

Feed Our Future and Ohio Schools Council

School Nutrition Professional Listening Sessions



Summary

Overview:

In partnership with Ohio Schools Council (OSC), Feed Our Future (FOF) held listening sessions with school nutrition professionals to better understand their lived perspectives and experiences on local food purchasing.

Goal: To inform our four strategic areas:

1 The “Why” of Local Food

2 The Farm to School Bid

3 School Foodservice Operations

4 Harvest of the Month Program

Key Take -Aways:

- School nutrition professionals are interested and excited about local food. But there are still barriers that make it hard to buy local for school meals.
- There are opportunities to increase the awareness of our farm to school bid.
- In order to increase farm to school programming in schools, school nutrition professionals need to build their staff's skill and capacity,
- To connect students to their food, we have to connect them to the people growing and making their food.

Background for Listening Sessions

In the fall of 2023, FOF and OSC conducted listening sessions to collect data to better understand the perspectives of school nutrition professionals (SNPs) on local food purchasing. The insights gained from these sessions will be used to inform and adapt current farm to school strategies and inform strategic growth for farm to school procurement and programming in Northeast Ohio.

The Goal:

The goal of our listening sessions was to inform 4 strategic areas of our farm to school work:

- **The Why of Local Foods:** What drives school districts to purchase local foods?
- **The Farm to School Bid:** Do schools currently partner with us for their local food purchases?
- **School Foodservice Operations:** What does or does not exist inside cafeterias that support farm to school capacity?
- **FOF's Harvest of the Month (HOM) Program:** Is the HOM program helpful to school districts? What opportunities for change exist?

The Process:

STEP ONE:

Online survey to gauge broad perspectives of school nutrition programs across the 38 counties of OSC's footprint.

STEP TWO:

In-person conversations for deeper dives into the 4 strategic areas to create space that allows for FOF and OSC to gain a deeper perspective into the lived experiences of school nutrition professionals.

STEP THREE:

Virtual meeting space to create an opportunity for those school districts that were unable to attend in-person sessions.

STEP FOUR:

Report out findings and recommendations to school nutrition professionals.

Background for Listening Sessions

In order to direct our facilitated discussion sessions, a pre-event survey was sent to school nutrition professionals. A total of 60 school nutrition professionals across 38 OSC counties responded. The survey consisted of questions relevant to the four key strategic areas.



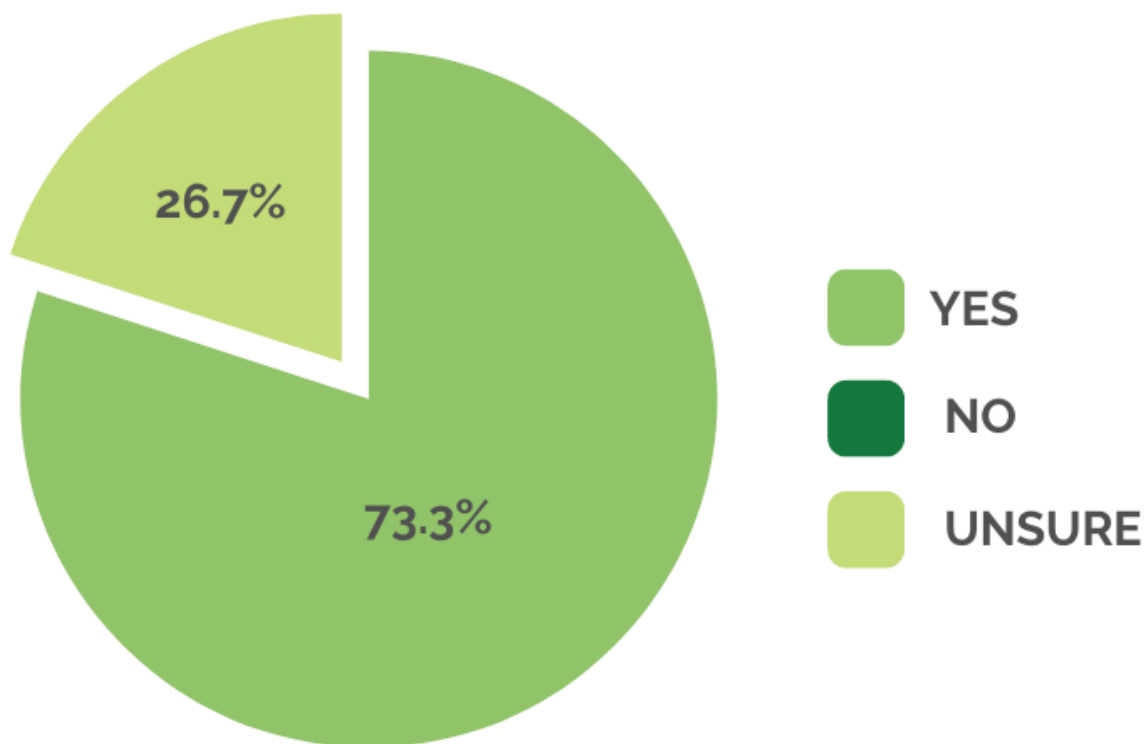
Listening sessions were held in-person in **six** Ohio counties between October 11, 2023, and November 4, 2023. For SNPs that were unable to make the in-person sessions, a virtual session was hosted on November 14, 2023. The facilitated conversations aimed to engage in more in-depth discussion of our four key areas of work.

The “Why” of Local Food

FOF and OSC understand how important it is to know why school nutrition professionals are serving local food in their child nutrition programs. By asking this question, we want to know what drives school districts to purchase local food.

What We Learned from the Survey:

When asked if schools were interested in purchasing local food for their child nutrition programs (CNP) **over 73% responded yes, while over 26% responded unsure.**



The “Why” of Local Food

To understand what drives schools to purchase local food for their CNPs, we asked them their “Why”:

Based on the survey results, **48 SNPs purchase local to support local businesses; 34 SNPs purchase local for the health of their students; and 31 SNPs purchase local for the economy.**

While serving local food in schools supports local businesses, is healthier and helps the local economy there are other goals that SNPs would like to achieve for their menus.



Support Local
Businesses

Health

Economy



Keep menu the same but
integrate local foods.



Revamp menus



Build new skills for staff

The “Why” of Local Food

FOF and OSC recognize that there are barriers that keep SNPs from purchasing local food for their schools. The top three answers by respondents are **vendor options**, **price** and **vendor experience**.



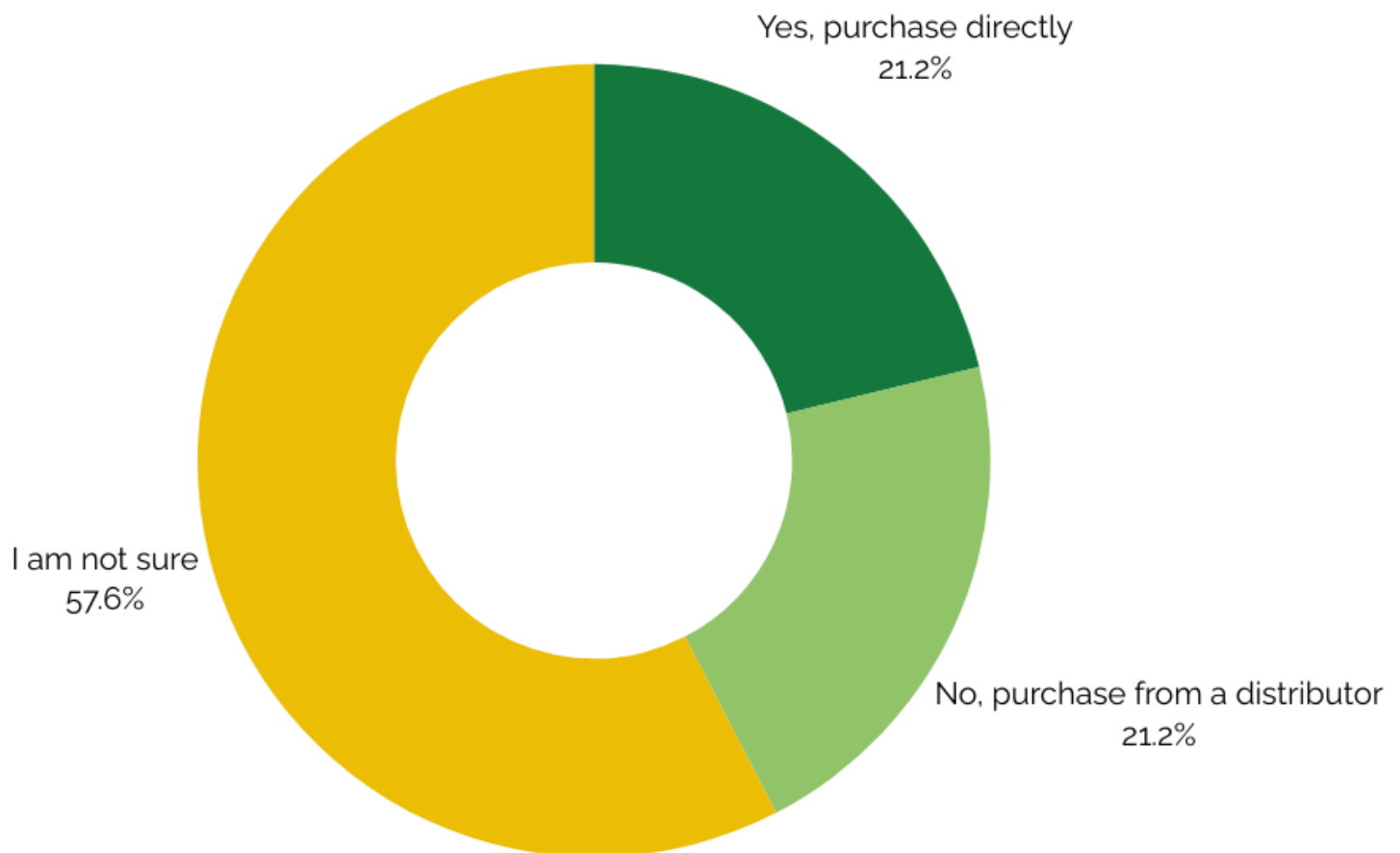
Although barriers still exist today, advances in farm to school have made purchasing local food more **available** and **exciting** to SNPs:

- The growing support and resources that are now available.
- It seems less daunting.
- New food service directors that want to learn more about farm to school.
- Want to expand the number of local partners used.
- Unable to find a local partner **until now**.

The “Why” of Local Food

It is important to understand the best distribution method for schools: direct purchase from a farm or purchasing from a distributor.

Over 50% of SNPs were unsure what the best distribution method for their schools would be.



The “Why” of Local Food

What We Learned When We Dove Deeper:

We asked attendees why serving local food to their students was important to them:

- Provides **fresher** and **more nutritious** foods for their lunches.
- Takes care of the local farmers and producers in their community.
- Increases community engagement and connects students to the people that grow their food.
- Marketing opportunities.
- Quality and nutritional value.

“We are locally grown people, and we want to take care of our people.” -Director

“Getting the best food to kids and seeing them get excited [is why serving local is important].”
- Director

The “Why” of Local Food

According to SNPs, where is food service headed in the next five years?

- Fear that strict rules and regulations for National School Lunch Program will get stricter.
- Continuous supply chain disruptions such as low inventory and high prices.
- Traditional distributors will not have the labor and workforce to sustainably produce products exclusively for school supply chains.
- Vendors will continue to leave the school food supply chain due to the unique requirements of the school food system.

These continued challenges and disruptions make it very difficult for school nutrition professionals to develop recipes and plan menus.

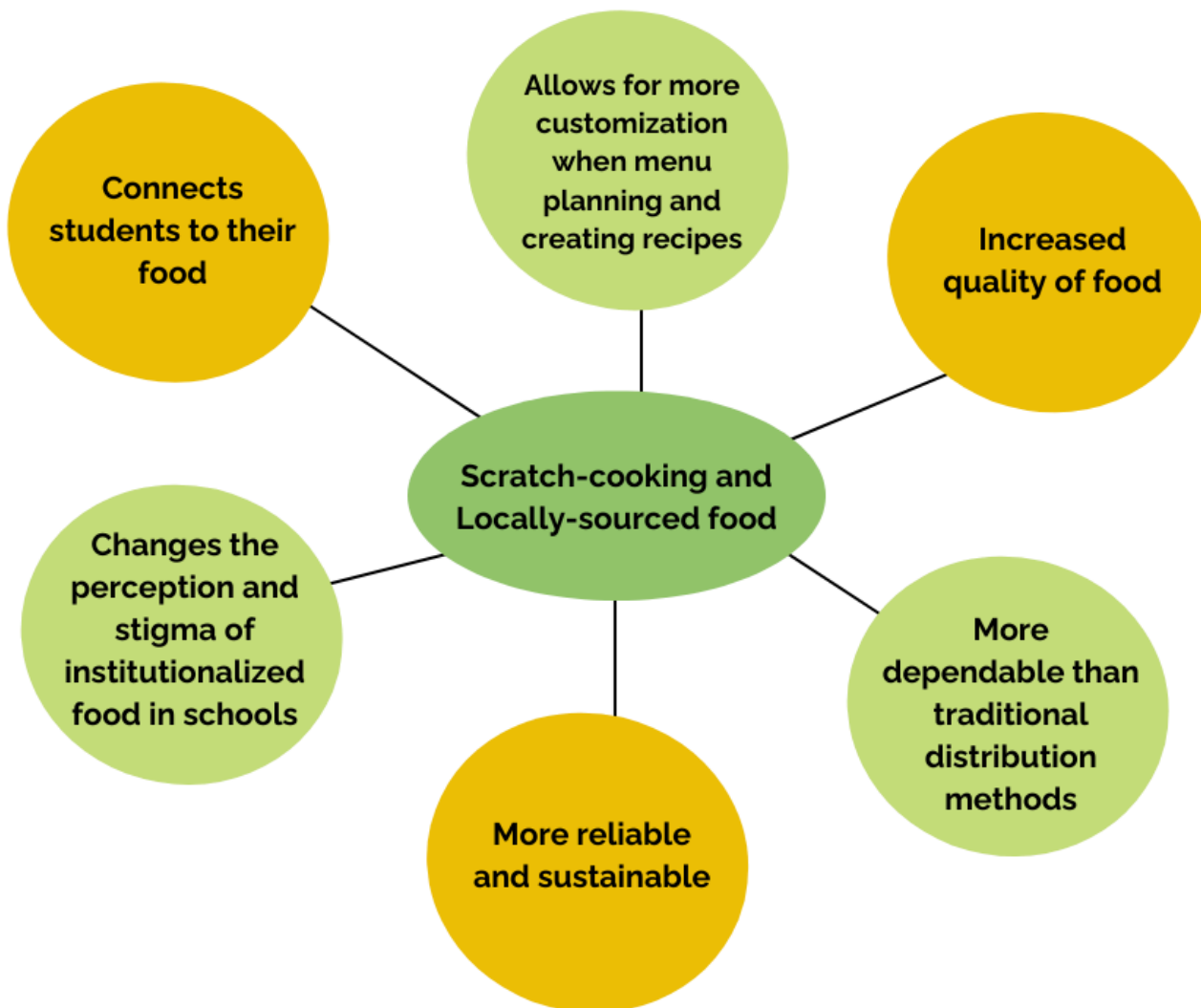
Schools have navigated these challenges by:

- Increasing scratch cooking and locally sourcing food for school lunches.
 - **Please note:** *The infrastructure of school kitchens plays a vital role in successfully implementing scratch-cooking. This will be discussed later in the report.*
- Increased purchasing of local produce and value-added products.

“As the world changes, there are dependable local options.” -Director

The “Why” of Local Food

The asset map below organizes the numerous benefits of scratch cooking and locally sourcing food that SNPs have experienced:



As schools experience success with scratch-cooking and locally sourcing food for their menus, this can become a replicable solution to navigate the challenges that traditional distribution methods still pose today.

The “Why” of Local Food

A common theme among attendees was that traditional school food supply chains are unreliable and unsustainable. While the local food system can be a part of the solution to supply chain challenges, this approach could require districts to be forward thinking about seasonal menu planning.



The Farm to School Bid

Since 2015, FOF and OSC have had the **goal of making local foods a cost-effective solution for school meal programs**. We do this through our farm to school bid. The purpose of our bid is to make purchasing locally efficient and user friendly.

What We Learned from the Survey:

Do you currently participate in the Ohio Schools Council farm to school bid?



The Farm to School Bid

FOF and OSC acknowledge that while the farm to school bid has created a more efficient way for schools to purchase local food, there are still barriers that schools face in getting local food into their cafeterias.

Working Well	Remains A Challenge
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Product quality• Positive experience with local vendors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Delivery• Delivery minimums

For individuals that are not participating in our farm to school bid, the **top four reasons include:**

1. Purchase from DoD Fresh.
2. Did not know that our farm to school bid existed.
3. Small school that could not meet the minimum.
4. New food service director that is unsure how the bid works.

The Farm to School Bid

What We Learned When We Dove Deeper:

The current structure of the FOF and OSC bid is one year; a goal is to adapt the structure to be multi-year. To understand the most beneficial structure for schools, it is important to understand how SNPs use and understand the bid. According to the in-person sessions:

- There is a lack of awareness of our local food bid.
- Request for an “Introduction to the Bid” training.
 - This would inform SNPs about the bid, how to navigate and use it, and the price point for local.
 - In-person or virtual meeting to work through the bid.
- Confusion regarding requirements and regulations with using the bid and other funding streams together.
- A central location for the OSC bid information.



The Farm to School Bid

Recommendations:

- Create no-cost professional development opportunities for school nutrition professionals to understand and interact with the farm to school bid.
- Create an accessible, easy-to-navigate, centralized location for farm to school bid information and resources.
- Explore options to leverage Food Service Director focused events to create awareness of OSC farm to school bids.



Food Service Operations

FOF and OSC acknowledge the barriers schools face in farm to school. Our goal is to make farm to school a reality in all schools across Northeast Ohio. It is important to understand the unique food service operations of each school district to ensure they can successfully implement farm to school in the capacity fit for their specific needs.

What We Learned from the Survey:

A way to implement farm to school in cafeterias is to understand the menu planning process. In order to find ways to integrate local foods into school meals, it is important to understand how SNPs plan their menus.

The top three answers from our survey are:

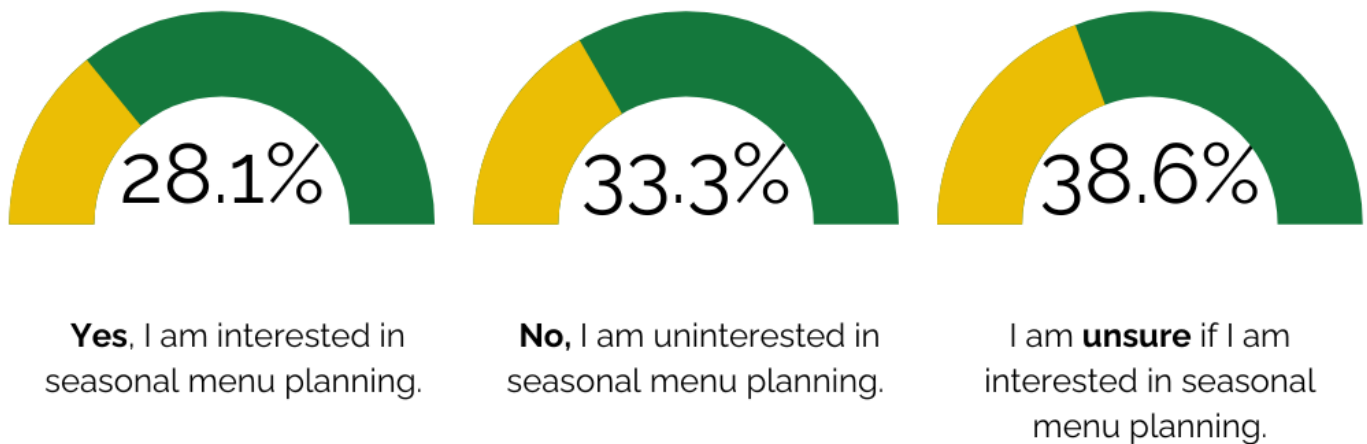
1. Subscription or software.
2. Contract with a consultant.
3. Committee.



Food Service Operations

A great way to highlight Harvest of the Month and other seasonal recipes is to plan the menu according to the seasons. Doing this can provide children with the most fresh and nutritional produce, while also being more cost-effective for schools.

According to SNPs, nearly 30% of them would be interested in seasonal menu planning.



In order to prepare producers for the school year, it is helpful for them to have an idea of the volume of produce schools will need to feed students for the year.

How far in advance could you (schools) inform a local vendor or distribution partner how much local food you will need for the next school year?

The top three answers include:

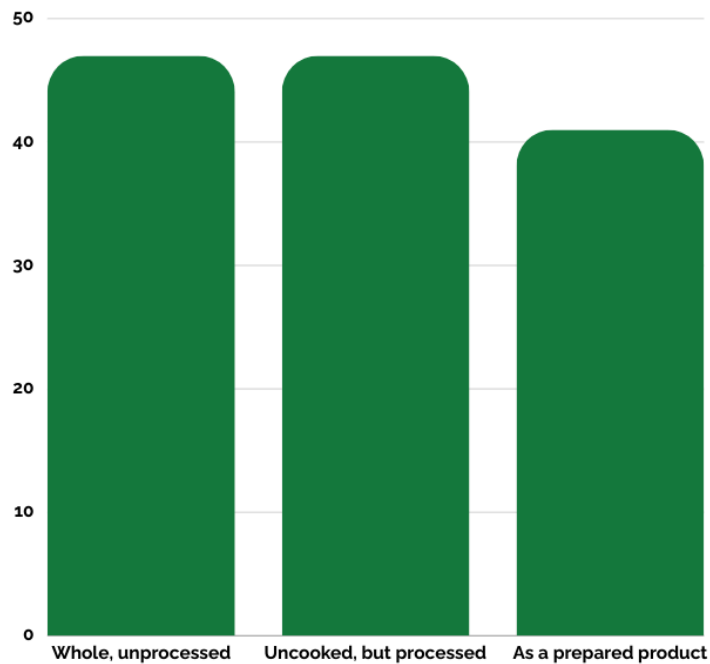
1. Less than 6 months: **23 responses**
2. 5-6 months: **16 responses**
3. 7-9 months: **8 responses**

Food Service Operations

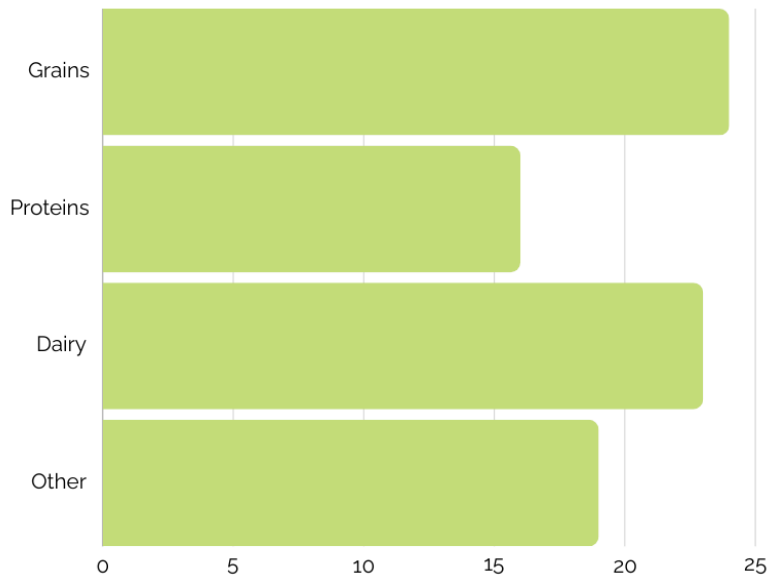
Each school has different ways they would like to receive their local food items.

How would you like to receive local food?

47 SNPs responded whole, unprocessed; 47 responded uncooked, but processed; and 41 responded they would like it as a prepared product.



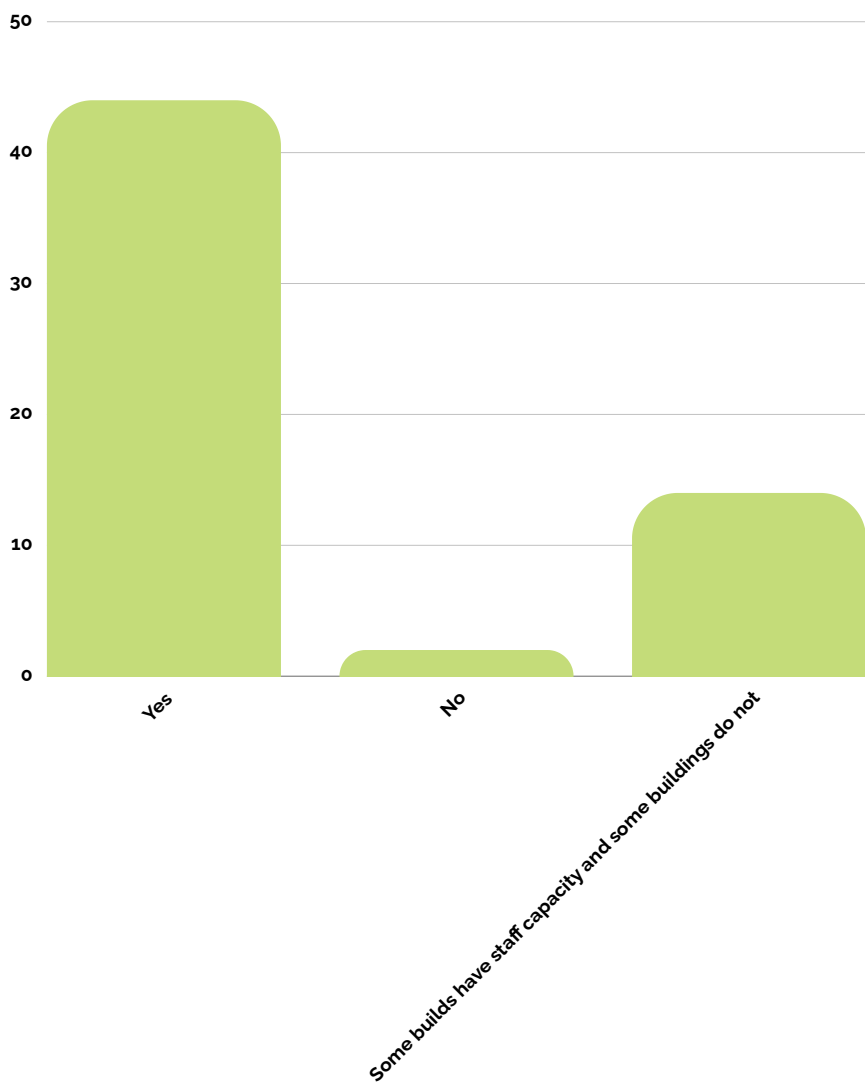
We hope to **diversify the products of our bid**, so it is important to understand what SNPs would like to see on the bid and would envision themselves buying throughout the school year.



Food Service Operations

Is your school nutrition staff trained to wash, chop and work with whole fruits and vegetables?

44 SNPs responded yes; 2 responded no; and 14 SNPs responded some buildings have the capacity and some do not.



Food Service Operations

What We Learned When We Dove Deeper:

To further farm to school efforts, it is important to build the capacity of school food staff and build the skills that the current staff has. Attendees requested different professional development days including:

- Knife skills training.
- Quality Control: how to care for and store produce, expected shelf life, how to salvage food that has gone bad, etc.
- Increased marketing of local food in schools and cafeterias.
- Change the perspective of school food staff about school food.
 - Team building/field trips
 - Perspective change



Food Service Operations

Recommendations:

- Create a professional development day for school food nutrition staff to learn knife skills and understand and apply quality control measures in their kitchen.
- Create resources to connect schools to farms and farmers for field trips, onsite visits or cooking demos.
- Provide no-cost seasonal menu planning support for school nutrition professionals through various methods.
- Convene a workgroup to inform professional development Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs).



Harvest of the Month

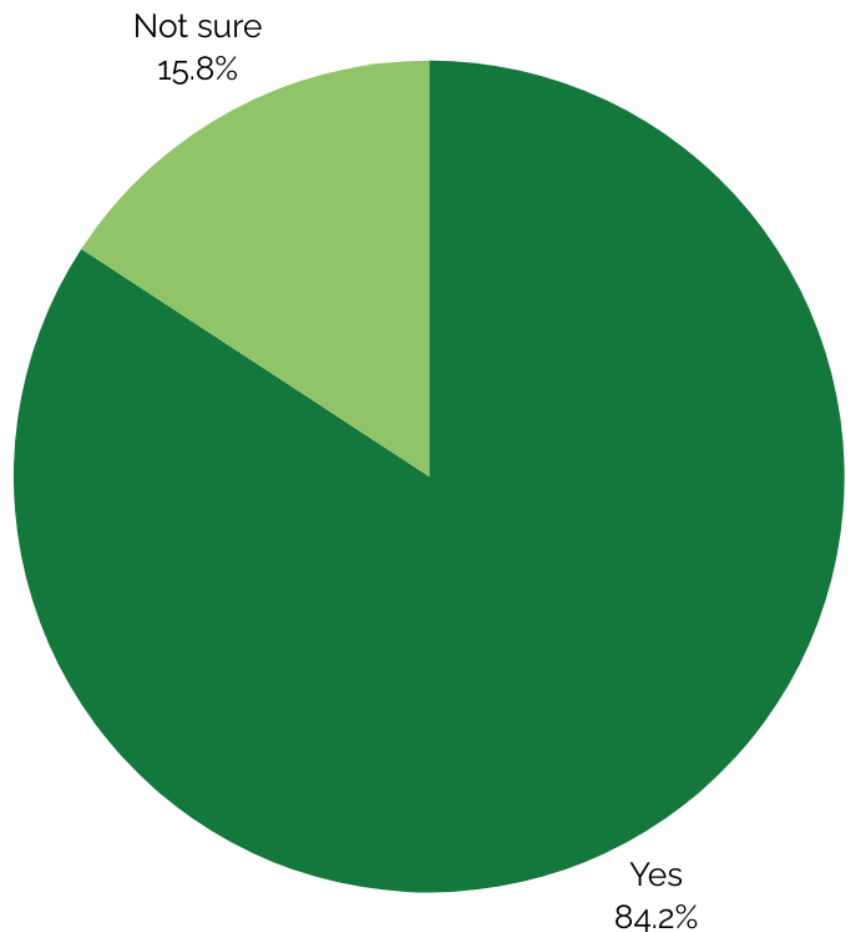
Our Harvest of the Month (HOM) program highlights a produce item each month that is able to grow in Ohio. Our HOM kits include educational posters, HOM recipes and fun prizes such as pins, stickers and temporary tattoos. These kits are meant to inspire learning, while encouraging students to develop a positive relationship with food that lasts them a lifetime.

What We Learned from the Survey:

To ensure our Harvest of the Month program is still applicable in schools, we asked SNPs if the current produce items for each month still make sense.

The current harvests include tomatoes, apples, sweet potatoes, potatoes, hydroponic lettuce, carrots, herbs, spinach, asparagus, berries, cucumbers and peaches.

84.2% of SNPs responded yes, while nearly 16% responded they are unsure.

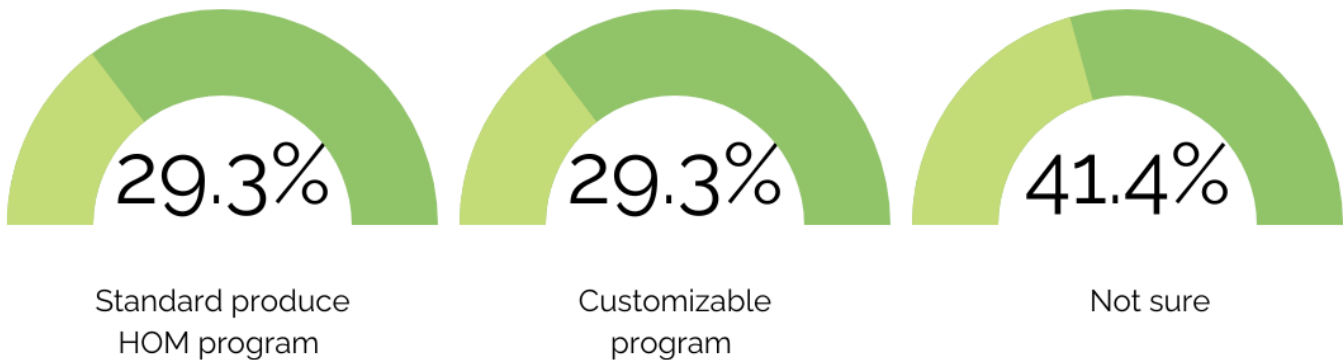


Harvest of the Month

We are considering making two options available for our Harvest of the Month program: a standard produce program and a customizable program.

Standard HOM	Customizable HOM
<ul style="list-style-type: none">One produce item is highlighted each month	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Ability to choose to highlight produce, dairy, grains or meats each month

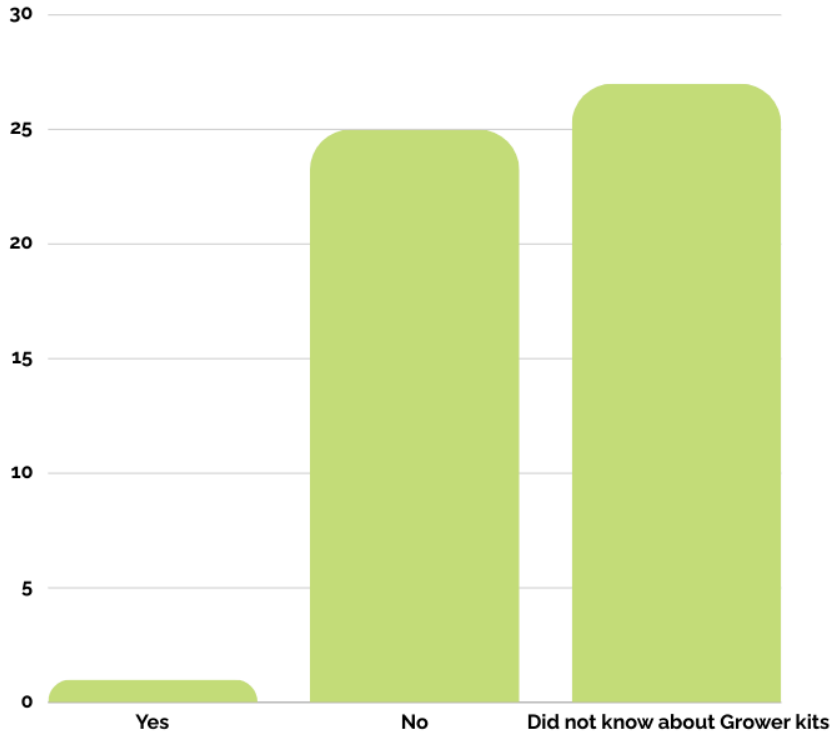
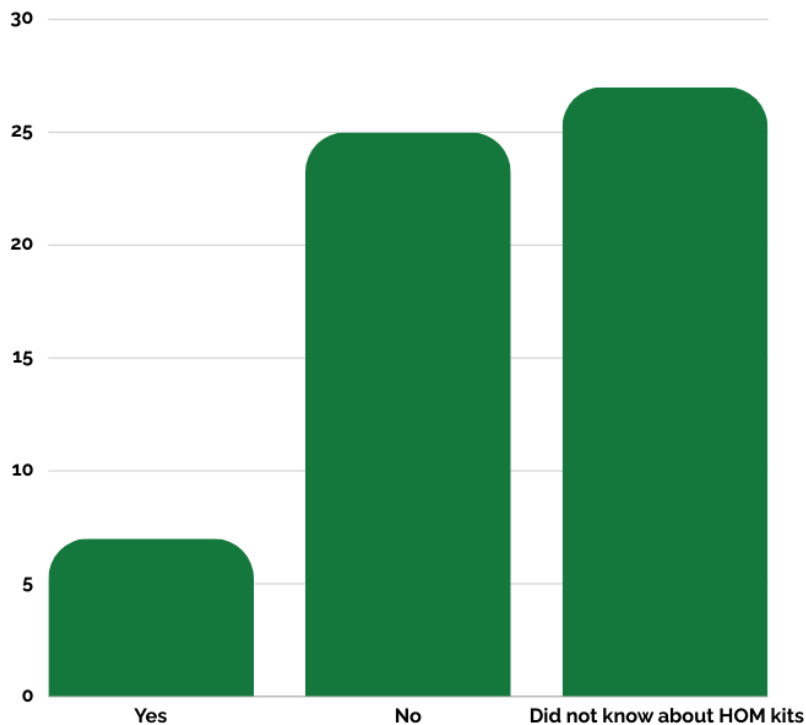
Which program would you be most likely to use?



Harvest of the Month

Have you used a HOM kit before?

7 SNPs responded yes; 25 said no; and 27 SNPs did not know that there were HOM promotional kits.



The Grower Storytelling Toolkits are designed to help connect kids with people growing their food. They include posters, trading cards and farm facts. Have you ever used the kits?

1 SNPs responded yes; 25 did not use them; and 27 did not know there were Grower Storytelling Toolkits.

Harvest of the Month

What We Learned When We Dove Deeper:

To connect students to their food, we have to increase the presence of farmers, producers and small businesses that supply food for their school meals. This is important in order to make the cafeteria an extension of the classroom. We can do this by:

- Hosting hands-on and kid-friendly recipe development days in the classroom.
- Creating videos of farmers to share in schools.
- Understanding the career path of a farmer. The OSC regions cover a lot of urban and rural land- not sure they can/how to become a farmer.
 - A major gap in farm to school programming is connecting older students to careers in agriculture.

Onsite events are a helpful way to involve students;

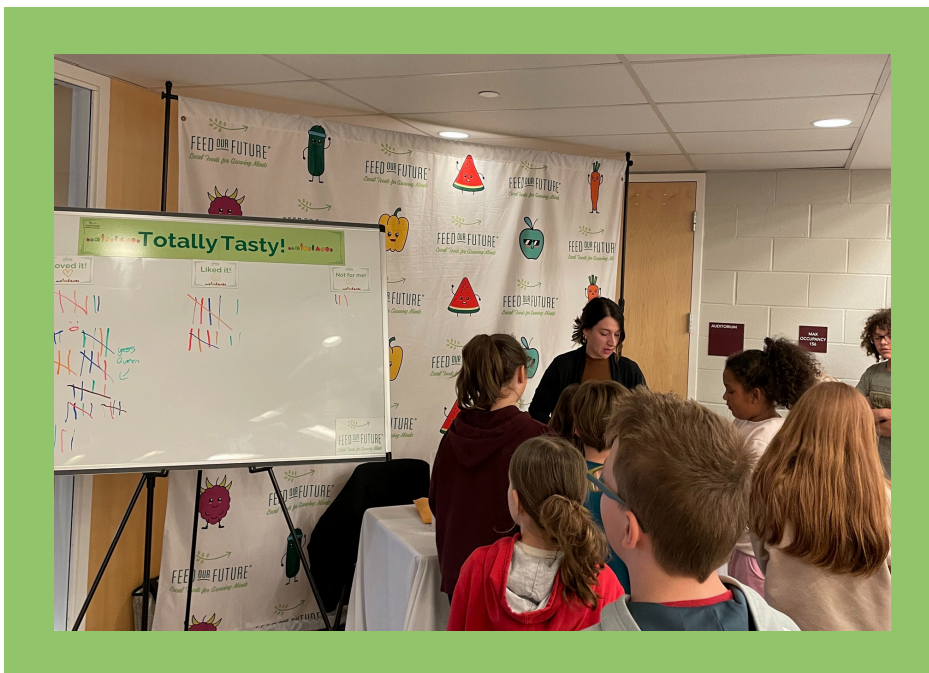
- SNPs were very interested in Totally Tasty taste test events.
- Involve parents to come in and try the food prepared and served by the school.



Harvest of the Month

Recommendations:

- Create and send an email to SNPs exclusively about Harvest of the Month kits before the start of each season.
 - February: Scrumptious Spring
 - August: Flavorful Fall
 - November: Wholesome Winter
- Explore options to expand the awareness of our Harvest of the Month program.
- Explore the possibility of a custom Harvest of the Month program and a more robust Harvest of the Month program.
- Collaborate with farms and farmers to create video clips to share in schools.
- Explore opportunities to support youth involvement in recipe development.
- The Spice Field Kitchen Curriculum: Connect students with in-season food through fun, and impactful course lessons. (It's FREE!)



Wrap Up

Through our survey and listening sessions, Feed Our Future and Ohio Schools Council collected insight into the unique perspective and lived experiences of school nutrition professionals around Northeast Ohio. Their feedback has given both organizations the necessary information to adapt and direct future farm to school efforts.

Thank you to everyone that has shared your voice and helped us to understand your unique perspectives and lived experiences! We couldn't feed our students healthy, fresh and local food without **YOU!**

For more about our listening sessions, contact us at: ohiofeedourfuture@gmail.com.



More Information

Feed Our Future:

Feed Our Future, Local Foods for Growing Minds, believes that every child, regardless of their school district, deserves access to fresh, healthy, and local foods (when available). Since 2015, FOF has been working to increase the number of school districts purchasing local foods for their school meal programs. For more, visit feedourfuture.org.

Ohio Schools Council:

The Ohio Schools Council is a regional council of governments (COG) created under Ohio Revised Code (ORC) 167. The OSC is governed by member school districts. Our primary mission is to streamline procurement processes, ensuring our members access top-tier products and services while maximizing cost savings. For more, visit osconline.org.

Our Partnership:

Each organization recognizes there are opportunities to increase local purchasing in K-12 schools. In addition to this, there is room for growth to increase the knowledge and skills of school meal program staff to menu, serve and teach about local foods.

