

# Farm to School Coordinators: Key Findings from a National Landscape Study

*Prepared by the National Farm to School Network based on research conducted by the Colorado State University Institute for Research in the Social Sciences (IRISS)*

## Farm to school programs are transformative.

They bring fresh, local food into cafeterias, connect students to hands-on learning, and support local economies. But the presence of **a dedicated Farm to School Coordinator** is what makes these programs sustainable and far-reaching.

To better understand the role and impact of these coordinators, National Farm to School Network partnered with Colorado State University's Institute for Research in the Social Sciences. Researchers conducted interviews, focus groups, and a nationwide survey of over 150 individuals responsible for farm to school coordination, providing both qualitative and quantitative insight into current practices and outcomes. This summary highlights the key findings from that study: **who these coordinators are, what they do, and how they drive results.**

Several charts are included that compare outcomes across multiple groups:

**Farm to School (F2S) Coordinators:** individuals holding that role or similar

**All Respondents:** all survey participants coordinating F2S efforts

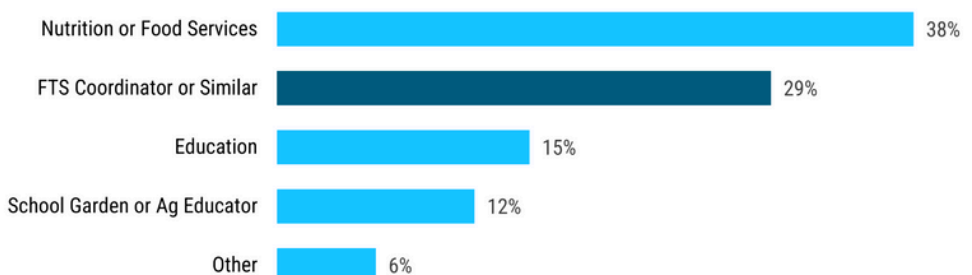
**All School Food Authorities (SFAs):** data from the USDA's national Farm to School Census

## Key Finding: Coordinators Are Integrated into Schools and Districts in a Variety of Ways

### Job Titles & Roles

Coordinators come with a variety of titles: nutrition director, garden educator, F2S manager, program lead. Nearly **three out of four** coordinators dedicate more than **half of their role** to farm to school, and over **half spend more than 75% of their time** on this work.

Chart 1. Many individuals primarily responsible for coordinating farm to school programming are not formally titled farm to school coordinators.



## Where They Work

Most F2S coordinators are housed either in **nonprofits (39%)** or **child nutrition services (32%)**, though they can also be found in other school-based roles, district departments, and public health agencies.

## How They're Funded

Federal grants are the primary funding source for many roles. However, **reliance on grant funding contributes to job instability**. Many coordinators described juggling multiple grants or having unclear job longevity due to shifting budgets.



## Key Finding: Coordinators Drive Higher Outcomes Across All Program Pillars

### Local Procurement

84%

of coordinator sites procure and serve local and regional foods (vs. 63% of SFAs)

Coordinators report **more frequent** weekly servings of **local fruits, vegetables, protein, and dairy**.

Chart 2. Farm to school coordinators report higher rates of procurement than the overall sample and the national average of all SFAs.

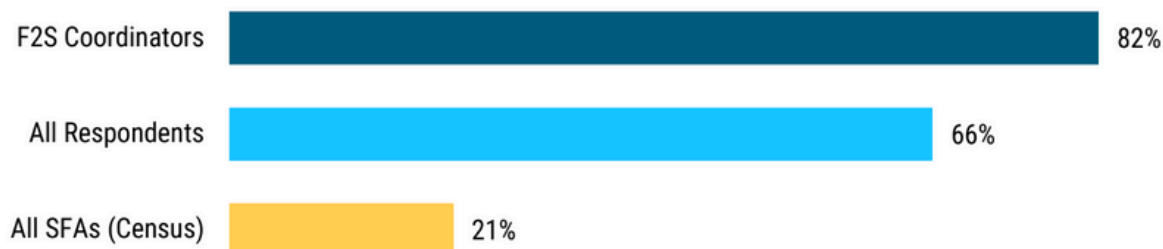


## Food and Agriculture Education

**82%** of coordinator sites conduct **ag education** in the classroom (vs. 21% of SFAs)

**84%** of coordinator sites include these lessons **at least once per month**

Chart 3. Farm to school coordinators report higher participation in farm to school education in the classroom than both the national average and the full survey sample.

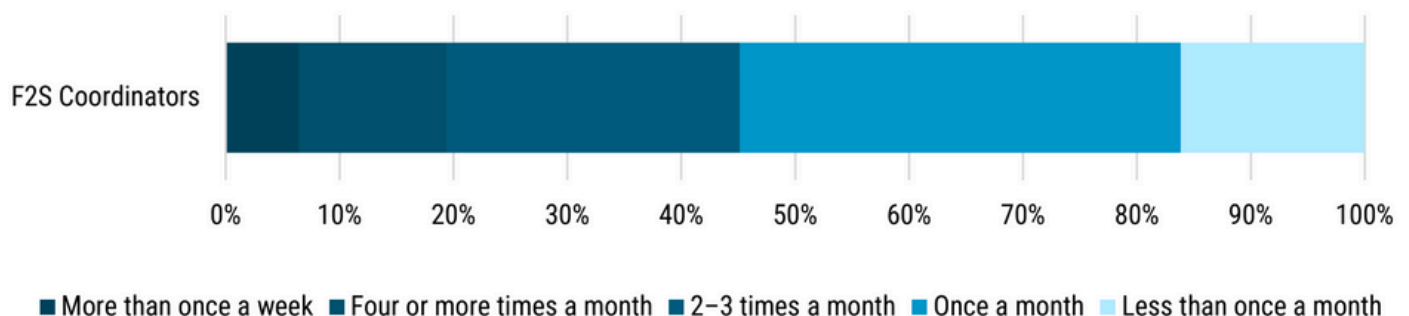


## School Gardens

**76%** of coordinator sites have **edible school gardens** (vs. 15% of SFAs)

**93%** of those sites report **regular student participation** (mostly 2–3 times per month or more)

Chart 4. A strong majority of farm to school coordinators report that students participate in agricultural education or school garden activities in the classroom at least once per month.



Coordinators also lead taste tests, organize field trips, host promotional events, and serve as connectors between farmers, teachers, cafeteria staff, and students.

## The Ripple Effect: Impact on Students and Families

Sites with dedicated coordinators show higher farm to school participation at every grade level, including early childhood:

**97%**

of **elementary school students** participate at coordinator sites (vs. 58% at all SFAs)

**82%**

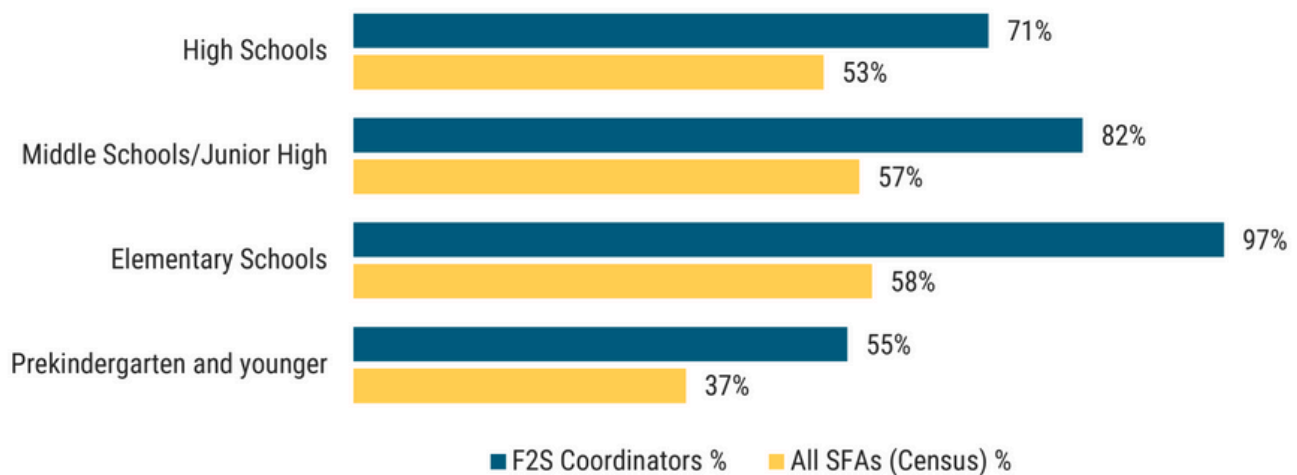
**middle school** student participation

**71%**

**high school** student participation



Chart 5. Farm to school coordinators report higher farm to school participation across all grade levels as compared to the national average.



Participants shared stories of students expanding their food vocabulary, getting excited about gardening, and forming real connections to their local food system. Coordinators also noted benefits to families, farmers, cafeteria staff, and the wider community.

***"The kids are getting better food. The farmers are getting more money. It's just a win-win for everyone."***



## Key Challenges: Coordinators Face Barriers that Undermine Program Stability

Despite their clear value, F2S Coordinators face common challenges:

- **Unstable funding:** many roles are tied to short-term grants
- **Unclear expectations:** coordinators often build their own job descriptions
- **Limited compensation and recognition:** nearly one-third reported dissatisfaction with pay
- **Burnout:** many work in isolation, juggling complex responsibilities

Still, most feel empowered in their work: **84% said they have adequate authority** to carry out their role.

## Recommendations

To grow and sustain farm to school efforts:

- **Invest in dedicated F2S Coordinator positions** at the school or district level
- **Clarify roles and responsibilities** with consistent job titles and expectations
- **Embed these roles into stable structures**, like child nutrition departments
- **Use national benchmarks** to track progress and guide program improvement

Farm to school programs thrive when they have a champion. This research confirms what practitioners already know: **having a dedicated or designated coordinator isn't just helpful, it is essential for achieving lasting impact across cafeterias, classrooms, and communities.**



*The 2024-2025 cohort of the NFSN Farm to School Community of Practice*

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