school networks; and, if your state has one, a Farm to School Institute coordinator.

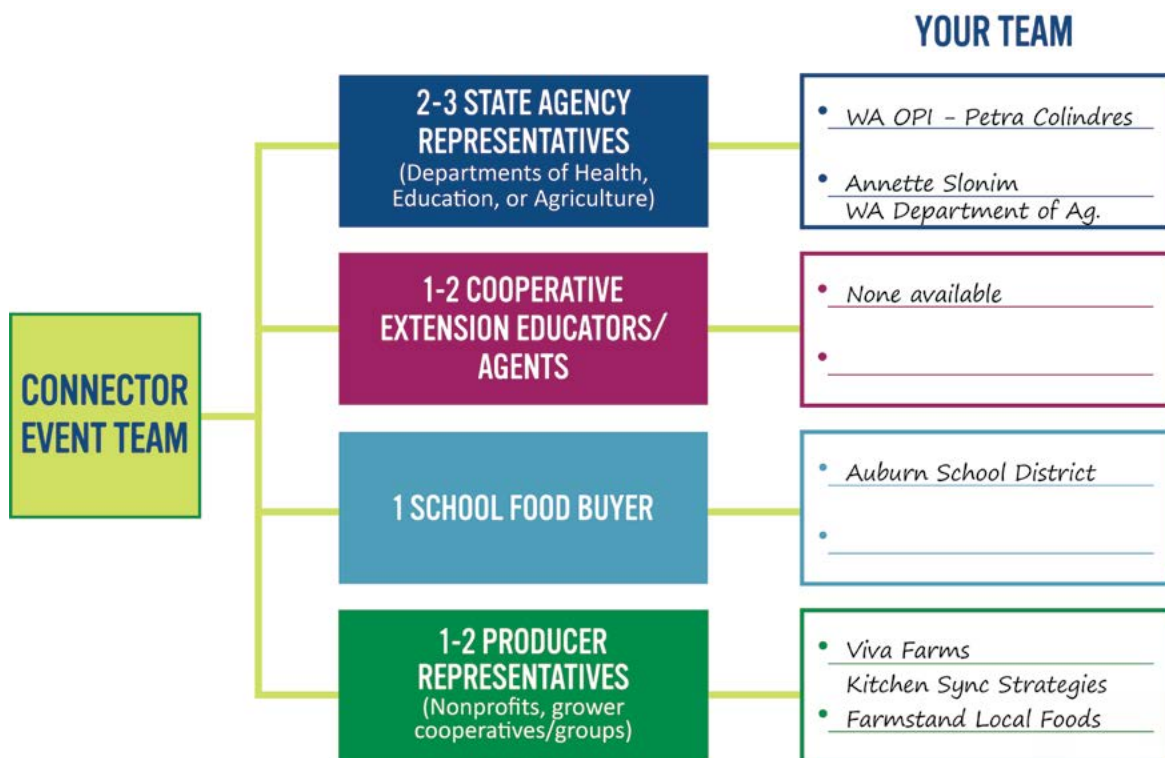
Central to the planning and implementation of any Connector Event is understanding the needs and capacities of both buyers and growers. Be sure that your planning team includes the perspectives of buyers, such as a school nutrition director, as well as growers. Since school food buyers and growers are both extremely busy, we recommend soliciting feedback and engagement through a phone call or by inviting them to one planning meeting once your team has clarity on timing and format.

Consider delegating various planning responsibilities to different types of teams. For example, a core planning team can focus on Connector Event planning and logistics. A separate advisory committee, whose members have insight into the intended audience, can provide guidance and suggestions for the Connector Event agenda and flow that will resonate best. In some cases, it may also be helpful to have a local host committee made up of organizations and individuals in the community where the training will take place.

Use this Connector Event Team graphic to jot down some ideas of your own.



See this example from Washington State Connector Event Planning Team



State Government Resources

State Departments of Agriculture and Education may have staff promoting the use of locally grown food in schools. We strongly encourage you to get to know these staff members.

In most situations, the State Department of Agriculture will be the principal agency to contact for information about resources available to assist producers with selling to schools. Each state also has an agency or agencies that administer Child Nutrition Programs (CNP). CNP's are Federal programs that offer food and nutrition assistance for children, such as the School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program. Agency staff ensure that the programs are managed according to Federal requirements and provide technical assistance to school nutrition professionals on a variety of topics, including local procurement.

Consider adding these experts to your Connector Event team. Connect with your region's [USDA FNA Farm to School Regional Specialist](#) to get recommendations for farm to school contacts and resources in your state.

Use this training team check list to guide engagement with state and regional partners and to highlight important considerations for a Connector Event.

- ☐ The team has a varied set of expertise and skills, and is familiar with the local farm to school landscape; the needs of producers and schools in your area; BTFS content; and/or school food procurement.
- ☐ The team has a mixture of representatives working at different levels, such as local, regional, tribal, or state. Depending on the geographic scope of the Connector Event, this could include representatives from state agencies; Cooperative Extension; producer-support organizations; and state or local farm to school coordinators.
- ☐ The team knows farmers in the region interested in connecting with school food buyers.

IDENTIFYING YOUR GOALS

With at least an initial team in place, you can begin thinking about why this Connector Event is important to your team and your local food system. This will shape your team's vision and goals along with the expectations of both you and your participants. The team should expect different outcomes and set different indicators of success depending on the readiness of participants and the local food system to foster local food sales and purchasing. Understand that the time it takes for Connector Events to lead to substantive purchasing from local producers may vary. Producers and schools associated with this project reported establishing purchasing relationships within six months to a year. In some cases, it may take longer. As you'll read later in this publication, it took one producer two years to establish a sales relationship with a school. These events remain important even when sales don't happen immediately, because they build interest, relationships, and visibility that often lead to future purchases.

As you make decisions regarding your Connector Event, you should know how those decisions relate to achieving your own definitions of success. The questions outlined in *Appendix C: Connector Event Goals Worksheet* will help you start outlining your goals.

Keep your completed goals worksheet handy, and refer to it as you move further along in organizing and evaluating the Connector Event.

The goals and the capacity of your team will inform how you address such logistical considerations as the Connector Event scope and location, which will be covered in more detail later in the planning section.

BUDGET

Your Connector Event planning will need to be based on available resources. Therefore, developing your Connector Event budget will likely be an iterative process. See *Appendix D: Connector Event Budget Template*.

For example, you may identify sponsors or partners who can offer meeting space that will free up limited resources to expand the number of participants or add additional components.

GEOGRAPHY

You want to make sure that you attract enough school food buyers and local producers to make the Connector Event worthwhile for everyone involved. However, avoid drawing upon such a large geographic area that the connections aren't realistic or meaningful. Consult with your planning team to identify what sort of turnout you can reasonably expect based on the event location and timing. Keep the big picture in mind and think about inviting local food businesses that are operating in your area.

Local food businesses play important roles in the farm to school supply chain and, where possible, they should be a target audience. Local food businesses will be used throughout this guide to mean:

- Producers and manufacturers of value-added products (e.g., yogurt, baked goods, cheese, etc.)
- Aggregators, including food hubs, that aggregate and distribute food and raw agricultural products from the area.
- Regional distributors, such as regional produce distributors that focus on specific commodities and distribute within a limited area of a state or region. They are often independently owned and operated.

Aggregators and distributors play an important role in the local food supply chain because they have the distribution and logistics infrastructure many school food buyers and producers lack. They also aggregate products from multiple farms to provide a greater variety of volumes requested by school food buyers.

Consider whether you want a variety of producers representing a diverse array of products to attend the Connector Event or whether you want to focus on a specific type of product (e.g., beef, vegetables, fruits, small grains). Inviting producers who sell specific products will narrow the focus and help simplify logistics with school food buyers. However, you may need to broaden the geographic scope to secure an adequate number of producers throughout the state. This might be particularly true with producers of commodity products such as beef and small grains but less so with vegetable producers. Under Federal procurement rules, the school buyer determines the geographic range that is considered “local” when they set out to buy school food. If you are going to include more than one school or multiple school buyers, you may want to ensure that your geographic area captures multiple school district buyers’ definitions of local.

Geographical Considerations in Rural Montana

In 2023, *Montana Food for Montana Schools* producer-buyer meet-ups were held in three locations across Montana in order to accommodate the state’s different regions, types of producers, and school nutrition directors.

These events were the result of a collaboration between Montana Team Nutrition, Montana Office of Public Instruction, and Abundant Montana. The different locations provided opportunities for participation by producers, food businesses, and school nutrition professionals within two hours of the event location. Partners helped with outreach through local and agricultural press as well as word of mouth outreach to school nutrition directors in the region.

Event organizers aimed to help schools and producers work together to feature local foods in Montana school meals with a two-part agenda:

- **Part 1:** A farm to school training for school nutrition professionals and producers focused on buying, serving, and selling local foods.
- **Part 2:** Agriculture producers and food businesses were able to connect with school nutrition professionals in a casual vendor show format.

“The event had two parts,” said Haley Scott of Montana Team Nutrition. “In the first part, we separated the school nutrition group and producer groups to allow for smaller group discussions and content specific to producer and school nutrition issues.”

The events had an average of 23 attendees, resulting in two producer connections with buyers per region. Also, 90 percent of the school nutrition directors who filled out the evaluation indicated that they were interested in purchasing from the producers they met. Fifty percent indicated that they had reached out to producers or local food business directly after the event.

“I enjoyed networking and hopefully made more connections for my farm business.”
—Local producer participant

“We will be working with local producers by next school year.” —School Nutrition Director participant



Producers and buyers meet up at Montana Food for Montana Schools in Hardin, MT. Photo: courtesy of Allison Bell, USDA Farm to School Program

WHOM AND HOW MANY TO INVITE

The success of your Connector Event hinges on your ability to ensure that both buyers and producers walk away feeling as though their participation was a productive use of their time. This means that school buyers should leave the Connector Event with new ideas and connections for sourcing local products, and producers should feel that they have found legitimate leads for selling their products in the future.

Decide on the target number of participants based on your goals and the characteristics of your audience. Consider figuring out the right ratio of producers to buyers to support your event. Having a diverse team of collaborators (your Connector Event team) assisting with outreach to a wide range of participants is important to ensure that there is an appropriate range of producers, school buyers, and local food businesses who make local food purchasing a priority.

Understand that both buyers and producers may be coming into the Connector Event with varying degrees of experience with local procurement and school sales. Inexperienced participants can be supported through pre-Connector Event preparation, targeted education, and facilitation during “matchmaking” at the event.

The *New Connections* team worked with local producer organizations to target producers with wholesale readiness and buyers with the experience and willingness to purchase local products. The exception to this principle was our collaboration at regional producer conferences. Producer conferences include a wide range of producers with varied experience. However, they provide excellent opportunities to build producer capacity in farm to school sales and facilitate preparedness for successful Connector Events.

If networking is the goal, carefully vet participants to ensure that producers and buyers are well-matched in capacity and readiness. Ideally, aim for roughly equal numbers of producers and school food buyers to support a successful Connector Event. At a minimum, it is important to maintain a balance so that neither group overwhelms the other. Too few participants can lead to awkward interactions, so you may want to postpone the Connector Event until you are confident that you can gather enough attendees to make the experience productive for everyone.

Need More Acres: Prioritizing Limited Resource Farmers

Need More Acres is a 20-acre farm producing fruits, vegetables, beef, pork, and chicken in Scottsville, Kentucky. They educate and work with other farmers to aggregate products for institutional sales. They also collaborate with the University of Kentucky to hold an annual gathering of 40 farmers.

“The goal of the cohort is for us to provide on-farm mentoring as well as an annual on-farm Connector Event that includes a producer and buyer meet and greet. Another of our priorities is providing assistance to help farmers scale beyond the farmers’ market to institutional sales,” said Michelle Howell, co-owner of Need More Acres. “We prioritize limited-resource farmers, although we tend to attract those farmers to our partnerships. There are some other, more resourced farmers who also want to participate, and they do so as well. Many school nutrition directors and service providers are excited to be participating in something that feels real and authentic. We invited school nutrition directors who prioritize local purchasing for this reason.”



A farm tour was included in the Need More Acres Connector Event. Photo: courtesy of Shelley + Portugal Photography and Need More Acres

PRODUCERS AND OTHER LOCAL FOOD SELLERS

It is important to gauge the readiness of producers invited to the Connector Event. Ensure that roughly half of the producers have experience with wholesale markets so schools can speak with producers who are currently able to meet their needs. If your Connector Event team identifies a large number of producers who have an interest in selling to schools but little wholesale experience, it may be better to start with a BTFS producer training to build capacity before connecting them with school food buyers. See the [BTFS website](#) for facilitator resources.

BUYERS

Consider inviting buyers who have both the interest and the capacity to purchase local products. Indicators that a buyer may be ready include scratch cooking, participation in cooperative purchasing, sufficient staffing levels, and experience with local food solicitation models. We recommend that the Connector Event team begin outreach by identifying school food buyers already interested in purchasing local products. In addition, involving school nutrition programs that are actively purchasing local foods and seeking to build relationships with new producers will enhance the learning and networking experience for everyone.

Ready Versus Curious: Accommodating Multiple Levels of Experience at a Connector Event

Refer back to your Connector Event goals. You'll want to pay attention to whom you're inviting. Make sure you have enough market ready producers to attract school food buyers and enough school food buyers with experience and interest in purchasing local products. Keep in mind that, regardless of your outreach and preparedness, it is likely that you will have producers who are curious about selling to schools but haven't made any progress toward market readiness. Having a mix of participants, both buyers and producers, that represents a range of readiness can be a more realistic reflection of market conditions. This is where peer learning can be an effective tool. Consider holding a breakout focused on solutions to some of the challenges associated with local food purchasing. Providing plenty of time for informal networking can also help facilitate peer-to-peer learning naturally. In some cases, following up through technical assistance for both producers and school food buyers can help them prepare for the next event. See the "Technical Assistance" section below.



An equal number of school district personnel, regional distributors, food hubs, and producers were actively recruited to this BTFS Connector Event and site visit at Manor School District north of Austin, Texas. For more information see the case study in Appendix E: Additional Elements to Enhance Connector Events. Photo: NCAT

OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

State or local farm to school coordinators can be valuable additions to Connector Events by providing additional resources, support, and perspectives. If they are not already on your team, consider inviting Cooperative Extension staff, farm to school, school nutrition, and producer-focused organizations, and state agency staff who work with producers or with CNPs. Farmers' market managers and program operators who work more broadly in the farm to institution realm (e.g., hospitals, prisons, etc.) may also be helpful in making producer connections (e.g., a Federally Qualified Health Center running a Produce Rx program). These partners can assist with planning and promote the

Connector Event to school buyers and sellers. If there is a training component for your event, these supporters can provide valuable information and resources during training sessions. For the networking portion of your event, they can facilitate conversations, suggest solutions to producer-buyer challenges, and provide one-on-one support to producers and school food buyers.

MEASURING IMPACT THROUGH EVALUATION

Developing an evaluation strategy will help you measure the impact and success of Connector Events. The data gained from your evaluation can serve many purposes; it can help your team identify areas for improvement, help you understand participant demographics, and help make the case for support of future efforts. We recommend creating an evaluation strategy during the planning phase so that it is designed around your goals and measures whether they have been met.

Use your evaluation strategy to answer important questions:

- ☐ Did your Connector Event accomplish your goals?
- ☐ Was it valuable for attendees?
- ☐ How can you improve the agenda and/or the logistics of any future Connector Events you may hold?
- ☐ What questions or needs should be addressed in your follow-up discussions with participants?

Base your evaluation on your goals worksheet. Many evaluations are focused on capturing changes in knowledge, perceptions, and attitude. A pre- and post-training evaluation can help capture these changes.

A pre-training evaluation can gauge producers' current engagement with CNP markets, interest in selling to schools, existing school sales, and knowledge of key topics covered in the educational sessions and the Connector Event. The post-training evaluation should include many of the questions in the pre-training evaluation as well as questions regarding the usefulness of the training. It is also important to evaluate sales or actions that resulted from participation in the events along with any additional feedback participants may have. For an example of pre- and post-training surveys, see *Appendix I: Evaluation Resources*.

Also consider contacting participants six months after the Connector Event to gauge whether the training, networking, and technical assistance effectively helped producers develop a strategy for selling to schools. If funds are available, incentives can increase participation in a follow-up survey. Examples of incentives include farm or ranch store gift cards or a raffle for a local food and farm supply gift basket.

Consider Collaborating with Farm to School Institutes

The Farm to School Institute program is a professional learning model for growing robust sustainable farm to school programs that originated at Shelburne Farms in Shelburne, Vermont.

Shelburne Farms Institute for Sustainable Schools

This model aims to connect the dots between classrooms, cafeterias, and communities to create sustainable farm to school programs through action planning, coaching, peer networking, and skill building.

There is a growing network of Farm to School Institute adaptors throughout the country. (See the [Farm to School Institute Adaptation program](#).)

Institute participants are primed to participate in a Connector Event because they have received training on best practices for local food procurement and, in most cases, developed an action plan for expanding local purchasing. Consider connecting with a Farm to School Institute adaptor team if there is one in your state.

CONNECTOR EVENT LOGISTICS

As the Connector Event organizer, you will need to decide early on whether the event should be in person or virtual. Both have advantages and disadvantages.

Table 1. Pros and Cons of In-Person and Virtual Events

In-Person Events:

Pros:

In-person connections can help foster the relationship-building process, which is an important component of successful school sales.

If there are site visits, producers and buyers can see school kitchens and packing areas to better understand meal program constraints, needs, and possibilities.

Producers can bring samples and/or have displays that help potential buyers better understand their products.

There is a greater opportunity for unstructured informal exchanges, which may lead to unexpected connections or ideas.

Cons:

In-person Connector Events take more effort for the organizer to host and for attendees to participate.

Events can be costly if you are renting space or paying for catering.

It can be challenging to align the schedules of producers and buyers.

Travel conditions can make it difficult to participate for those living in communities that experience inclement weather.

Virtual Events:

Pros:

Virtual Connector Events can reach a wider audience.

Fewer people are required to run them, and they cost less.

Since they don't require travel, they carry less risk.

Cons:

It can be difficult to build relationships through a screen.

Setting up and smoothly implementing events requires a tech-savvy team.

Abundant Connections: Virtual Model in Rural Montana

In February 2024, the Montana-based Abundant Connections producer-buyer event provided a platform for producers and buyers to set up meetings on their own. Producers taking part in the virtual meet-up provided information on their registration form, including a list of products that they were selling, a schedule of the products' availability, and the producers' distribution area.

Conversely, buyers provided a list of products they were looking for, the quantity they needed, a schedule of when they needed the products, and the region for delivery.

For the week of virtual meet-ups, organizers encouraged buyers to reach out and initiate one-on-one meetings with producers but both parties were able to set up meetings. Abundant Montana hosted a virtual kickoff and a closing meeting.

Erin Austin of Abundant Montana discussed some of the lessons learned from this virtual Connector Event in a subsequent *ATTRA: Voices from the Field* podcast "Episode 358. Abundant Montana 'Meet Up' Meets with Success – ATTRA – Sustainable Agriculture". Erin says, "Sharing a directory with registrants

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ahead of time was really helpful for planning connections and as a reference for participants after the Connector Event.”

“The virtual format comes with pros and cons,” Erin said. “One of the pros was that it allowed the Abundant Montana team to reach a wider audience spread across the very rural state of Montana. The directory of participants was also useful for folks as a reference after the Connector Event.”

“The format we used for people to be able to make and schedule their own meeting times with each other required us to start the meeting for them,” Erin said. “It basically meant somebody from our team needed to always be on call, and that was challenging for our staff.”

“There were some very early morning meetings and some late-night meetings, which are fabulous and nice if they’re not having to rely on a third party to let everybody into the meeting.”

Anecdotally, producers made buyer connections that they hadn’t considered before the event. Findings from the follow-up survey showed that:

- 58 producers and 45 buyers registered and participated.
- 71 meetings were scheduled.
- 20 businesses made new connections with local food producers.

For more details about the logistics and outcomes of Abundant Montana’s Connector Event, click on the link below.

ATTRA: Voices From the Field Podcast: [Episode 358. Abundant Montana “Meet Up” Meets with Success – ATTRA – Sustainable Agriculture](#)

3 EASY STEPS!

- 1 Producers tell us what local food they have for sale and their availability to meet virtually with buyers Feb 13-19.
- 2 Buyers tell us what local food they're looking for.
- 3 AMT makes this information available, and facilitates producers and buyers meeting virtually about wholesale opportunities.

February 13 - 19

Jan 20 Producer and Buyer Registration Deadline
Feb 13 3 PM - Kick-off Event
Feb 17 2 PM - Wrap-up Event

REGISTER NOW
abundantmontana.com/event/abundant-connections/

This outreach flyer explains the virtual Connector Event.

TIMING

Consider the timing of your Connector Event to attract the right ratio of producers and school food buyers. Thoughtful timing will ensure that you can get the best attendance and have participants’ full attention by avoiding their busiest time of year. Keep producers’ production season in mind as well as the busier periods for school food buyers and other local food businesses. The Connector Event will have the greatest chance of success if you schedule it during slower periods for both school food buyers and producers. For example, the peak growing season in Texas is spring and fall, so an ideal time for working with producers in the region is August. But in northern latitudes, August is peak production time. Also, different types of producers are busy at different times of the year. For example, cattle producers often calve in late winter and early spring. Work with your Connector Event team to help narrow down an appropriate time window that works for your target audience.

Explore partnering with producer organizations to add Connector Events at existing gatherings or conferences.

Conferences for producers are almost always scheduled in the producers' off season and can be an effective way to engage busy producers where they are already gathered. This approach can create challenges in attracting buyers to these Connector Events because school nutrition professionals typically do not attend these conferences. Providing educational credits or stipends can help attract school food buyers and provide opportunities for them to understand the producers' perspectives.

Stand-alone Connector Events provide more flexible timing, but the Connector Event's offerings need to be strong enough to motivate producers and school food buyers to attend. Pairing the stand-alone Connector Event with a site visit, meal, or snacks can be an incentive for parties to attend.

OTHER IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

There are a number of elements that you can add to the planning and execution of your Connector Event to help you be more organized or improve participation. These include registration platforms, locally sourced meals, and farm site visits. More details are included in *Appendix E: Additional Elements to Enhance Connector Events*.

Execution

STRUCTURING YOUR EVENT

Once you have decided to host a Connector Event, you will need to decide on the agenda and training format as well as how to structure networking opportunities between sellers, producers, and school food buyers. The Connector Event format should be selected based on the needs of local producers and school food buyers, regional characteristics, project partners, and team capacity. If you have an Advisory Committee, this would be a critical place to solicit their input. See *Appendix F: Sample Producer – Buyer Connector Event Agendas*.

PREPARING PARTICIPANTS

Once you receive registration, reach out to the participants and provide them with an agenda, a list of participants, and any information and preparation that is needed for the Connector Event. For example, if you are having a site visit on a farm, encourage practical clothing for walking in the fields.

Preparing your audience through email communication or a pre-event webinar can create more meaningful connections and increase the success of your Connector Event. A few weeks before, encourage participants to prepare materials that will help advance sales to share at the networking portion of the Connector Event.

If you plan on doing a pre-event webinar, consider using the components of the BTFS curriculum and the resources available in *Appendix G: Resources for Preparing Producers and Buyers for the Connector Event*. For pre-event webinars, the BTFS team has relied on variations of Modules 1 and 2 in the BTFS curriculum. These two modules provide key information on school nutrition programs and the different market pathways that lead to school sales. This educational programming, in addition to applied activities such as worksheets and role-play meetings with school food buyers, have yielded positive results and improved producer readiness.

See below for a suggested list of materials to bring to the Connector Event by type of participant. Again, review Appendix G for additional ideas.

Preparing Producers for Successful Connections

“A successful Connector Event is 95 percent prep work.”

- Elliott Smith, *Kitchen Sync Strategies*

In a recent Farm to Institution Connector Event in Denver, Colorado, Elliott Smith of Kitchen Sync Strategies shared information about school buyers, including the types of products they commonly buy, their grading standards, and their quantity expectations. He shared that information with participating producers prior to the Connector Event. This groundwork helped producers understand which buyers to connect with during the Connector Event, which included wholesale and institutional buyers.

For ideas and a producer-buyer networking timeline see *Appendix B: Planning Timelines for Connector Event Organizers*.

Consider sending the following checklists to the respective participants prior to the Connector Event.

Note that the elements in the following lists are in order of priority.

What Should School Buyers Bring to the Event?

- ☐ Business cards
- ☐ Example of a monthly school menu
- ☐ A list of products you're interested in purchasing locally, including desired specifications such as grading, quantities, and food safety certifications
- ☐ Photos and/or information about the school and school cafeteria (e.g., number of meals, salad bar, cycle menus, procurement timeline, and storage capacity)
- ☐ Ideas for other ways producers could be involved with their school (e.g., fund raisers, special events, and nutrition education activities)

What Should Producers, Aggregators, and Distributors Bring?

- ☐ Business cards
- ☐ Product samples if possible
- ☐ A seasonal product and wholesale price list
- ☐ Information about their operation (e.g., product liability insurance, food safety practices and/or certification, miscellaneous certifications, volume minimums and maximums, and delivery capacity)
- ☐ A list of current buyers

What Should Farm to School Supporters Bring?

- ☐ Business cards
- ☐ Handouts, QR codes, promotional materials, information about upcoming Connector Events, newsletter sign-up sheets, tabling materials if applicable, and/or other resources for attendees

EVENT FORMAT

Need More Acres: Setting the Tone for Mutual Respect

Need More Acres is a 20 acre mid-sized farm producing fruits, vegetables, beef, pork, and chicken in Scottsville, Kentucky. They also train farmers and aggregate products to sell to schools. They start



Photo: Courtesy of Shelley + Portugal Photography and Need More Acres

Connector Events in a circle. According to Michelle Howell, this is a powerful way to give everyone power in the conversation and set the tone for mutuality among all participants.

“There are no teachers and students,” she said. “We all have our own expertise. This also breaks down some of the hierarchy among older versus younger, resourced versus limited resource, practitioner versus farmer. We do not have prompts. We just ask people to share why they wanted to be there to participate. People tend to get vulnerable fairly quickly this way.”

EDUCATIONAL SESSIONS

Based on your assessment of participants, it may make sense to include educational sessions for them. Educational sessions can take place virtually beforehand, in conjunction with a conference, or at your Connector Event. An important question for your Connector Event team is “What do attendees need to know prior to the networking session for the event to be successful?” The answer will likely vary based on whether they are sellers, buyers, or support organizations, as well as the experience they have with local foods in schools.

Adult learning best practices² suggest all educational sessions feature experts with lived experience, applied learning, and interaction. Bringing the Farm to School curriculum uses these adult learning principles. Consider using the ready-to-use and adaptable slide decks from the BTFS curriculum, along with the associated lesson plans, for educational sessions with producers. In addition, the curriculum includes resources for regionalization, interaction, and application through worksheets and discussion. For more on BTFS, see page 1 or visit [BTFS website](https://www.btfs.org/) to access the slide decks and lesson plans. Educational sessions can be split into separate “tracks” based on the role participants play in the school food supply chain. (See the Montana Food for Montana Schools example on page 5.) We suggest having the educational sessions before the networking in order to prepare participants for the networking opportunities. The following section includes a suggested framework for supplemental educational activities, should they be included in your Connector Event.

Session Topics for All Attendees

- **Question and Answer or Peer-to-Peer Models** – Peer-to-peer-learning can be particularly impactful, especially if you have individuals with different levels of farm to school experience participating. Producers or school food buyers with varied experience can share examples of what worked best and share their experiences in overcoming challenges related to school sales. One way to foster peer-to-peer learning is through breakout groups. Event planners may want to use information from the Connector Event registration to curate the attendees assigned to each group. Groups can be organized by experience levels, scale of operations, resource needs, or other important characteristics such as whether they are producers, school food buyers, or distributors.

2 Bell, S. and J. McAllister. 2021. Sustainable Agriculture through Sustainable Learning. SARE Agriculture Innovations Series Technical Bulletin. www.sare.org/resources/sustainable-agriculture-through-sustainable-learning

Organizers can also use the registration to identify and ask individuals to serve as experienced peer trainers at the Connector Event. The facilitators for such sessions should come with pre-determined topics and questions in case conversation slows or participants don't know what to ask.

- **Farm to School Panel** – A panel is another great method of peer learning that can help illustrate successful examples of producer-buyer relationship building. Panels provide “ground truth” to the principles being discussed in the educational sessions through examples. The panels at the BTFS Connector Events have focused on successful relationships featuring varied sizes of school districts and producers. When forming a panel, be sure to select a skilled facilitator. Facilitators should connect with panelists ahead of time to identify key themes, develop framing important to the conversation, and highlight panelists' unique perspectives and contributions to the topic.

– *Suggested Panelists:*

- A farmer or rancher with success selling to schools.
- A local food business representative (including an aggregator or distributor) with success in selling to schools.
- Another institutional buyer of local products (e.g. hospitals and restaurants), especially if schools are not currently buying from local farmers.
- A school food service director who purchases local food products.
- Members of school administration who make farm to school a priority.
- Regional support organization staff who are available to facilitate farm to school relationships.

– *Possible panel questions for school food service buyers:*

- Can you describe your local food procurement process?
- How do you emphasize local products during this process?
- During school menu planning, how do you identify the products you need and the logistics behind the scene?
- What strategies have you employed to source local products at a price that works for both the farm and the school?
- What advice do you have for producers in the room thinking about selling to schools?

– *Possible panel questions for aggregators/ distributors and other local food businesses:*

- How did you get started selling to schools?
- Can you speak to the challenges of scaling your operation, including distribution to meet schools' needs, and how you address those challenges?
- What do you think producers who want to sell to businesses like yours need to know?

– *Possible panel questions for producers:*

- How did you get started selling to schools?
- What drove your interest in selling to schools?
- What local products are schools interested in that work well for your operation? Are you exploring other products?
- Did you have to invest in infrastructure to make school sales work?
- How did you manage some of the identified challenges, such as distribution, price point, and food safety?



The Wyoming Food Coalition Conference panel had a lot of interest and was led by skilled facilitator, Andrea Alma from the USDA Food and Nutrition Administration's Mountain Plains Regional Office. Photo: NCAT

Educational Session Topics for Producers, Aggregators, and Distributors:

- **Marketing Pathways or Channels for School Sales** – In this session, you help producers understand the different pathways their product can take to end up on a school plate. These could include selling directly to schools through aggregators, a regional distributor, or a broadline distributor. It is always helpful to have speakers with experience selling through these channels and maintaining profitable school accounts. Note this is Module 2 in the BTFS curriculum.
- **Introduction to Selling to Schools** – This session can help producers understand the processes and procedures schools must go through in order to purchase from them. This session could review types of purchases as well as details about what school nutrition directors might expect for purchase agreements. This session could also include a school nutrition director explaining step-by-step how he or she buys from a local producer.
- **CNPs** – This session can raise awareness of the different CNPs that school food buyers use to help producers better understand how their products fit “on the plate” and to help them communicate with buyers.
- **Producer Perspective Examples** – This session can share relevant case studies of producers selling to schools, with an emphasis on how the process worked from the producer's perspective.



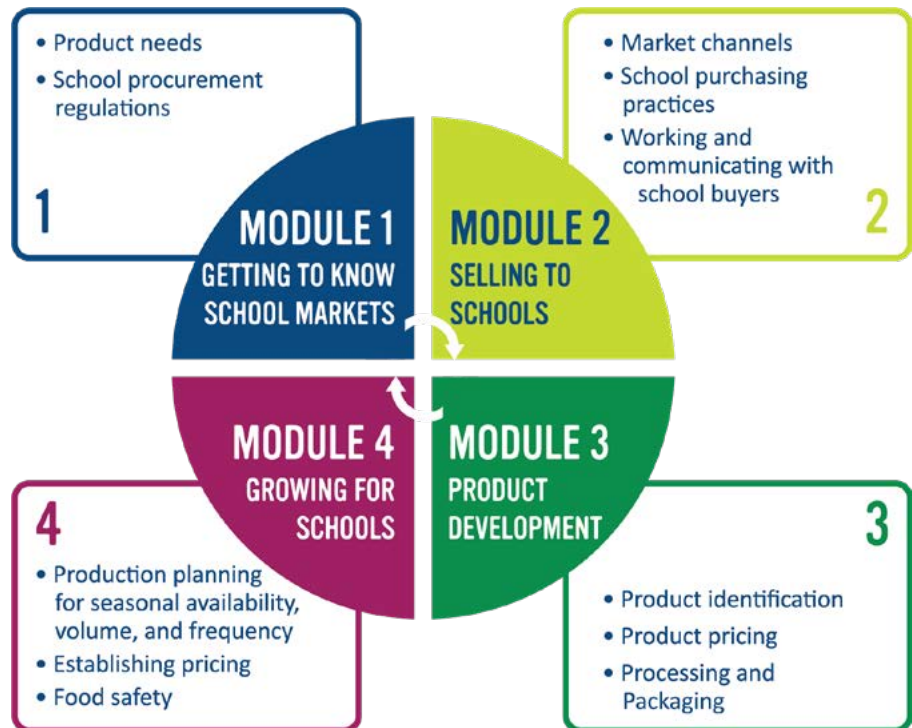
Photo: NCAT

Consider Utilizing the Bringing the Farm to School Curriculum for Educational Sessions Involving Producers

The BTFS curriculum has adaptable slide decks on topics outlined in this section, such as lesson plans, worksheets, and case studies. The topics tie into the educational session suggestions for producers discussed in this section. The BTFS Curriculum Introduction and Modules 1-2 include much of the content suggested in this section.

Slide decks, lesson plans, and more are available on the

[BTFS website](#).



Session Topics for School Food Buyers, Including School Nutrition Directors, SFAs, School Food Service and Others:

- **Local Procurement Strategies** – It is important to show that there are strategies for balancing out the impacts of more expensive items to ease the concerns of schools that are new to purchasing locally or have struggled with it in the past.
Since this topic could easily take a full day, consider breaking it into manageable topics including:
 - *Local purchasing strategies, such as finding and working with producers and other local food distribution companies.*
 - *Explanations of funding assistance and programs that are available in your state or region.*
 - *How to purchase local products with limited school food budgets.*
- **Seasonal Menu Planning** – Information about seasonal menu planning is important because it allows school nutrition directors and staff entering conversations with sellers to have a baseline knowledge of what food the sellers may have available. It can also be a fun exercise to get food service professionals to think creatively about what they can make with the local food that is available in their region throughout the year.
- **Food Safety and Other Regulatory Requirements** – If the producer audience offers local fish, seafood, meat, or grains, consider a session on food safety and procurement requirements and strategies associated with purchasing these products.

MAKING THE CONNECTION - THE NETWORKING SESSION

“Prioritize mutuality among participants. Make sure that everyone understands what the expectations are for the Connector Event. Create a casual atmosphere. Prioritize time for “next steps” and what needs to happen next to make actual sales of food happen. Follow up with farmers and buyers after the Connector Event. Understand that it can take a couple years of connecting to make actual sales happen.”
– Michelle Howell, *Need More Acres*

The heart of the Connector Event is, of course, the direct interactions between school buyers and producers, aggregators, distributors, and other local food businesses. There are several ways to structure this connection-building (or networking) component. Before sending attendees off to begin networking with each other, it is important to provide some context and introduction of who is at the Connector Event.

- **Before the Networking** – If your Connector Event has fewer than 20 people from each group, you could have participants introduce themselves and their role in the farm to school supply chain. With a larger group, if there’s a time when you have everyone’s attention, you can do a “raise your hand if” session to demonstrate different types of farmers, different sized schools, and other attributes of participants that may be helpful to know before networking. Another option is to share a list of participants with information about their business or school beforehand. This allows participants to plan ahead by identifying those they want to get to know better.
- **Supplier Booths** – Consider having a special section with tables or “booths” to provide an opportunity for producers, aggregators, distributors, and other local food businesses to showcase their products and/or services. This product showcase format can offer a casual environment and allow for buyers to peruse the booths and connect with sellers on their own time. Alternatively, the booth format can overlap with the “speed dating” concept where buyers systematically visit each booth for a certain amount of time.

A farm to school showcase is designed to highlight producers, processors, and distributors of local foods by creating a designated “showcase” space for these vendors within a larger school nutrition trade show.³ While it is considered a form of networking, it isn’t discussed in detail in this publication.

For more information on farm to school showcase events, see Ecotrust’s [Farm to School Showcase Toolkit](#).

There are logistical considerations with a showcase set up. You will need to consider both where the booths will be located and what the producers will need to operate the booths. Some producers may need to cook their product. It will be important to identify an appropriate venue for this type of event and ensure the layout of the facility is conducive to what producers will need to showcase their product.



At the **Wyoming Food and Farm Coalition Farm to School Showcase and Connector Event** in Casper, Wyoming, November 2024, all the producers introduced themselves before the networking began. This format helped to break the ice, described the products, and allowed buyers to see which tables they may want to prioritize visiting. The showcase booths remained throughout the farm and food conference, so producers and other food businesses could continue to provide samples and talk with buyers in a casual atmosphere.

1890 Farms displaying their sweet corn production and describing how they sell it to schools. Photo: NCAT

- **“Speed Dating”** – “Speed dating” is a great option if you have a roughly equal number of buyers and sellers who are mostly in the same region and therefore, at a basic level, more likely to be a “fit” for a sales relationship. If your audience spans a larger region, networking groups can be organized by location. Have each seller sit at a table or at their booth if they are showcasing their products. Then match each seller with a buyer. Allow at least five minutes for each connection, and be sure to let participants know when they have about a minute left. Then have them switch in an organized manner (e.g., rotate clockwise, move to the right, etc.).
- *Logistical considerations of speed dating* – Allow some time for more casual networking after the speed dating so participants can have longer conversations if needed. It will also be important to have a roughly equal ratio of producers and buyers present; otherwise, there will be gaps in the connections being made. If there are fewer producers, farm to school supporters and service providers can sit at tables to offer their expertise to buyers.

3 Sobell, S. and K. Pelissier. 2013. Farm to School Showcase Toolkit. Ecotrust.



Networking in a “speed dating” format. Photo: NCAT

The **BTFS Connector Event at the East Central Independent School District** in San Antonio, Texas in January 2025, started with an introduction about BTFS and Texas-based resources. Participants talked in a breakout format about opportunities and barriers for selling to schools in Central Texas.

Each breakout session included producers, local food businesses, and school districts. After the breakout and a shared meal, the networking took place in “speed dating” format. Producers and other local food businesses stayed at their assigned table with their business cards, product list, and other resources. The buyers switched every seven minutes in a clockwise direction around the room. The networking took place in an older school house, so organizers were able to use a school bell to signal the switch. The ratio of producers and buyers worked out well. The event concluded with informal networking.

- **Open Networking** – Regardless of whether your Connector Event provides networking through “speed dating” or a booth set up, set aside time for attendees to connect through informal networking. This could be over snacks and beverages or, if the budget allows, a locally sourced lunch.

If this is the only networking opportunity, visual cues such as color-coded name tags or stickers based on respective roles in the farm to school supply chain can help distinguish between sellers and buyers which can make it easier for people to connect.

Discussion prompts can also facilitate conversation. The facilitators should walk around and help make sure buyers and producers are actively networking. For example, if buyers are hanging out with fellow buyers and producers with fellow producers, facilitators should actively introduce buyers to respective producers in order to create connections. Review producer registration information about what they are selling and their scale to help facilitate these connections.

CLOSING THE EVENT

Keep in mind, as you close your Connector Event, that you want the momentum from the networking discussions to carry forward into follow-up conversations and, ultimately, into concrete actions such as contracts and sales. In the BTFS Curriculum, we encourage Connector Event organizers to remind producers of actions they are planning to take after the event with a postcard or a follow-up correspondence.

A strong closing speaker can share any themes or findings from the day and share any actions they will personally take following the Connector Event. It’s also helpful to close out the Connector Event by reminding attendees of resources and organizations available to them to help them accomplish their goals.

As a facilitator, consider taking notes so you can follow up with specific producers and buyers to help make connections after the Connector Event. A team of people following up with buyers and sellers is critical for closing the gap between *possible* sales opportunities and *actual* sales.

Seth Wilner, a specialist in farmer adult education principles, suggests closing your Connector Event by engaging the audience in a discussion about which goals and continued learning can best support them as they move forward with selling to schools. This same principle could be used with buyers, providing an excellent opportunity for the Connector Event team to take notes and identify how and when they will follow up with producers and buyers.

Make sure that you include time for evaluation to gauge the success of your Connector Event. We suggest allowing 5 to 10 minutes before the end of the Connector Event. In BTFS Connector Events, we found that QR code digital surveys had a low response rate. Setting aside time for participants to fill out a physical copy of a survey will ensure a higher rate of participation. See *Appendix I: Evaluation Resources* for sample surveys.

Post Event

DEBRIEF WITH YOUR TEAM

Taking the time to meet with your team shortly after the event provides an opportunity to review what went well, what could have gone better, and how to improve next time. Consider sharing the evaluations with the team. This will provide feedback from the participants about the overall success of the event.

FOLLOWING UP AFTER THE EVENT

You can help producers and buyers cement successful connections that lead to valuable sales relationships by following up after a Connector Event. This can be particularly impactful after a first Connector Event. Of course, following up depends on the time and resources of the Connector Event team and organizers. For example, if there are farm to school specialists or Cooperative Extension staff on your team, they may have time and resources through their work with producers and school nutrition staff to follow up with technical assistance and resources.

Below is a sample of a post-Connector Event communications and activities timeline. Your own timeline could look different depending on the size of your participant pool and the capacity of your team.

Table 2: Suggested Timeline for Following Up

Note: These are suggestions based on our work with the *New Connections* project. If your resources and time are limited, these actions may not be realistic. You'll want to pick the activities that best align with your goals and resources.

Week After the Connector Event:	
Task	Notes
☐ Review notes from the Connector Event. ☐ Review the participant list and add detailed information about participants while it is fresh in your mind.	These tasks help you recall the participants and draft a personal response. This could be as simple as adding a notes column to the registration platform if you are using a spreadsheet or a client database if you use one.

— Table continued on next page —

Task	Notes
☐ Send follow-up/thank-you emails to everyone who attended any of the BTFS or Connector Event activities and ask if there is anything you can do to help them make farm to school sales a reality. This is also a good opportunity to encourage participants to fill out an evaluation if there was an initially poor response.	If time permits, use the information from your notes to tailor each email, preferably asking each person to do something that requires a response to your email. If attendees indicated how they would follow up at the Connector Event’s closing session, reference these activities and offer to help. This personalized offer will feel more genuine than a stock email. Remind them to reach out via phone, email, or text – whichever is appropriate – for assistance. If participants reach out after your initial email, follow through quickly with their request. If there is little response, consider giving them a call if you have time and it aligns with your team’s goals and resources.
Monthly After the Connector Event:	
☐ Remind yourself or program partners to provide information and relevant resources to Connector Event participants to keep it fresh in their mind and allow for opportunities to connect producers and school food buyers.	Sharing resources and relevant events monthly helps provide additional opportunities for touch points and establishes trust. Resources could include such relevant events as producer wholesale readiness training or farm to school programming. Review the resources in <i>Appendix G: Resources for Preparing Buyers and Sellers for the Connector Event</i>. Also consider sharing information and resources from email lists.
Four to Six Months After the Connector Event:	
☐ Follow up with producers to find out whether they established any sales agreements. If not, try to determine why. This can be done through a formal evaluation process. See <i>Appendix I: Evaluation Resources</i> sample post-training evaluations. ☐ Review your original goals and assess whether your evaluation helps you understand how the process can be improved. ☐ If you are simply trying to understand the success of the Connector Event, you might settle on an informal follow-up email or phone call.	Connecting with the participants on a regular basis after the Connector Event will provide opportunities for producers to identify those sticking points and apply what they are learning in the educational session. This also can be an opportunity to provide information about other events or resources related to selling to schools.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE THROUGH PRACTICE AND APPLICATION

Another adult-learning principle for successful producer-buyer connections⁴ is to provide opportunities to practice and apply resources from the educational sessions and networking opportunities outlined in this manual. To ensure that producers use the information they have learned and follow through on the connections they make at the Connector Events, we encourage you to follow up with participants. As mentioned in the previous section, technical assistance can be an effective way of following up with participants if you have the resources and time.

The more opportunities you give participants to recall key concepts and practice essential skills, the more likely it is that they will be able to apply their new knowledge and skills when challenges or opportunities arise. If your team decides that following up with Connector Event participants is a priority, we suggest using components and worksheets from the BTFS Producer Workbook. These resources help producers address the challenges of selling to schools after the Connector Event. See the [Producer Workbook and accompanying worksheets](#). The follow through can help producers keep momentum when it comes to selling to schools. See *Table 2: Timeline for Successful Follow Through* for examples and suggested timelines.

Bring partners in your state or locality together

to discuss the needs that were identified during the Connector Event and make tangible plans for resource providers to offer resources and support to producers. The BTFS team can help provide support and technical assistance as needed, including connecting with other local and state resources. USDA Regional Farm to School Specialists are another great regional resource.

See the [USDA Farm to School Program staff directory](#).

Also see the “Have Questions?” section at the bottom of each [BTFS web page](#).

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN!

Thanks for your interest in connecting producers with school food buyers. By combining the educational content for producers and schools with a Connector Event, you lay the groundwork for meaningful conversations and create opportunities for successful, lasting connections. Furthermore, following up after the Connector Event with technical

assistance helps producers reinforce what they've learned, address challenges, and solidify connections.

We hope you share your experience with the BTFS Team. While we have extensive experience in developing producer-focused educational programs, we are still learning how to make these Connector Events impactful. We want to learn as you develop your own producer-buyer networking best practices. Reach out to the [BTFS team](#) and [USDA Farm to School Regional Specialists](#) with questions and suggestions. Good luck with your successful Connector Event!



Marietta School District (outside of Atlanta, GA) kitchen site visit and networking event.
Photo: NCAT

4 Bell, S. and J. McAllister. 2021. Sustainable Agriculture through Sustainable Learning. SARE Agriculture Innovations Series Technical Bulletin. www.sare.org/resources/sustainable-agriculture-through-sustainable-learning

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: RESOURCES FOR CONNECTOR EVENT ORGANIZERS

This section includes case studies and examples of producer-buyer Connector Events that are not included in this guide. This section also includes USDA and state-based resources to explore before organizing your Connector Event.

USDA Farm to School Program Resources

The USDA Farm to School program helps CNP participants through [grants, research, technical assistance, and training](#).

- [Selling Local Food to Schools: A Resource for Producers](#) (fact sheet)
- [Integrating Local Foods into Child Nutrition Programs](#) (fact sheet)
- [USDA Foods: A Resource for Maximizing Food Budgets to Buy Local](#) (fact sheet)

Connector Event Models

- [Ecotrust's Farm to School Showcase Toolkit](#) – A guide for connecting local food suppliers with school food buyers at school nutrition trade shows.
- [Wisconsin Farm to School Marketplace](#) – Monthly call connecting buyers and sellers. It includes a list of materials that food service staff should bring with them when meeting with producers.
- [Farm to School Road Show Events](#) – The Minnesota Farm to School Leadership team has held several Connector Events in a series called the Farm to School Road Show. For more information, reach out to the leadership team.
- [York County Farm to School Meet & Greet](#) – This is an informal model of a Connector Event, but it's good to have a variety of examples to consider when planning your event.
- [Growers' 101: Selling to the School Market](#) – Growers were encouraged to participate in this one-hour workshop before going to Community Health Improvement Partner's (CHIP) [Let's Go Local! Produce Showcase](#). The intent was to expand their understanding of selling to institutions and prepare them to have meaningful conversations with food service staff and distributors. Producers' entry fee to the produce showcase was waived if they attended the workshop.

APPENDIX B: PLANNING TIMELINE FOR CONNECTOR EVENT ORGANIZERS

This timeline is designed to help you organize and stay on top of tasks for your Connector Event. We recommend using this checklist as a guide, not a rulebook, and to customize it as needed. The timeline may need to be adjusted based on the size of your event and the capacity of your Connector Event team.

Six Months to a Year Before the Event

- ☐ Build your Connector Event team and determine how to work together. See more in the Planning section on page 2.
- ☐ Identify your target audience and their needs. Consider specific kinds of producers, school food service directors, aggregators (including food hubs), and regional food distributors in the region.
- ☐ Review the training materials in the [BTFS Facilitator's Guide](#) and select which modules you will use based on your audience's needs and the amount of time allocated for your Connector Event. We suggest Modules 1 and 2 for the purposes of the Connector Event.
- ☐ Develop a draft agenda with your team.
- ☐ Work with your team to decide how many producers and which buyers (e.g., school district nutrition directors, aggregators, and regional food distributors) to invite to your Connector Event. Decide whether you will limit producers to a specific kind of product (e.g., specialty crop, livestock, etc.).
- ☐ Determine a target date and time for the Connector Event. Points to consider:
 - Will it align with an existing Connector Event or be stand-alone?
 - Will it align with the off-season for producers?
 - What days of the week and times of day will work best for your participants?

Three to Six Months Before the Event

- ☐ Secure a training facility/meeting room or online hosting platform.
- ☐ Contact potential guest speakers and facilitators.
- ☐ (OPTIONAL) Contact buyers such as a local school district and local food businesses for potential site visits.
- ☐ Develop an outreach plan that will reach producers in places where they frequently receive news and information:
 - Newspapers and radio stations
 - State Departments of Education, Agriculture, and Health, along with universities and Extension offices
 - Farmer conferences, trainings, associations, and Connector Events
 - Other local organizations and associations that work with or represent farmers
 - Direct outreach to individual farmers who could benefit from the training

Three Months Before the Event

- ☐ (OPTIONAL) Make arrangements for meals if you are providing them.
- ☐ (OPTIONAL) If you are hosting a site visit, either arrange transportation or share directions to the site visit location.
- ☐ Update posters, postcards, and other visual media with your Connector Event information.
- ☐ Create a registration process that allows a participant profile to be created and shared before the Connector Event.
- ☐ Once the registration form is complete, start recruiting participants:
 - Have a Connector Event webpage for participants to learn more.
 - Send regular email blasts.
 - Send emails to relevant listservs.
 - Post on a variety of social media platforms that your audiences use.
 - Create social media posts that are inked to the Connector Event webpage.
- ☐ Reach out to local VIPs (e.g., policymakers, funders, school district decision-makers) since they can potentially be trainers or bring more attention to your training.

Two Months Before the Event

- ☐ Confirm the venue and venue logistics.
- ☐ Finalize the Connector Event schedule (see sample agendas in Appendix F) as well as an internal run-of-show schedule for Connector Event organizers.
- ☐ Follow up with potential speakers.
- ☐ Contact partner organizations for assistance in outreach. These should include organizations represented on your planning team. Consider these organizations if they aren't already represented on your team:
 - University Extension
 - Grange associations
 - Farm Bureau and Farmers Union
 - Fruit and vegetable associations
 - Farmers market associations
 - State Department of Agriculture
 - Local food policy council
 - Local farm to institution organizations
 - Local food hubs and food co-ops
- ☐ Reconnect with local VIPs to confirm attendance, re-invite them, or ask for suggestions for an alternate participant.

One Month Before the Event

- ☐ Send a press release to relevant newspapers, television stations, and radio stations emphasizing the Connector Event, and noting the registration deadline (e.g., closes in two weeks).
- ☐ Send an email blast about the registration closing.
- ☐ Continue posting to social media – consider “boosting” the posts if the budget allows.
- ☐ Ensure that any new media announcements have new information or updates. Don't just send a copy of what you have sent before. Examples could include agenda details, panel participants, and ratios of producers to school food buyers.
- ☐ Monitor registration and close it if you reach capacity. If you reach capacity, decide whether you want to create a waitlist.
- ☐ Consider personalized phone calls from your Connector Event team and partners to target producers who might be interested.
- ☐ Prepare evaluations – see evaluation resources and sample surveys in Appendix I: Resource Evaluations.
- ☐ Gather honorariums, thank-you cards, and/or simple gifts for any external speakers or field trip hosts.

Two Weeks Before the Event

- ☐ (OPTIONAL) Print out [BTFS: Agricultural Producers Workbook](#) for participants if you are using this resource.
- ☐ Close the registration and confirm final attendance details.
- ☐ Order any necessary teaching supplies (e.g., markers, flip chart paper, etc.).
- ☐ Confirm food or order food.
- ☐ Confirm any local VIP attendees.
- ☐ Practice the training content.
- ☐ Develop information about participants to help them prepare for the meet and greet portion of the Connector Event.

One Week Before the Event

- ☐ Send press releases to newspaper, television, and radio reporters.
- ☐ Send a reminder, a schedule, and participant information to participants and tell them what to bring.
- ☐ Print name badges for participants.
- ☐ Ensure all materials are printed and binders or folders are prepared.
- ☐ Create directional signage with the name of the Connector Event for parking, restrooms, registration, road directions, etc.
- ☐ If hosting a virtual training, complete a practice run with all presenters.
- ☐ Prepare any recognition for funders and other supporters, such as the venue host.
- ☐ Prepare any thank-you notes or gifts for speakers.

APPENDIX C: CONNECTOR EVENT GOALS WORKSHEET

Answer these questions with your Connector Event team. This worksheet will help you frame your key audience, determine the needs of that audience, and decide how to move forward with event organization.

How Are Producers Selling Local Products to Schools?

Example: Review previous assessments or surveys. Are they selling directly to schools or through an aggregator or distributor?

Your Answer:

What Are the Challenges for Producers Who Want to Sell to Schools?

Example: Scale, Price point, Wholesale readiness

Your Answer:

What Do Producers Need to Know About Selling to Schools?

Example: Producers understand procurement thresholds. Producers understand the types of products and capacity needed to sell to schools.

Your Answer:

How Are Schools in Your Target Region Purchasing Local Products?

Example: Micro-purchasing, Cooperative purchasing, Direct from farmers, From aggregators

Your Answer:

What Are the Challenges for Schools that Want to Purchase Local Products?

Example: Finding producers, Time and labor, Price point

Your Answer:

What do school food buyers need to know about buying local?

Example: How to connect with producers. What is the best purchasing option for local procurement?

Your Answer:

What Does “Success” Look Like?

Think in terms of concrete, achievable outcomes.

Example: Producers connect with at least one school nutrition director.

Your Answer:

Based on These Answers, What Are Some Elements to Focus on for Your Connector Event?

Example: We will need a pre-network educational webinar for producers and buyers. A site visit will help illustrate how regional schools purchase local food.

Your Answer:

APPENDIX D: CONNECTOR EVENT BUDGET TEMPLATE

This budget template can be helpful as you start to plan your Connector Event and if you are planning on applying for grants or sponsorship funds. If you are considering applying for grants, you may also need to consider personnel, fringe and travel expenses, and contractual costs. As mentioned in the timeline section, we encourage having a meal that is locally sourced; however, that is optional. Other often overlooked considerations are stipends for site-visit hosts and transportation to the site visit.

Bringing the Farm to School through New Connections Connector Event Budget Template	
CATEGORY	COST
Venue	
Location Rental	
AV Equipment	
Tables and Chairs	
Miscellaneous (Wi-Fi access, staffing, cleaning, etc.)	
SUBTOTAL	\$-
Supplies	
Signage	
Producer resources – we suggest printing the BTFS Producer Workbooks	
Nametags	
Agendas	
Other Printing	
Miscellaneous (pens, markers, flip charts, dots)	
SUBTOTAL	\$-

— Table continued on next page —

Food and Beverage (consider Federal per diem rates)	
Food (breakfast, lunch)	
Beverages (water, coffee, tea, etc.)	
Snacks	
SUBTOTAL	\$-
Program Costs	
Panelist Honorariums	
Incentives (gift cards, swag, etc.)	
SUBTOTAL	\$-
Site Visits	
Transportation (bus, van, etc.)	
Honorarium for Site Visit Host	
Miscellaneous	
SUBTOTAL	\$-
Other	
SUBTOTAL	\$-
GRAND TOTAL	\$-

APPENDIX E: ADDITIONAL ELEMENTS TO ENHANCE CONNECTOR EVENTS

Depending on the availability of financial and human resources, the following elements can be considered for your Connector Event to enhance the participants' experience.

Event Registration

A registration system will help you anticipate participant numbers, provide an opportunity to learn about the participants, and generate participant contact information for any follow up. Registration data can provide insights about your participants, including the size of their institution or farm and which products they intend to sell or purchase.

Ultimately, how you manage registration will depend on the format you choose for the Connector Event and whether it is in conjunction with an existing conference or other Connector Event. Explore platforms and find one that works for your budget and the goals of your Connector Event.

Consider what information you need from participants when setting up your registration system. The questions could provide more information and help with agenda adjustment or development. Depending on the type of Connector Event you are running – especially if you are going to be handling registration fees – such event platforms as Whova, Swoogo, and Cvent can ease processing payments and handling registration. If there is no registration fee, registration can be handled through your organization's client- and customer-relationship management database (e.g., Mailchimp, Constant Contact, etc.) or through other low-cost solutions such as Microsoft, Eventbrite, or Google Forms.

Although we all want to keep costs low for participants, charging for Connector Events can ensure the participant is committed to coming to the event. It allows a more accurate assessment of whom to expect, decreases the chance of no-shows and cancellations, and provides funds to purchase locally sourced meals, snacks, refreshments, or tours.

Registration fees should be set by your Connector Event team or whoever is responsible for this task. Your working budget can also inform you whether a registration fee will be helpful or necessary to offset costs for the Connector Event. If the Connector Event is sponsored by grants or state agencies, registration fees can simply be the cost of meals for the day, which is typically anywhere between \$30 and \$50. For targeted buyer connections, producers may be willing to pay up to \$100, depending on their market readiness. In our work, we have found that anything over \$100 will need to have guaranteed sales relationships in order to attract producers and school nutrition directors, since both are usually working with tight budgets.

Another consideration is waiving Connector Event fees as an incentive. Community Health Improvement Partners' *Growers' 101: Selling to the School Market* provides a great example of this. Growers were encouraged to participate in a one-hour [workshop](#) before going to the [Let's Go Local! Produce Showcase](#) (showcase). Producers' entry fee to the showcase was waived if they attended the one-hour workshop. The intent was to expand their understanding of farm to institution food sales and prepare them to have meaningful conversations with food service staff and distributors.

Food

Everybody likes to eat, especially when you're talking about food all day! Providing a meal (or at the very least, snacks) is a perfect way to showcase local foods and demonstrate what's possible with local food. We recommend that all training and Connector Events



Networking Lunch in Seattle, WA at Farmstand Local Foods. The Auburn School District brought their food truck which featured locally procured food. Photo: Auburn School District

provide, at minimum, drinks (water, coffee, tea) and snacks for the participants. Providing time for full meals is preferable. Meals are a chance for unstructured networking and for the participants to start building those relationships with buyers.

Highlight locally grown, environmentally responsible food as often as possible. This is a chance to lead by example. One idea would be to provide a locally sourced “school lunch” like the meals that participants could potentially support with their products, or at least a simple meal featuring some of the local products that are common to the area.

Consider soliciting sponsorships from local restaurants, distributors, and farms if you are not able to cover meals through a grant or registration fee. A Connector Event that includes samples can help offset meal needs. Also, delicious locally produced meals can provide an opportunity to charge a small admission fee to cover the event meal costs.

Site Visits

In the spirit of applied learning, we encourage Connector Events to include a site visit. There are multiple site visit options along the farm to school supply chain, such as visiting a food hub, local farms that sell to schools, or a school kitchen. While everyone enjoys visiting a farm, we suggest visiting a school and/or other local food business to help producers understand how their product makes it onto the school plate.

Here are some factors to consider when your team is deciding whether to host a site visit:

- How will the site visit help increase understanding and facilitate more sales to schools?
- What operation could your audience benefit from seeing?
- Accommodate both buyers and sellers through two site-visit options, one directed toward sellers and another directed toward school buyers. You may also consider visiting multiple locations within the farm to school supply chain.
- If your audience prefers shorter Connector Events, you can make the site visit optional and have attendees select the site visit in the registration process.
- Site visits may require transportation. Consider whether it is realistic to have people drive to the site visit independently or whether group transportation is necessary. Alternatively, the site visit location can serve as the Connector Event location if the facilities are appropriate. These considerations will be important factors when developing your Connector Event budget.

Site Visit Helps Producers See ‘Under the Hood’ of a School District Nutrition Program

In collaboration with the Texas State University Small Farms Program, the BTFS team developed a series of educational programming at their annual Southern Farm Family and Food Systems conference.

This included a BTFS educational session titled “Introduction to the Farm to School Supply Chain;” a farm to school buyer and resource provider panel; and a producer – buyer mixer. Participants were invited to a post-conference site visit to “see under the hood of a school nutrition program that makes local food purchasing a priority.” The site visit was at Manor School District in North Austin.



Producers visit Manor School District scratch cooking kitchen. Photo: NCAT

Participants provided their own transportation. The 40 participants included an equal number of producers, regional distributors, food hub staff, and school district food service directors. The Manor School District nutrition director provided a tour of the district’s scratch kitchen and provided a presentation detailing how he purchases local products. There was also an opportunity for further networking through target breakout sessions and free networking time over a meal from the Manor School Nutrition staff.

“The extra networking opportunity proved to be impactful! The meetings led to sales agreements with a food bank and the Manor School district,” said Cody Brown of Growtopia Farms, San Antonio, TX.

APPENDIX F: SAMPLE PRODUCER – BUYER CONNECTOR EVENT AGENDAS

Below are samples of three different types of Connector Event agendas. Feel free to adapt them based on your own logistical needs. To access the slide decks for educational programming at your Connector Event, go to www.farmtoschool.org/our-work/bringingf2s-facilitators

Example 1: Two-Day Conference

Day 1: Conference Session 1	
Day 1: Getting to Know the Farm to School Supply Chain	90 minutes
Day 1: Conference Session 2	
Panel: Producer and School Food Buyers Making It Work	90 minutes
Day 1: Conference Session 3	
Day 1: Informal mixer and networking	60 minutes
Day 2: Optional post-conference site visit: School District	
Day 2: Introductions and networking over local product breakfast	30 minutes
Day 2: Introduction to BTFS Resources	15 minutes
Day 2: Breakout discussion Questions: • <i>What are your top two challenges?</i> • <i>What are your top two solutions?</i>	30 minutes
Day 2: School Food Buyer: “How I Make Local Food Purchasing Work”	30 minutes
Day 2: Kitchen Tour	30 minutes
Day 2: Networking and Local Food Lunch	60 minutes

Example 2: Stand-Alone Event

Half-day event starts at noon	
Registration	30 minutes
Introductions <i>Each attendee will have a couple of minutes to introduce themselves</i>	30 minutes
Resource Overview	15 minutes
Local Procurement Training (<i>producers and school staff break into separate groups</i>) • Farm to School basics • Procurement regulations • Strategies for local food procurement	90 minutes
Break and Transition <i>Note that if producers need more time to set up their space, they can do so during the break. If they need yet more time, make the break longer.</i>	10 minutes
Meetup, Connections, and Networking <i>Each producer will have a table to display marketing and other materials. School nutrition professionals will be able to move to each table in a casual vendor-show style format. Presenters from the Local Procurement Training session will be available during this time to answer questions.</i>	60 minutes
Closing and Evaluation	10 minutes

Example 3: Stand-Alone Event at a Site Visit

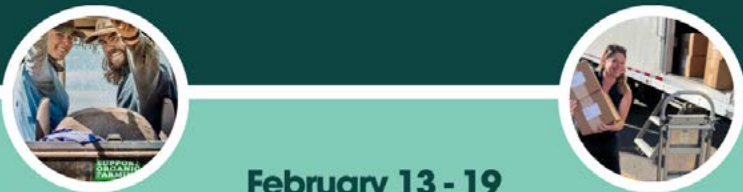
School District Site Visit	
Introductions and networking over locally sourced breakfast	30 minutes
Introduction to BTFS Resources	15 minutes
Breakout discussion Questions: • <i>What are your top two challenges?</i> • <i>What are your top two solutions?</i>	30 minutes
School Food Buyer: “How I Make Local Food Purchasing Work”	30 minutes
Kitchen Tour	30 minutes
Networking and locally sourced lunch	45 minutes
Speed Dating Producer-Buyer Networking • <i>Each producer has a table to display marketing and other materials. School nutrition professionals move to each table. After six minutes facilitator gives a one-minute warning. At seven minutes, school food buyers rotate to the next table.</i>	60 minutes

Example 4: Virtual Event

Weeklong event with one-on-one connections via Zoom or other virtual meeting platform	
Registration Requires very detailed information, which can be shared with buyers	Three weeks between registration deadline and kick-off event
Virtual event kick-off - Share logistics - How to access producer and buyer information - How to set up the meetings - Suggested meeting questions and topics	60 minutes
Virtual meet and greet Participants have one full week to schedule calls.	30 minutes
Virtual event wrap-up meeting - Suggestions on next steps - Evaluation - Further resources	30 minutes

3 EASY STEPS!

- Producers tell us what local food they have for sale and their availability to meet virtually with buyers Feb 13-19.
- Buyers tell us what local food they're looking for.
- AMT makes this information available, and facilitates producers and buyers meeting virtually about wholesale opportunities.



February 13 - 19



Jan 20 Producer and Buyer Registration Deadline
Feb 13 3 PM - Kick-off Event
Feb 17 2 PM - Wrap-up Event

REGISTER NOW
abundantmontana.com/event/abundant-connections/

Image courtesy of Abundant MT.

APPENDIX G: RESOURCES FOR PREPARING PRODUCERS AND BUYERS FOR THE CONNECTOR EVENT

If your Connector Event team has the resources and time, it can be beneficial for participants to prepare ahead of time to succeed. This will vary depending on the participant, of course. But if producers know which products they will have available; how much of the products they will have available; when their products will be available; and how much their products cost, they will be prepared to have a meaningful conversation with school food buyers. Conversely, school food buyers who know which products they would like to purchase locally; those products' specifications; and when the purchases will be made help producers understand whether their product is a good fit.

To further prepare your audience, consider holding a virtual orientation session to explain resources and offer an opportunity for participants to ask questions. Any preparatory events should be held at least one week prior to a Connector Event. See the Execution Section on page 11 for ideas. Below are suggestions for checklists and other resources designed to help prepare participants for meaningful interactions with one another. Many of these can be adapted and sent to attendees in advance.

Bringing the Farm to School Producer Worksheet: School Nutrition Director Meeting Checklist. [Bringing the Farm to School Producer Workbook](#). See Page 32

Wisconsin School Nutrition Director Survey – This survey can be completed by school nutrition staff engaged or interested in local purchasing in advance of meeting with producers. Their responses will help ensure they are well prepared to have meaningful conversations. Conversely, producers can use the survey to guide conversations with school food purchasing staff to determine whether sales with that district might be a good fit.

[Wisconsin New Vendor Meeting Checklist](#) – This checklist includes a list of items food service staff should be prepared to discuss with producers.

[Product Availability and Pricing Form](#) – This is a template producers can use to share information about the items, pack sizes, and prices of products they may have available for schools.

[Community Health Improvement Partners' \(CHIP\) Questions to Ask Your Vendor](#) – This is a list of questions schools can ask vendors and distributors to better understand their local food program and assess their interest in connecting with more local producers.

[CHIP's Farm to School Profiles](#) – These farm to school profiles offer example of key information that school districts may want to share with producers and distributors when discussing local sourcing.

[USDA Farm to School Census](#) – The Farm to School Census can help producers find information on farm to school programs in their state or nearby community. Producers and other partners can look up data at the national and state level on farm to school activities. They can also search by individual School Food Authority to get a sense of where opportunities exist and where their operation might be able to fit into local efforts.

APPENDIX H: STEPS FOR ACHIEVING SALES TO SCHOOLS

The steps outlined below provide a “big picture” of what is needed to set up sales to schools. It could be useful to share with producers and buyers at, or before, the Connector Event.

1. Buyer and seller meet at the Connector Event
 - Provide each party with any information that you have available (e.g., product price list and example micro purchase agreement). See the Preparing Participants checklist on page: 12)
 - Set up a time for a more in-depth call if interested in furthering the relationship.

2. Prepare for the meeting

Seller brings:

- ☐ Business description
- ☐ A seasonal product list and wholesale price list with product specifications (e.g., cherries-pitted, mixed greens-triple washed)
- ☐ Information about their operation (e.g., product liability insurance, food safety practices and/or certification, volume minimums and maximums, delivery capacity)
- ☐ A list of current buyers
- ☐ Delivery details

Seller considerations before meeting:

- ☐ Other ways you might want to be involved in farm to school (e.g. farm visits, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) pick-up, farm stand site, fundraisers, school gardens, and internship programs)
- ☐ Do you have any questions about the process?

School Buyer brings:

- ☐ Business cards
- ☐ Example of monthly school menu
- ☐ Example of a typical purchase agreement and details on any requirements (e.g., product insurance, food safety, drops)
- ☐ List of products you’re interested in purchasing locally, including:
 - basic product specifications
 - desired quantities
 - desired pack sizes
 - desired pricing
- ☐ Photos and/or information about the school and school cafeteria (e.g., number of meals, salad bar, cycle menus, procurement timeline)
- ☐ A list of other ways producers could be involved with their school (e.g., “farm raisers,” Connector Events, nutrition-education activities)

School Buyer considerations before the meeting:

- ☐ Do you want to start with a micro, informal, or formal purchase? Be prepared to talk with the seller about the requirements of each. Starting with a micro purchase is a safe way to establish a relationship and requires less paperwork for both parties.
- ☐ What prices do you need to be able to make this sale work?
- ☐ Can you pair a local item with your USDA Foods in Schools (USDA Foods) to balance the cost?
- ☐ What are your storage capabilities, delivery requirements, and desired food specifications?
- ☐ What are your district’s food safety requirements? Does the seller meet them?
- ☐ Are there other ways the seller could benefit farm to school education and programming (e.g., classroom visits and field trips to the farm)?

3. Complete the necessary paperwork
 - ☐ This will depend on state and district requirements as well as purchase size.
 - ☐ Ensure that the agreement includes clear directions.
4. Make the first sale.
 - ☐ Ensure that both parties are aware of what should be included on the invoice and what is required for recordkeeping.
5. The seller fills the order and the school uses the product!
6. Evaluate how the sale went by checking in with the school food buyer.

NOTE: While the time from making the right connections to completing the first sale will vary widely, several groups of producers and schools have found that it can take an average of six months to a year to establish a sales relationship.

APPENDIX I: EVALUATION RESOURCES

Developing an evaluation tool can help you understand the effectiveness of your event. Listed below are sample surveys from the New Connections project. These are specific to BTFS, but they can be used as a framework to help you evaluate the effectiveness of your Connector Event.

Bringing the Farm to School Pre-Training Producer Evaluation

Evaluation of the training focuses specifically on producers. It seeks to capture changes in their knowledge, their perceptions, and their attitude regarding CNP markets and selling their products to schools. This is accomplished through a pre- and post-training evaluation. The pre-training survey captures producers' current engagement with CNP markets, interest in selling to schools, and knowledge of key topics covered in the BTFS curriculum.

The BTFS pre-survey: [BTFS Pre-training producer survey](#)

Bringing the Farm to School Post-Training Producer Evaluation

The post-training evaluation includes many of the same questions in the pre-training evaluation as well as questions regarding the usefulness of the training and any additional feedback participants may have.

BTFS Post-Training Survey: [BTFS Post-training producer survey](#)

Six-Month Bringing the Farm to School Training and Technical Assistance Evaluation

Participants evaluate the usefulness and medium-term impact of the technical assistance and engagement with CNP markets six months after the Connector Event.

BTFS Six-Month Post-Training Follow-Up: [BTFS Six-Month follow-up](#)

Bringing Farm to School Connector Event Pre-Training Producer Survey

Thank you for registering for the Bringing Farm to School connector event. As part of your participation, we ask that you fill out this survey prior to the training event. The survey takes 10 minutes or less to complete and provides us with important information. We will use this information for evaluation reporting purposes and to improve the quality and content of the resources we provide.

About Your Farm

1. What is your role at the farm (e.g., owner, manager, employee):

2. In which state(s) is your farm located in?

3. How many years have you been farming?

4. In the past year, about how many acres did you have in production?

☐ 1-10

☐ 11-50

☐ 51-100

☐ 101-500

☐ 500+

5. What is the annual gross sales of your farm or ranch?

☐ Less than \$10,000

☐ \$10,000-\$49,999

☐ \$50,000-\$99,999

☐ \$100,000-\$249,999

☐ \$250,000-\$499,999

☐ Over \$500,000

6. Which of the products below do you produce? *Select all that apply.*

☐ Fruits

☐ Vegetables

☐ Meat, poultry, & eggs

☐ Grains & legumes

☐ Fish

☐ Milk & dairy

☐ Nursery, floriculture, and greenhouse items (including plants, mushrooms, cut herbs, flowers)

☐ Value-added food products (e.g. processed/prepared foods, baked goods, preserves)

☐ Other food products, please describe: _____

☐ Other non-edible farm products (e.g. feed & forage)

School Sales

7. In the past year, did your business sell any product(s) to local schools? *Select all that apply.*

☐ Yes, I sold directly (i.e., not through a distributor or aggregator) to local schools

☐ Yes, I sold through a distributor or aggregator

☐ No, I did not sell any products to local schools

☐ Not sure

8. (If yes to direct sales) In the past year, about what percent of your total gross farm income came from DIRECT sales to schools?

9. (If yes to sales through distributor or aggregator) In the past year, about what percent of your total gross farm income came from school sales through a distributor or aggregator?

10. (If yes to direct sales) In the past year, about how many schools or school districts did you sell directly to?

11. (If yes to direct sales) What products did you sell?

12. How do you typically conduct business with the schools you sell directly to? *Select all that apply.*

☐ Formal contracts/purchase agreement

☐ Informal contracts (ongoing relationship without written contract)

☐ Sell products occasionally

☐ Respond to solicitations

☐ Other, please explain: _____

(If marked respond to solicitations)

13. (If selected solicitations) How often have your responses to bids or proposals been successful?

☐ Always

☐ Usually

☐ About half the time

☐ Seldom

☐ Never

14. In the past year, about how many different agricultural products (e.g. varieties) did you sell to schools (either directly or indirectly) e.g. If you sold cherry tomatoes, grape tomatoes, and cucumbers to the schools, you'd put 2 not 3.

15. In the past year, did your farm participate in any educational activities, such as field trips, presentations, or special events at any school?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Don't know

16. (If yes to events) How many separate activities did you participate in?

Farm to School Knowledge

17. How interested are you in beginning or expanding sales to local schools?

☐ Not at all interested

☐ Slightly interested

☐ Moderately interested

☐ Very interested

☐ Don't know

18. In general, how would you rate your level of knowledge about selling your products to schools?

☐ Very low

☐ Low

☐ Medium

☐ High

☐ Very high

19. Please rate your agreement with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I understand the different FNS child nutrition programs (e.g. National School Lunch, School Breakfast, Summer Food Service) and the unique needs of each					
I know how to find and begin communicating with schools that are interested in purchasing products from local farms.					

I know how to develop purchasing relationships with schools.					
I know how to effectively respond to a solicitation from school food service (e.g., Invitation for Bid, Request for Proposals, or informal solicitation)					
I know how to plan my crops based on school menus and schedules					
I understand the food safety and traceability requirements of schools.					
I know what infrastructure and capacity are needed to sell to schools.					
I am confident in my ability to effectively produce and sell my products to schools.					

Additional Feedback

20. Anything else you'd like to share?

Bringing the Farm to School

Connector Event Post-Training Producer Survey

Thank you for participating in this Bringing Farm to School connector event. As part of your participation, we ask that you fill out this survey to provide feedback on the training event. The survey takes 10 minutes or less to complete and provides us with important information. We will use this information for evaluation reporting purposes and to improve the quality and content of the resources we provide.

About Your Training Session

What areas of the Bringing Farm to School Training did you participate in? *Select all that apply.*

- ☐ Getting to Know School Markets (Module 1) — overview of USDA Child Nutrition Programs and regulations/characteristics that influence purchasing practices.
- ☐ Selling to School Markets (Module 2) — information to assess operational capacity to meet standards for various school market channels.
- ☐ Choosing the Right Product to Sell to Schools (Module 3) — How your product fits on the school meal plate and the type of product that is a good fit with your chosen school market channel.
- ☐ Growing for School Markets (Module 4) — Business and production planning to meet school meal requirements and the product mix identified.
- ☐ Bringing the Farm to School Buyer Connections
- ☐ All of the above
- ☐ I don't know

How useful was the BTFS training?

- ☐ Not at all useful
- ☐ A little useful
- ☐ Useful
- ☐ Very useful

Did you make any useful connections with the following? *Select all that apply.*

- ☐ Other producers interested in farm to school
- ☐ Producer organization(s)

- ☐ Distributors or aggregators
- ☐ Child Nutrition Program Staff
- ☐ None of the above

Do you plan to implement change(s) based on what you learned during the BTFS training?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

What change(s) do you plan to make?

Farm to School Knowledge

How interested are you in beginning or expanding sales to local schools?

- ☐ Not at all interested
- ☐ Slightly interested
- ☐ Moderately interested
- ☐ Very interested
- ☐ Don't know

In general, how would you rate your level of knowledge about selling your products to schools?

- ☐ Very low
- ☐ Low
- ☐ Medium
- ☐ High
- ☐ Very high

Please rate your agreement with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I understand the different FNS child nutrition programs ((e.g. National School Lunch, School Breakfast, Summer Food Service)) and the unique needs of each)					
I know how to find and begin communicating with schools that are interested in purchasing products from local farms.					
I know how to develop purchasing relationships with schools.					
I know how to effectively respond to a solicitation from school food service (e.g., Invitation for Bid, Request for Proposals, or informal solicitation)					
I know how to plan my crops based on school menus and schedules					
I understand the food safety and traceability requirements of schools.					
I know what infrastructure and capacity is needed to sell to schools.					
I am confident in my ability to effectively produce and sell my products to schools.					

Training Feedback

What suggestions do you have for improving the BTFS training?

Bringing the Farm to School

Technical Assistance/Connector Event Six-month Follow-up

Thank you for your continued participation in the Bringing Farm to School program. We ask that you fill out this quick (5 minutes) survey to provide feedback on the training event. We will use this information for evaluation reporting purposes and to improve the quality and content of the resources we provide.

1. In the past six months, have you had any conversations with farm to school buyers as a result of attending the connector event?

☐ Yes

☐ No

2. In the past six months, have you started or expanded your farm sales to local schools / school districts?

☐ Yes, I have expanded my sales to schools

☐ Yes, I started selling to schools

☐ No

(If yes to sales) By how much have your sales to local schools increased by?

☐ 0%

☐ 1-25%

☐ 25-50%

☐ Over 50%

3. What changes, if any, have you made as a result of attending the connector event or by receiving technical assistance? *Select all that apply.*

☐ Changed my crop planning to meet school menus and schedules

☐ Responded to at least one local food solicitation

☐ Adjusted food safety and packing protocols to meet school requirements

☐ Invested in new infrastructure and/or capacity to scale up my production to sell to schools

☐ Other, please describe: _____

☐ None of the above

4. Based on the knowledge or skills you learned in the connector event or via technical assistance, have you experienced any of the following impacts? *Select all that apply.*
- ☐ Increased income based on new or expanded sales to schools
 - ☐ Increased production based on new or expanded sales to schools
 - ☐ Adjusted my marketing strategy
 - ☐ Enhanced purchasing relationships with schools
 - ☐ Increased confidence in my ability to produce and sell my products to schools
 - ☐ Other, please describe: _____
 - ☐ None of the above
5. In which of the following topics have you received technical assistance? *Select all that apply.*
- ☐ Finding and responding to farm to school solicitations
 - ☐ Business planning for school sales
 - ☐ Scaling up my operation for school sales
 - ☐ Packing and grading for school sales
 - ☐ Building relationship with school Food Authorities
 - ☐ Other, please describe: _____
 - ☐ None of the above
6. How helpful was the technical assistance you received? Are there any additional farm to school topics you wish you had received technical assistance in but didn't?
7. When it comes to selling your farm products to schools, what barrier(s), if any, do you continue to face?
8. Anything else you'd like to share about the BTFS connector event or technical assistance you received?

NOTES

NOTES



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