

The road to school food system change: Enacting a vendor strategy

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Drawing on the experience of the School Food Learning Lab in Saint Paul and Denver, the FOCUS case study school districts, the following strategy may help you explore and examine opportunities to introduce significant, lasting changes in your food purchasing and procurement practices.

Step 1: Be ready to communicate the changes you desire

Do your homework before contacting vendors. Work with knowledgeable community partners to identify and prioritize desired changes in your food procurement and purchasing system. Be as specific as you can about what you really want, as well as what degree of change is still significant and acceptable. Prepare, review and write them down so that you can document and share -- not only with your vendors, but also with other community partners, local government agencies, or neighboring school districts.

Step 2: Prepare yourself well to explore opportunities

Working with your community partner(s), assemble a list of current as well as potential vendors of selected priority products. Refine and rank the list based on the required product, perceived supplier capability and your vision. This will result in a list of vendors to contact immediately. Start with your current suppliers, if possible.

Step 3: Prepare to conduct interviews with current and potential vendors

Prepare and review a list of questions ahead of time. Develop, review and refine your questions with your community partners. Some of the questions could be specific to your needs based on desired changes; others could be questions that help you understand how vendors operate in terms of product supply and demand and relationships with customers and suppliers.

Make the right introductions going into your first meetings with vendors. Before going into detailed questions, let vendors know about your desires and wants. Be precise and clear about your desired changes and goals. Explain your gold standard to vendors, and then gauge their ability to deliver it. This will give you room to negotiate rather than revealing right away how you might compromise. Following are five categories of questions to ask vendors in order to understand the constraints and opportunities in introducing the desired change.

Q1: Ask about the product lines directed at school districts and other customers. Specifically, learn where products are sourced and marketed. Explore existing product lines and the potential for developing new product lines. Investigate the supply chain and discover the types of processors involved in these products.

Q2: "Who do you source from, and how much of the products are local?" This will give you an opportunity to learn about sources of the desired products in the region. Ask



related questions such as, “How do you define or conceive of local and healthy foods?” This will help you to discover whether the vendor’s product sourcing philosophy aligns with your goal. Learn about the vendor’s direct connection with local producers and suppliers by asking questions such as, “Have you been sourcing product from local farmers and suppliers? Can you name them on your delivery documentation or invoices? Would you be willing to share the prices you pay to farmers? Can we contact these farmers?”

Q3: “What types of logistics and delivery systems do you have in place for schools and other major customers?” This question will allow you to examine the required changes in terms of product delivery, schedule and related logistical issues. It also allows you and the vendor to discuss potential delivery options such as drop/ship, direct to each school, or a hybrid delivery model. Anticipate future logistics needs by asking questions such as, “What logistical changes should our district make if you agree to supply the specific product?” Compare current versus new delivery arrangements and related costs; discover whether vendors’ delivery mechanism aligns with your current logistics arrangement; check whether products come directly or through a distributor.

Q4: “Are you willing to source and supply the desired product to our schools? Do you have the capacity to do so?” Here, the goal is to obtain more information about quantity, price point, and seasonality of supply. Ask, “What are your major constraints to supply the product?” This will allow you to learn more about the steps and actions that you and the vendor should undertake to overcome challenges and make the changes happen. This will also help you evaluate the vendor’s readiness to make those changes.

Q5: “What makes us a good customer for you?” Try to understand the vendor’s interest in terms of day- to-day communication, order processing, and desired types of relationships if he or she is able to supply desired product. This gives you valuable information to facilitate future transactions: “What attributes or behaviors are appealing when it comes to your customers? How often, and by what means, do you communicate with them? How do you negotiate prices and other terms? What kinds of mechanisms and agreements (bids, RFPs, etc.) do you prefer, and why?”

Step 4: Going further: involve your community partners to get additional information

You may have some unanswered questions that require additional information from current or new vendors, or other stakeholders. In such cases, involve your community partners to help you gather the information. This broadens your knowledge about potential vendors of desired products in your region. You may also find new information about how suppliers work with other schools that will help you to compare vendors’ activities.

Step 5: Analyze and review information, and develop action steps to meet goals

At this stage, share your learning from the process with your community partners and other stakeholders. Create a list of concrete action steps. Share these action steps with neighboring school districts and check their willingness and readiness to collaborate to implement these action steps. This could include RFP development, changing vendors, product development, shipping logistics and product delivery. Work with the selected vendors and your community partners to move forward, holding product tastings and pilots. This may require meetings, preparation of documents, and specific knowledge. Contact regional colleges and research organizations to provide you with the required information.

Step 6: Periodically check in with vendors to discover how the new arrangements are working

What do they like? What don’t they like? Has the change caused any impacts on their businesses? Involve your community partners and use this process to make necessary adjustments.