



Small Farms/ School Meals Initiative

Town Hall Meetings

A Step-by-Step Guide on
How to Bring Small Farms
and Local Schools Together

“*The Small Farms/School Meals Initiative is an important step toward improving both the economic stability of small farmers and the long-term health of children in our school systems. The farmers are able to sell fresh produce to local schools for use in their meal programs, and children get the benefit of adding fresh fruits and vegetables to their diets. It is a win-win situation for everyone involved.*”

— Shirley Watkins, Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services,
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Introduction

A comprehensive approach to connecting small farms to the school meal programs began in the summer of 1997. At that time, the Small Farms/School Meals Initiative, popularly called the “farm-to-school” initiative, started. This initiative—which is based on the cooperation of Federal, State, and local governments, as well as local farm and educational organizations—encourages small farmers to sell fresh fruits and vegetables to schools and schools to buy this wholesome produce from small farmers.

Both schools and small farmers benefit from their participation in the “farm-to-school” initiative. Schools provide children fresh, tasty, nutritious produce, while small farmers acquire new markets. Schools are able to provide fresh produce quickly and with lower transportation costs by buying it from small farmers instead of from distant markets. And children learn from farmers who visit their classrooms about how the produce is grown and the role it plays in a healthful diet, thereby experiencing first-hand in both the classroom and the cafeteria the value and appeal of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Farmers must consider a number of logistical issues to provide produce to schools. They must supply the volume, variety, quality, and selection of produce schools need, and they must deliver it when schools want it. Generally, farmers have found it essential to join together in a cooperative or some larger organization in order to meet the schools’ needs. Equally important, school officials must have a genuine commitment to placing local produce on their menus.

The “farm-to-school” initiative needs to be a cooperative venture among Federal, State, and local entities. The joint USDA/Department of Defense (DoD) fresh produce project, USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), USDA’s Rural Business-Cooperative Service, State departments of agriculture and education, farm organizations, and other entities need to be involved. It is also helpful to include members of Congress so they can promote the initiative in their local areas and support the program nationally as well.

USDA enjoys an especially productive partnership with the Department of Defense Personnel Support Center (DoD/DPSC), in which DoD delivers fresh produce to children taking part in the National School Lunch Program. DoD has operated a nationwide system to purchase and distribute fresh produce to its military installations, Federal prisons, and veterans’ hospitals. It added schools in 1994.

In partnership with FNS and USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), DoD began buying and delivering fresh fruits and vegetables to schools in eight States in the 1994-95 school year; by the 1996-97 school year the project had expanded to 32 States. Schools ordered most of the produce for their salad bars. DoD provided quality items at the most favorable market prices, delivered on time to meet State agency and school requirements. In the North Carolina project referred to later in this manual, DoD officials attended the town hall meeting and were particularly helpful in working with small farmer cooperatives to obtain fresh, local produce for the schools.

The manual provides a step-by-step guide of activities for groups to plan, conduct, and publicize a professional town hall meeting that encourages small farmers and local school food officials to begin a “farm-to school” project. Each section of the manual contains a narrative on an aspect of how to hold a meeting.

This guide—which is based on USDA’s experiences with the North Carolina Town Hall Meeting in January 1998 and the Virginia Town Hall Meeting in April 1998—is the first step towards successful, positive events across the Nation.

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Overview

The initial phase of the “farm-to-school” initiative is learning how to begin such a project. Much of this phase focuses on how to communicate to school officials and farmers that they can begin a project and what they need to know to get started.

The National Commission on Small Farms endorsed the Small Farms/School Meals Initiative in its report, *A Time to Act*, published in January 1998. The Commission’s report stated on page 74:

The Commission endorses the efforts of the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to pursue marketing opportunities for small farms to supply local school lunch programs. These agencies should be commended for taking this step, and should pursue the pilot programs in North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida with a commitment to overcoming any barriers to developing this market. Cooperative Extension should also be involved in supporting this effort. The results of the pilots should be published and distributed along with a manual to encourage replication of these efforts throughout the country.

From the early learning experiences in California, North Carolina, Florida, and elsewhere, the Small Farms/School Meals Initiative presents real potential in expanding the levels of fresh, nutritious fruits and vegetables in the school meal programs and in providing new markets for local fruit and vegetable farmers.

The town hall meeting is an opportunity for local producers and school food service staff to learn how to work together for their mutual benefit. At such a meeting small farmers can discover the potential of new markets for their fresh fruits and vegetables, and schools have the opportunity to learn how to purchase locally grown fresh produce.

While the meeting is just the beginning of the process, it serves the crucial purpose of informing farmers and school officials about the initiative. Follow-up meetings, mailings, and other communications efforts must continue over the long term to ensure a successful project.

■ Preliminary Planning

There are several factors to consider during preliminary planning for the meeting:

- Keep USDA's partners in the State departments of education and agriculture and its officers-in-charge fully informed, and consider modifications based on their input. Their support is critical to the success of the meeting, and their insight is invaluable throughout the planning process. They understand how things work in their States.
- Select a city and site that are centrally located, convenient to the farmers in the area.
- Select a time of year and date when farmers and school food service staff will be available. Input from State officials is critical when making this decision. Small farmers do not have the luxury of breaking away during planting or harvesting times to attend meetings. Generally, school food service staff are not available during the summer.
- Plan the event for a weekday...and hope for rain! (Farmers don't plow in the rain.)
- Plan for about 150-200 participants. (A smaller number can be included in the follow-up meetings.)
- Have regular conference calls with the groups involved in the planning process.

■ Structure of the Meeting

The meeting should last about 2 hours and consist of presentations, questions and comments from the audience, and concluding remarks.

The speakers should consist of about three to four Federal, State, or local officials and four to five panelists. The officials' remarks should convey their support and commitment to local farmers and schools working together. The panelists—who serve as technical experts and resource people—should briefly discuss the initiative from each of their perspectives. Encourage all speakers to limit their remarks to 3 to 5 minutes, to leave enough time for questions.

At the end of the meeting, it is important to summarize the key points and explain the next steps for farmers and school food service staff who want to get involved. There should be a specific plan for the succeeding steps, and participants should leave with the names and phone numbers of people to contact for more information.

■ Roles and Responsibilities

Many different groups should be involved in organizing a town hall meeting. Communication and a clear understanding of the roles of those responsible are critical to hosting a successful event. Staff have to be assigned certain duties to ensure a successful meeting. In some cases, there are suggestions in this manual as to who should perform these tasks but you can be flexible in how you accomplish what needs to be done.

■ Organizer of the Meeting

- Takes overall responsibility for the meeting;
- Organizes staff to host the meeting, including planning the logistics of setting up the meeting in the area where it will be held;
- Defines expectations and outcome;
- Arranges for speakers and confirms their attendance;
- Compiles the final list of participants;
- Approves content of agenda, invitation, and handout materials; and
- Closes the meeting, summarizing the next steps in the process.

■ Communications and Governmental Affairs

- Coordinates the itinerary for officials;
- Prepares briefing materials (itinerary, briefing book, speeches, etc.);
- Approves media advisory;
- Prepares press release; drafts invitation and media advisory and provides desktop publishing for all materials;
- Sends invitations to participants and media;
- Develops flyer to advertise the meeting and handouts to be given out at the meeting;
- Coordinates with Congressional staff for any U.S. Congressional representatives attending; and
- Takes photos at the meeting.

■ On-Site Representative

- Assists with planning for facilities and may provide photos of potential sites;
- Serves as a local contact for RSVPs from participants;
- Serves as a local contact for farmers' questions after the meeting; and
- Provides transportation for officials, as needed.

State Department of Education

- Provides a speaker for the meeting;
- Provides a list of administrators and school food service officials to be invited to the meeting and encourages their participation.

State Department of Agriculture

- Provides a speaker for the meeting;
- Provides a list of farmers to be invited to the meeting and encourages their participation;
- Distributes flyers at local events;
- Serves as a local contact for accepting RSVPs from participants; and
- Serves as a local contact for farmers' questions after the meeting.

Congressional Staff

- Assists with outreach;
- Assists with media while on-site; and
- Provides a speaker for the meeting (in North Carolina, for example, Congresswoman Eva Clayton spoke; in Virginia, U. S. Senator Charles Robb and Congressman Robert Scott were speakers).

USDA Rural Development

- Provides technical expertise on formation of small farmer cooperatives;
- Provides an expert to serve as a panelist; and
- Suggests farmers and farm organizations to invite to the meeting.

USDA's Farm Service Agency; Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service; and Agricultural Marketing Service

- Provide input in developing lists of farmers and organizations to invite;
- Provide speakers for the meeting; and
- Help implement the initiative.

Local Farm Organizations

- Publicize the meeting to local farmers and encourage their attendance.

In North Carolina, the North Carolina Coalition of Farm and Rural Families was instrumental in getting a large turnout of farmers to the meeting; and in Virginia the National Association of Black Farmers assisted in informing farmers of the meeting. Local USDA offices and departments of agriculture in each State are the best sources of information about important farm organizations.

As the plans for the meeting progress, it is vital that everyone be kept up to date on the latest developments. During the early planning stages there should be weekly or bi-weekly conference calls to ensure that responsibilities are clearly defined and everyone is informed. Throughout the entire process, frequent e-mail messages to all those involved are an absolute must.



■ Meeting Facilities

Once the date, time, and location of the meeting are established, select a facility. Be sure there is enough free parking and that the room will be of no cost to the government.

Generally, someone who lives in the selected city can arrange for a room and the regional office staff can make all the arrangements afterwards. These arrangements include:

■ Audio-Visual Equipment

Ideally, there should be a microphone on the podium for the speakers and two portable microphones for use during the question-and-answer session. One portable microphone would be for audience members asking questions. Responders would use the second portable microphone to enable them to speak from their seats rather than going to the podium.

Be sure to ask speakers before the event about their audio-visual needs and make appropriate arrangements. Since presentations are limited to 3-5 minutes, there shouldn't be much need for special equipment. Also, try to find out in advance if any participants will need assistive devices. This is especially important because some participants may have disabilities.

Inviting the Guests

The Invitation

The invitations should be simple and direct, using a “*Who, What, When, Where and Why*” format. The invitation may also be used as a flyer for distribution at local farm organization meetings or on bulletin boards and other areas where farmers and school officials can see it. The invitation should include directions to the meeting place and a local telephone number for RSVPs so that guests can respond without having to make a long-distance call.

The Guests

USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) and Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, the cooperating farm organizations, the State department of agriculture, and the Congressional staff should provide lists of farmers, and the State department of education should provide names of school officials. Additional potential invitees could include local farmers market representatives, members of the PTA and individual parents, and health and nutrition teachers.

Ideally, the list should include a name, address, telephone, and fax number for each guest. Faxing the invitations is the most cost-effective method and provides proof of receipt. If fax numbers are not available, be sure to allow adequate time and funding for mailing.

Follow-up

After the invitations have gone out, make follow-up calls to invitees to get some idea of how many people will be attending. It may be impossible to know beforehand exactly how many will attend. Many farmers attended the North Carolina meeting, but very few sent in formal RSVPs. Aim to get an accurate *estimate* of how many farmers and other interested parties will attend and the *precise* number of USDA, State agriculture, and education officials. About 175 people attended the North Carolina meeting.

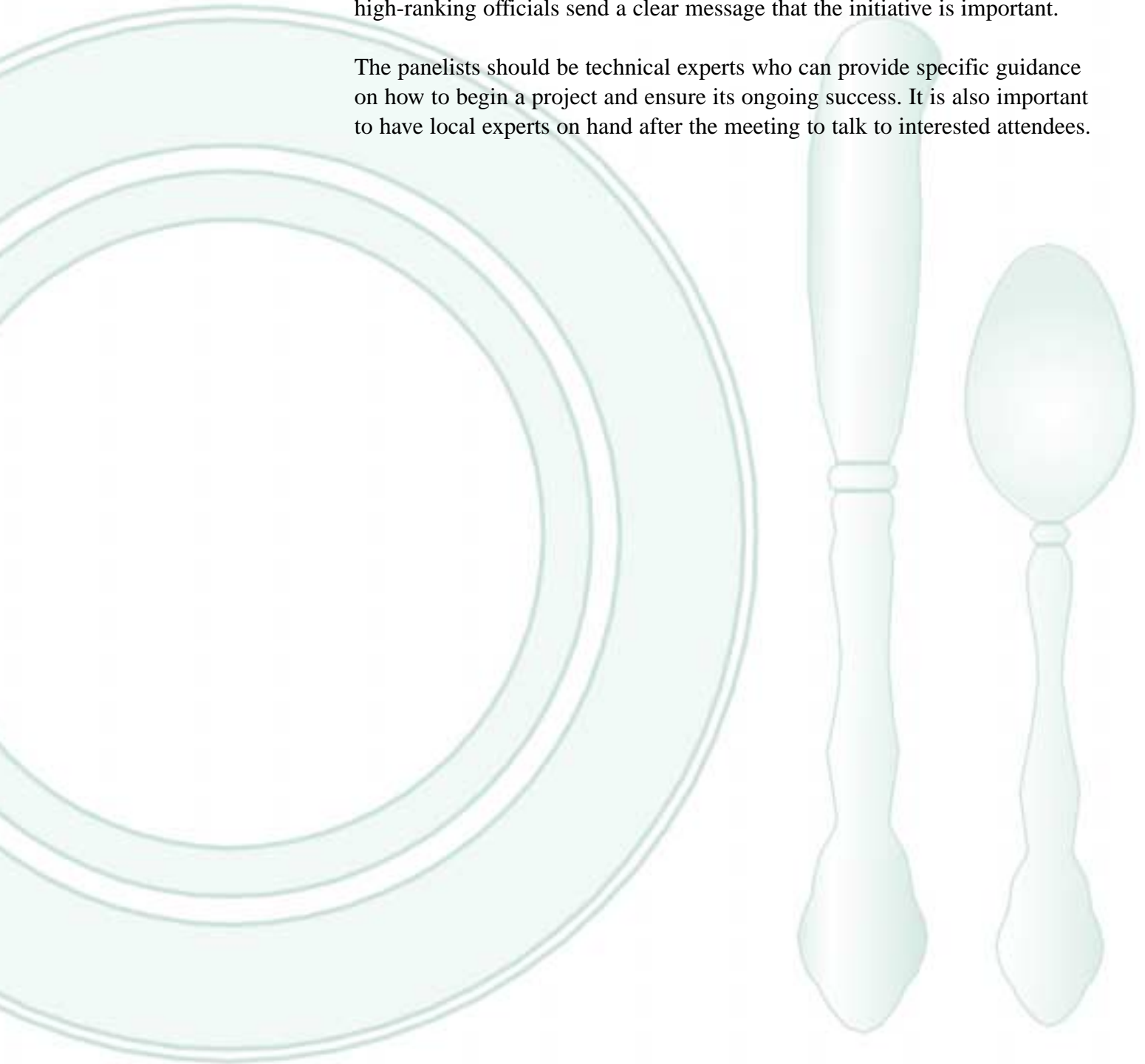
Outreach

The local Congressional staff could arrange for publicity in the local papers and on radio stations to help publicize the meeting. At the North Carolina meeting on the morning of the event, a member of Congress and an FNS representative appeared on a local television show to promote the event and encourage the community’s participation.

■ Speakers and Panelists

The speakers should be USDA and other officials who have an interest in the success of the initiative. They should discuss the initiative and express their commitment to making it work. Speakers who are high-ranking officials send a clear message that the initiative is important.

The panelists should be technical experts who can provide specific guidance on how to begin a project and ensure its ongoing success. It is also important to have local experts on hand after the meeting to talk to interested attendees.



Materials and Handouts

As part of your meeting, the following materials would be useful:

Sign-in Sheet

It is critical to have a staffed registration table outside the meeting room and to require guests to sign in with their names, addresses, and telephone numbers. The sign-in sheets provide an accurate, complete record of the people who are interested in the initiative.

Agenda

A succinct agenda provides the roadmap of progress through the program. Once the content is approved, send the agenda to all officials, speakers, and panelists. Give each participant a copy at the registration table.

Informational Materials

Each guest registering at the event should receive a copy of fact sheets available about the school lunch and breakfast programs and information on the “farm- to-school” initiative.



Media Coverage

In order to promote the initiative, it is important to have as much media coverage as possible.

Media Advisory

An advisory should be sent to all media in the local and surrounding areas advising them of the upcoming meeting. Make follow-up calls to the media a day or two before the meeting to encourage participation and to get a preliminary indication of interest. Keep a list of “confirmed” media available for interested parties.

Press Release

Prepare a press release and send it out the day of the meeting.

Press Kits

The press kits should contain:

- Biographies of the Congress member and USDA officials;
- Press release;
- School Lunch and School Breakfast Program fact sheets; and
- Information on the “farm-to-school” initiative.

News Clippings

Arrange for someone on-site to collect any news articles and, if possible, to get videotape of television coverage. Send copies of the articles and videotapes to FNS. Many of the farm communities publish weekly newspapers, and it is important to have a local person review those newspapers for any stories about the meeting.

Summary Checklist

Ongoing:

- Hold conference calls regularly to update all interested parties.

At least 6 to 8 weeks before the event:

- Decide on a city and possible date;
- Confirm city and date with USDA and other officials; and
- Gather team of interested parties.

At least 4 to 6 weeks before the event:

- Reserve a site for the event and get all pertinent information;
- Once the city and date have been established, work with a team of interested parties to develop a list of invitees; and
- Determine how to publicize.

2 to 4 weeks before event:

- Identify speakers and panelists and obtain biographies;
- Develop agenda;
- Develop media list;
- Develop “take home” flyer for meeting attendees; and
- Fax or mail invitations.

1 to 2 weeks before event:

- Confirm meeting site;
- Prepare materials and handouts;
- Follow up with participants;
- Confirm speakers and panelists; and
- Prepare background information on speakers and panelists.

Final Week:

- Prepare briefing materials;
- Develop and assemble press kits;
- Visit site; and
- Fax media advisory, confirm media, and fax press release.

Day of Event:

- Prepare room;
- Coordinate final arrangements;
- Make sure all equipment is working properly;
- Provide name tags and table tents for speakers and panelists;
- Register guests and provide them packets and handouts;
- Welcome the media and have them sign in;
- Coordinate media interviews.

Follow-up after event:

- Obtain news articles from the event and distribute to interested parties;
- Make copies of sign-in sheets available to interested parties;
- Follow up with speakers, panelists, and participants and send thank-you letters to them;
- Coordinate with established contacts on outcome and future plans.

■ Current Projects

Several States have “farm-to-school” projects. Among the most promising are those in North Carolina, Florida, California, and Connecticut. The role of USDA and the Food and Nutrition Service varies in all of these projects.

Because the ability to make a “farm-to-school” project work depends on a long list of variables, the projects work better in some places than in others. The goal is for the North Carolina success to spread to other States.

For the long term, the various USDA agencies are researching the advantages and disadvantages of the different approaches States are taking in their “farm-to-school” projects.

■ For More Information

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