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FARM to SCHOOL  
NETWORK

# BIPOC Growers And Farm to School

Finding your path into school markets

*Insights, pathways, and resources to help you  
explore K-12 and early care and education markets*



# Acknowledgments



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This guide reflects several years of engagement with growers and partners working to strengthen equitable pathways into farm to school markets. Its content and direction were shaped through producer outreach, regional convenings, technical assistance, peer learning, and direct feedback from growers exploring or participating in institutional markets.

## Advisory Contributors & Project Collaborators

NFSN gratefully acknowledges the advisory group members and regional partners whose experience, feedback, and perspectives helped inform the development and direction of this work:

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Their contributions helped ground this work in the experiences of growers and practitioners working across different regions, roles, and food-system contexts.

## With Special Thanks to Growers

NFSN extends special appreciation to the **38 growers who participated in the BIPOC Grower Needs Assessment: Farm to School & Institutional Markets.**

Your experiences, priorities, challenges, and recommendations directly shaped this guide. Your responses helped elevate the importance of buyer relationships, procurement navigation, capital and infrastructure, distribution, food safety, aggregation, cooperative partnerships, and continued opportunities for peer learning and technical assistance.

Thank you for sharing your knowledge and helping shape resources intended to better serve growers exploring farm to school markets.

# Welcome

School markets may offer you opportunities to diversify your sales, build new community relationships, and help children access fresh, locally grown, and culturally relevant foods. At the same time, selling to schools can feel unfamiliar. You may have questions about how schools purchase food, who makes buying decisions, whether you can meet volume expectations, how delivery works, what food-safety requirements apply, and whether the price will work for your farm.

You are not alone in asking these questions.

The National Farm to School Network has been listening to BIPOC growers about their interests, experiences, and needs related to school and institutional markets. This guide reflects what growers shared. It is designed to help you understand the pathways available to you, identify the support you may need, and connect with people and resources that can help you take your next step.

We also recognize that market access is not only about whether an individual grower is “ready.” BIPOC growers have historically faced inequitable access to land, capital, technical assistance, public programs, policy decisions, and established market relationships. These conditions continue to shape who can enter institutional markets and what support growers may need to participate successfully.



# About the National Farm to School Network

The National Farm to School Network, or NFSN, works to strengthen connections among children, communities, and local and regional food producers.

We support farm to school through:

- training and technical assistance;
- practical tools and resources;
- peer learning and relationship-building;
- partnerships across the food system; and
- policy advocacy that strengthens local food purchasing.

Our work is grounded in the belief that farm to school should benefit children, farmers, school communities, and local economies. We also believe racial equity must be central to how farm to school programs and markets are designed.

That means asking important questions:

- Who has access to school-market opportunities?
- Whose food, knowledge, and agricultural traditions are valued?
- Which growers have established relationships with buyers?
- What barriers prevent growers from participating?
- What must schools, agencies, and organizations change to create more equitable markets?

NFSN operates as a network because you should not be expected to navigate school markets alone. We work with growers, school nutrition professionals, food hubs, cooperatives, technical-assistance providers, state agencies, community organizations, and other partners to strengthen the relationships and infrastructure that make local procurement possible.

You can also become an NFSN Partner and join a national network of individuals and organizations working to strengthen farm to school. Becoming a Partner can help you stay connected to farm to school resources, learning opportunities, events, and others working to strengthen local and regional food systems. [Learn more and become an NFSN Partner.](#)



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## How to use this guide

This guide is a starting point. It is not intended to teach you everything you need to know about selling to schools. Use this guide to:

- understand the different ways your products might reach a school;
- consider whether school markets align with your farm goals;
- identify common barriers and possible solutions;
- locate people and organizations that can support you;
- learn from the experiences of other BIPOC growers; and
- find more detailed tools when you are ready to move forward.

The companion **Bringing the Farm to School (BTFTS) Producer Workbook** provides detailed guidance on school-market readiness, procurement, buyer relationships, product selection, pricing, food safety, production planning, and business action planning. This guide also draws inspiration from the Kentucky Farm to School Month Toolkit, particularly its practical approach to identifying community partners, understanding pathways into school markets, and connecting growers with the people and resources that can support them.

### This guide helps you answer four initial questions:

- ➡ Where am I in this process?
- ➡ What might be getting in my way?
- ➡ Who can help me?
- ➡ What should I do next?

Throughout the guide, you will find three types of callouts:

#### What Growers Told Us

Findings and perspectives from the grower needs assessment.

#### Questions for Your Farm

Prompts to help you consider whether school markets align with your goals and capacity.

#### Dig Deeper

Directions to the relevant section of the BTFTS Producer Workbook or another targeted resource.



## Equitable Farm to School Market Access Initiative

The Equitable Farm to School Market Access Initiative reflects NFSN's ongoing work to strengthen connections between BIPOC growers with schools and other institutional markets. Through this work, NFSN seeks to better understand the opportunities, barriers, relationships, and resources that shape growers' ability to participate in these markets.

This initiative may provide you with opportunities to:

- connect with other growers;
- learn how school markets operate;
- meet school buyers and food-system partners;
- participate in peer learning and technical assistance;
- share your experiences and priorities; and
- help shape future resources and programs.

As part of this work, NFSN conducted the **BIPOC Grower Needs Assessment: Farm to School & Institutional Markets**, which gathered input from 38 growers across the country.

Responses showed strong interest in institutional markets while also identifying persistent barriers and a clear need for continued support, relationship-building, and connection. NFSN is using these findings to help ensure that future resources, technical assistance, and programming reflect growers' actual experiences and market realities.

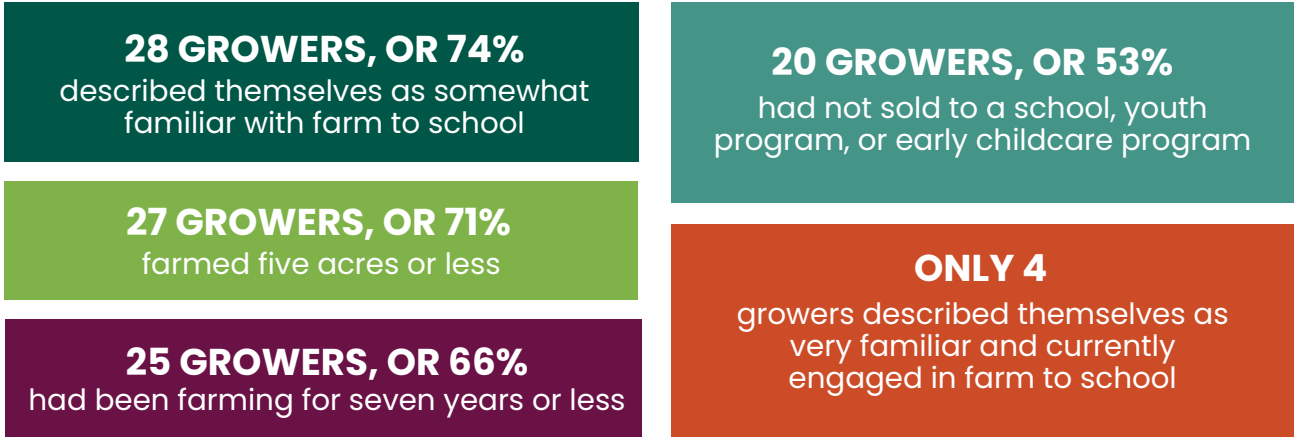


# What we heard from BIPOC growers

You may already know something about farm to school but still be unsure how to turn that knowledge into a market opportunity.

That experience was common among growers who responded to the needs assessment.

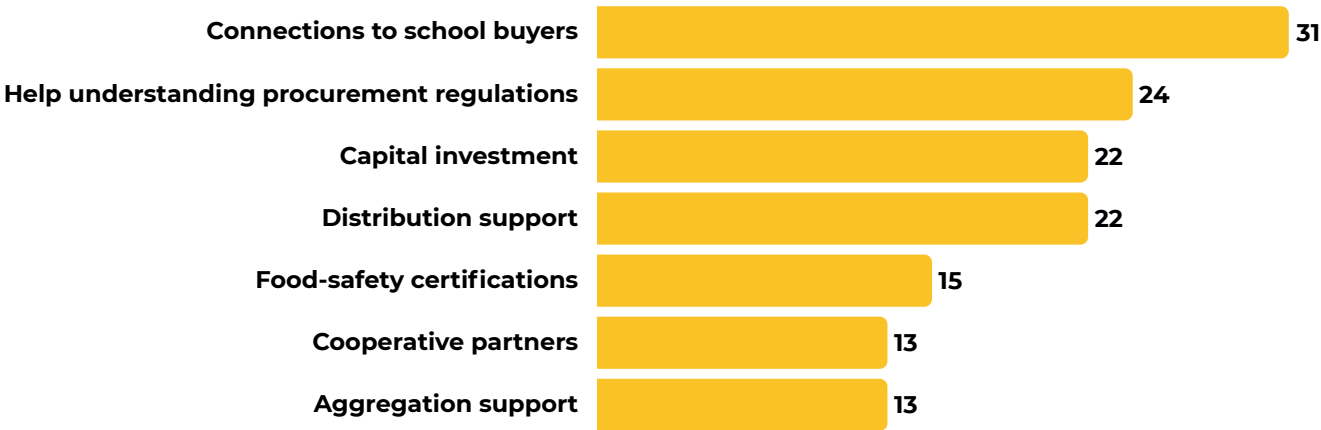
**Of the 38 respondents:**



These findings suggest that many growers are not beginning from a place of no experience. Rather, they may understand the general idea of farm to school but still need support translating that awareness into a viable market relationship.

## Growers identified several interconnected needs.

The most commonly selected needs were:



These needs are interconnected.

You may understand procurement but still lack transportation. You may have a strong relationship with a buyer but need more volume. You may be able to grow the product but lack washing, packing, storage, or processing infrastructure.

# Why consider school markets?

School markets may provide you with opportunities to:

- diversify your customer base;
- develop recurring or seasonal sales;
- build long-term relationships in your community;
- introduce children to locally grown and culturally relevant foods;
- connect your farm with education, taste tests, or farm visits; and
- participate in a stronger local and regional food economy.

Growers responding to the needs assessment frequently described their work in terms of community health, food access, food sovereignty, environmental stewardship, cultural connection, and creating opportunities for future generations.

School markets may align with those values, but the market must also work for your farm.

School sales will not be the right fit for every farm, and they do not have to be. Exploring the market can help you decide whether it supports your goals or would place too much strain on your time, production, finances, or infrastructure.

## Questions for your farm:

- Why are you interested in selling to schools?
- Do school sales align with your farm's mission and long-term goals?
- Do you grow products that schools may be able to use?
- Can you meet the buyer's expectations while covering your costs?
- Would school sales complement or compete with your existing markets?
- What infrastructure or relationships would you need?
- How much risk are you comfortable taking on?

The BTFTS workbook encourages you to consider your farm goals, community impacts, profitability, transportation, production capacity, infrastructure, and risk before entering school markets.

**Dig Deeper:** BTFTS Introduction: The Power of Farm to School and the School Business Assessment.



# Finding your path into school markets

There is more than one way for your products to reach a school.

The best pathway for you may depend on:

- your farm size;
- what you grow or produce;
- the amount you can supply;
- your location;
- your transportation capacity;
- your storage and processing infrastructure;
- your existing wholesale experience; and
- how schools in your area purchase food.

**Dig Deeper:** BTFTS Module 2, Selling to School Markets.

## Selling directly to a school

You may sell directly to a school district, individual school, or early care and education program.

This pathway may work for you when:

- you are located near the buyer;
- the buyer can use smaller or seasonal quantities;
- you are comfortable communicating directly with school nutrition staff;
- you can manage the required paperwork and invoicing; and
- delivery expectations are realistic for your farm.

Direct sales can help you build a close relationship with the buyer. However, you may also be responsible for marketing, procurement paperwork, packaging, delivery, communication, and invoicing.

## Selling through a food hub or aggregator

A food hub or aggregator combines products from multiple farms and sells or distributes them to schools and other institutional buyers.

This pathway may help you when:

- you cannot meet the buyer's full volume on your own;
- the school prefers to work with fewer vendors;
- transportation or storage is a challenge;
- you need help with invoicing, sales, or procurement; or
- the hub already has a relationship with the school.

Several growers responding to the needs assessment expressed concerns about filling complete orders, maintaining volume, finding aggregators, and managing transportation and storage.

A food hub may help address some of these issues, although you will need to understand its pricing, product specifications, payment structure, and vendor requirements.

## Working through a farmer cooperative

A cooperative allows you and other growers to work together to address volume, distribution, storage, processing, marketing, or administrative needs.

This pathway may help you reach markets that would be difficult to serve alone.

Successful cooperation also requires:

- clear communication;
- agreed-upon product and quality standards;
- reliable production schedules;
- shared expectations;
- defined responsibilities; and
- trust among participating growers.

## Selling through a distributor

You may sell through a distributor that already provides food to schools.

This pathway may fit your farm if:

- you already have wholesale experience;
- you can provide consistent quantities;
- you can meet packaging and product specifications;
- you have appropriate food-safety systems; or
- you prefer not to manage multiple school accounts yourself.

Distributors can provide access to established customers and delivery systems. However, they may have stricter requirements related to price, volume, packaging, consistency, and insurance.

## Which pathway might work for you?

|                                                                |                                                                            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>You can deliver modest quantities to a nearby district.</b> | <b>Direct to school</b>                                                    |
| <b>You cannot meet the requested volume alone.</b>             | <b>Food hub, aggregator, or cooperative</b>                                |
| <b>Transportation is one of your largest barriers.</b>         | <b>Food hub or distributor</b>                                             |
| <b>You already sell wholesale.</b>                             | <b>Distributor or institutional buyer</b>                                  |
| <b>You need help making your product school-ready.</b>         | <b>Technical-assistance provider, processor, hub, or cooperative</b>       |
| <b>You do not know any school buyers.</b>                      | <b>Farm to school coordinator, connector, or school nutrition director</b> |

The Kentucky toolkit similarly separates direct purchasing from intermediated purchasing and emphasizes the importance of identifying the partners involved in each pathway.

# What gets in the way?

*"I do not understand procurement."*

Twenty-four growers identified a need to understand procurement regulations.

## You may have questions about:

- how schools request products or prices;
- which forms you need to complete;
- whether you need insurance;
- how purchase thresholds work;
- how bids and quotes differ;
- when purchasing decisions are made; and
- where opportunities are posted.

**Dig Deeper:** BTFTS Module 2 and the sample solicitation materials

Schools must follow purchasing requirements, but not every school or purchase uses the same process. Requirements may vary based on the size of the purchase, the school's policies, state and local rules, and whether the school buys directly or through an intermediary.

You do not need to understand every procurement rule before having your first conversation with a buyer.

## Questions you can ask

- How does your district purchase local products?
- When do you plan menus and make purchasing decisions?
- How are growers notified about opportunities?
- What vendor documents are required?
- Does the district request informal quotes, formal bids, or both?
- Is there a farm to school coordinator who can help me?

*"I do not know the buyer."*

Connections to school buyers were the most commonly identified need, selected by 31 of 38 growers.

You may be ready to explore school sales but not know whom to contact. You may also feel hesitant about approaching a large institution without an introduction.

**You can begin by contacting:**

- a school nutrition director;
- a district procurement or business official;
- a farm to school coordinator;
- a state farm to school contact;
- a food hub serving schools;
- an Extension educator;
- a community-based organization; or
- another grower who already sells to schools.

**Your first conversation does not need to be a sales pitch.****You can begin by asking the buyer:**

- What local foods do you currently purchase?
- Which products would you like to purchase locally?
- What product forms and pack sizes work best?
- When do you plan menus?
- How much product do you typically need?
- Where and when are deliveries made?
- Do you already work with a distributor or food hub?
- What challenges are you trying to solve?

Your goal is to learn whether your products and capacity might align with the buyer's needs.

*"I cannot meet the volume or delivery requirements alone."*

Distribution support and capital investment were each selected by 22 growers. Thirteen growers identified aggregation support, and 13 identified cooperative partners.

**You may be concerned about:**

- not having enough product to fill an order;
- maintaining supply throughout the season;
- needing more land or equipment;
- transportation and delivery;
- storage and refrigeration;
- washing, packing, or processing;
- meeting packaging requirements; or
- expanding too quickly.

These concerns do not necessarily mean school markets are unavailable to you. They may mean that you need a different entry point or additional partners.

### **You might begin by:**

- offering one seasonal product;
- working with a food hub or aggregator;
- coordinating with other growers;
- selling to an individual school or early care site before pursuing a large district;
- exploring shared storage or delivery;
- providing products for a taste test or special meal;
- working with a processor; or
- seeking infrastructure financing and technical assistance.

You may not need to scale your entire operation to begin. A smaller, well-defined opportunity may provide a more realistic first step.

### ***"Can I earn a fair price?"***

You may be interested in school markets but concerned about whether school budgets can support the true cost of your product.

### **Growers responding to the needs assessment raised concerns about:**

- low prices;
- fair compensation;
- unstable funding;
- balancing buyer budgets with production costs;
- payment timing; and
- the cost of meeting new requirements.

A sale is not successful if it weakens your farm financially.

### **Your price may need to account for:**

- seeds, feed, or other inputs;
- labor;
- harvest and processing;
- washing and packing;
- packaging;
- transportation;
- administrative time;
- insurance or certification costs;
- delayed payment; and
- infrastructure investments.

**Dig Deeper:** BTFTS Module 3, Choosing the Right Product, and Module 4, Growing for Schools.

The BTFTS workbook provides more detailed guidance on break-even pricing, wholesale comparisons, school budget limitations, and selecting products that may be a stronger fit for institutional markets.

## *"What food safety requirements will apply to me?"*

Fifteen growers identified food-safety certifications as a need.

### **You may be unsure whether you need:**

- a food-safety plan;
- GAP certification;
- liability insurance;
- traceability records;
- specific packaging;
- temperature controls; or
- access to an inspected processing facility.

Requirements vary by product, buyer, location, and market pathway. Do not assume that every school requires the same certification.

### **Start by asking the buyer:**

- What food-safety documentation do you require?
- Does the requirement apply to my specific product?
- Do you accept an on-farm food-safety plan?
- Is certification required or preferred?
- Can a food hub or processor help me meet the requirement?

Extension, technical-assistance providers, food hubs, state agencies, and other growers may be able to help you develop a realistic food-safety plan.



# You do not have to do it alone.

You should not be expected to become an expert in procurement, food safety, pricing, logistics, and school nutrition before you begin.

Both the BFL needs assessment and the Kentucky toolkit reinforce the importance of community partners. The Kentucky resource frames this directly: you do not have to do everything on your own.

## **Build your farm to school support team.**

### **Other growers and farmer mentors**

They can tell you what the process actually looks like. They may be able to share advice about buyers, pricing, delivery, production, certifications, and mistakes to avoid.

### **School nutrition professionals**

They can help you understand what the school needs, including products, quantities, pack sizes, delivery schedules, budgets, storage capacity, and preparation requirements.

### **Farm to school coordinators**

They may help you identify buyers, understand the local farm to school landscape, navigate procurement, or connect with technical assistance.

### **Food hubs and aggregators**

They may help with aggregation, sales, storage, processing, invoicing, procurement, and transportation.

### **Cooperatives and producer networks**

They may help you work with other growers to address volume, distribution, infrastructure, and market visibility.

### **Extension and technical-assistance providers**

They may support you with:

- production planning;
- business planning;
- food safety;
- season extension;
- pricing;
- processing;
- financing; or
- infrastructure development.

### **BIPOC-led and community-based organizations**

These organizations may provide culturally relevant assistance, trusted relationships, advocacy, peer support, and connections to resources that can be difficult to access through mainstream institutions.

### **State agencies and nonprofit partners**

They may maintain producer directories, administer local purchasing incentives, offer training, connect you with buyers, or support changes in school procurement practices.

### **Growers want continued connection**

Thirty of the 38 needs-assessment respondents said they would be interested in joining a BIPOC Grower Community of Practice focused on institutional market access. Seven more said they might be interested.

This suggests that you and other growers may benefit from more than a static guide. Peer learning, buyer connections, mentorship, technical assistance, and ongoing opportunities to exchange knowledge may be equally important.

# Where are you right now?

## You are curious about school markets.

### Start by:

- reading the grower stories;
- reviewing the BTFTS introduction;
- using the USDA Farm to School Census to explore school districts in your area and learn about their farm to school activities and local food purchasing;
- learning which schools or early care programs operate near you; and
- talking with another grower or farm to school coordinator.

### Explore Your Local School Market with the USDA Farm to School Census

The [USDA Farm to School Census](#) can be a powerful, free market-access and research tool. Use Census data to build your awareness of the K-12 school communities around you, learn more about their farm to school activities, and identify districts you may want to research further.

Think of the Census as a starting point for building your local market map. Once you identify potential school communities, use the relationship-building and market-readiness strategies in this guide and the Bringing the Farm to School Producer Workbook to determine whom to contact, what questions to ask, and how your products might fit their needs.

**Try this:** Identify three to five school districts in your area. Learn what you can about their farm to school activities and local purchasing, then create a short list of districts where you would like to begin building relationships.

## You are interested but unsure whether your farm is ready.

### Start by:

- completing the BTFTS School Business Assessment;
- reviewing your current products and markets;
- identifying your production and infrastructure gaps; and
- speaking with a technical-assistance provider.

## You want to sell directly to a school.

### Start by:

- using the [USDA Farm to School Census](#) to identify and learn about school districts in your area;
- identifying the school nutrition director;
- learning what the school purchases;
- asking how and when purchasing decisions are made;
- requesting information about vendor requirements; and
- reviewing BTFTS Module 2

## You need help with volume, aggregation, or transportation.

### Start by:

- locating nearby food hubs or cooperatives;
- speaking with other growers;
- asking buyers which intermediaries they use;
- exploring shared delivery or storage; and
- considering a smaller or seasonal opportunity.

## You are ready to work on pricing, products, and production.

### Start by:

- reviewing BTFTS Modules 3 and 4;
- calculating your break-even price;
- comparing school needs with your production capacity;
- reviewing packaging and delivery expectations; and
- completing the School Business Action Planning Guide.



## **You do not need to solve every challenge today.**

Choose one practical next step based on where you are now.

### **My current priority is:**

- ☐ Learn how school procurement works
- ☐ Identify a school buyer
- ☐ Find out what local products schools need
- ☐ Determine whether my product fits school menus
- ☐ Explore aggregation or cooperative sales
- ☐ Find transportation or distribution support
- ☐ Review my production costs and pricing
- ☐ Address food-safety requirements
- ☐ Identify capital or infrastructure needs
- ☐ Connect with another BIPOC grower
- ☐ Complete a school-market assessment

### **One person or organization that may be able to help me:**

### **One action I will take in the next 30 days:**

### **What I hope to learn or accomplish:**

#### **Keep Moving Forward**

Building a school market can take time. Start with the relationships and opportunities that make sense for your farm, use the resources available to you, and continue asking questions as you learn. Whether your next step is researching a nearby school district, contacting a buyer, connecting with other growers, or strengthening your farm's market readiness, each step can help you better understand where school markets fit within your farm's goals.

# Continue learning and stay connected

Your path into school markets does not end with this guide. Farm to school is built through relationships, continued learning, and connections with people and organizations that can help you navigate opportunities and challenges as they arise.

## Continue Your Learning

Use the **Bringing the Farm to School Producer Workbook** as the primary companion to this guide when you are ready for more detailed support related to:

- understanding school markets and procurement;
- assessing your farm's market readiness;
- building relationships with school buyers;
- selecting products for school markets;
- pricing and production planning;
- food safety and distribution; and
- developing a school business action plan.

You can also use the USDA Farm to School Census as an ongoing market exploration tool to learn about K-12 school communities in your area, understand their farm to school activities, and identify potential school markets and relationships to explore.

## Stay Connected

You do not have to navigate school markets alone. Continue building relationships with other growers, school nutrition professionals, farm to school coordinators, food hubs and cooperatives, Extension and technical-assistance providers, community-based organizations, and other partners in your local and regional food system.

Look for opportunities to participate in peer learning, grower gatherings, technical assistance, buyer-grower connections, and other farm to school activities. These relationships can help you stay informed about market opportunities, learn from other growers, and identify support as your farm and market goals evolve.

You can also become an NFSN Partner to stay connected to the broader farm to school movement. NFSN Partners are part of a national network working to strengthen farm to school in their communities and across the country. Becoming a Partner can help you stay connected to resources, events, learning and engagement opportunities, and people working across the farm to school movement.



**Become an  
NFSN Partner**  
[farmtoschool.org/our-network](https://farmtoschool.org/our-network)



