CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Program

Best Practices for Applicants by Project Type

Local Procurement Assistance Projects

(Examples: marketing and education for students, culinary training for cafeteria staff, equipment purchases for cafeterias, group purchasing, community dinners, taste tests)

1. **Establish a vision and goals:**

This does not have to be your first step, but it is a meaningful one especially as you start to build momentum! Define what your farm-to-school program aims to achieve. Where will you focus your efforts first? Overlapping areas to think about include the 3 farms to school areas of classroom, cafeteria and community. Your vision and goals are a living anchor to build your farm to school team around.

2. **Start small and scale up:**

Begin with a pilot project or a limited number of local products and gradually expand the program as successes are achieved, and capacity increases. Focus on one school rather than thinking about the whole district/ Work with cafeteria managers and staff who are already excited to serve local products. Regular, seasonal taste tests, that also serve to test recipes and get feedback from students, are a great strategy. Fall is a great time to feature a wide range of products at peak harvest with volume and price benefits.

3. **Build a team:**

Involve key stakeholders like school nutrition staff, teachers, farmers, and community members to ensure diverse perspectives and collaborative decision-making. Foster communication and relationships by maintaining open communication between schools, farmers, and distributors to address challenges, share information, and build strong, lasting partnerships. Promote your program to educate students, staff, and the wider community about the benefits of farm-to-school and the importance of supporting local agriculture is key to team development!

4. **Find local products:**

Utilize resources such as UConn Extension's Farm Directory to locate and connect with local farmers and producers. Start learning what is available throughout the seasons by visiting your local farmers markets, farm stands, and signing up for a local farm newsletter. Develop a clear definition of "local" based on geographic proximity, seasonality, and farm practices, aligning with school district policies and regulations.

5. Use incentives and proper procurement methods:

Explore options like geographic preference, micropurchasing, and informal procurement procedures to facilitate local food purchases while adhering to regulations. Know your district purchasing options; they are likely more flexible than you think when it comes to direct purchasing from farms. Work with the CT Dept. Of Education to utilize local purchasing incentive programs and get familiar with how they work.

Experiential Learning Projects

(Examples: school gardens, classroom-based lessons, farm field trips, farmer visits to the school, hands on culinary or nutrition lesson, professional development for teachers)

1. **Start small and go where the excitement flows:**

If just starting out, try piloting your Farm to School project with one class, grade level, or a teacher that is excited. Starting small allows you to test what works, build momentum, and start out successfully. Focus your efforts wherever there's energy or engagement: work with a science teacher with a green thumb, a cafeteria manager that loves to scratch cook, or a principal with a passion for local farms.

2. **Involve students in planning and leadership:**

Empowering students, at any grade level, builds excitement, relevance, and ownership. Let students help design a garden layout, choose crops, create cafeteria signage, plan and support taste tests, or lead cooking demonstrations for their peers. Student-centered activities also support core learning standards like collaboration, communication, and problem solving.

3. **Incorporate farm to school into existing curriculum:**

Make connections to what is already being taught. Integrate a soil test lesson into a science unit, add a local food cooking class to a math lesson about fractions, or bring food justice into social studies. There are many examples of Farm to School lessons and curriculum that exist for free, and many of these resources detail curriculum alignment.

4. **Build relationships across the Classrooms, Cafeterias, and Community:**

Whenever collaborative relationships are built over time between educators, cafeteria staff, and community leaders, farm to school programs will thrive. Use grant funds to create opportunities for collaboration between teachers, nutrition staff, school administrators, parents, and farmers. Invite cafeteria staff to garden planning meetings or invite a farmer to visit a classroom. Shared ownership between multiple groups leads to long-term success.

5. **Document and celebrate progress:**

Use photos, student artwork, simple data (e.g., pounds of local food purchased), or short newsletters to share Farm to School wins. Communicate with your Board of Education to schedule annual updates at their meetings. Highlighting success helps maintain enthusiasm, secures ongoing support from leadership, and demonstrates impact to funders and families.

Producer Capacity-Building Projects

(Examples: high tunnels for season extension, wash-pack stations, harvest and sorting equipment, transportation to schools and ECE centers, food safety training)

1. Form trusting relationships with school buyers

Work with School Food Authorities to partner and create a short list of mutually beneficial crop preferences. Both buyers and sellers need to listen carefully to understand each other's needs. Be clear and flexible about expectations for crop quality, volume, and pricing ranges and delivery. Being a r*esponsive and responsible* vendor will lead to a smooth relationship between a local farm and a school food service program.

2. Meet in person to discuss purchasing parameters

Collaborative conversations between local farmers and School Food Authorities can help clear up any questions from either party and can clarify purchasing and delivery parameters. Establish the best way to communicate and communicate your 'wholesale' list regularly, even if it is small. Be consistent, patient, and keep communicating.

3. Increase your efficiency

Understanding what infrastructure and systems support efficiency from harvest to delivery, especially for each specific crop family, will help you achieve profitability. Investing in specialized equipment that increases food safety and product movement will support school sales. Investments to consider are:

- Root washer, root digger,
- Wash and pack platforms with drainage
- Harvest and delivery equipment that is uniform and can be sanitized
- Refrigeration and storage

4. Scale up over time

Start with one 1-3 crops that you grow well, and you have good infrastructure to manage. Can you scale up a particular crop? Maximize the efficiency of your wash & pack systems to deliver food products that are safe and consistent. As your confidence and relationships grow with school buyers, begin to expand by adding new items to your crop list. Some

schools are looking to branch out to more unique crops as their programs progress but usually want to start with the basics, such as kale, root vegetables, lettuce, peppers etc.

5. Ask questions

The more you understand how school food planning works, the less frustrated you will be! Share how your farm business works and why. You are educating each other. Both farms and school food programs are year-round, dynamic and complicated. Lean on service providers like UConn Extension to help you along the way!

Early Care in Education Projects

(Examples: raised garden beds and tools, purchasing a CSA or local products at a farmers' market for snacks or for families, professional training for staff, family engagement activities, farm field trips and farmer visits)

1. Buy and serve locally grown products

Connecting with local producers through farmers markets, CSA programs, or farm stands opens the door to fresh, seasonal ingredients. These items can be incorporated into engaging classroom activities such as cooking demonstrations, taste tests, or simple recipe enhancements. Involving families with culturally reflective recipes deepens connections, while children can safely participate in age-appropriate tasks like cutting, sorting, and cleaning fresh produce.

2. Utilize gardening activities to spark learning

Start small with easy-to-grow, child-friendly crops like cherry tomatoes, herbs, or string beans to build gardening confidence over time. Gardens offer countless learning opportunities across subjects—from art and storytelling to motor skill development and seasonal cycles. Use tools sized for children, skip the gloves, and make tool care a regular part of the routine to foster responsibility and independence.

3. Engage families and community

Invite families and caregivers into the experience by sending produce home, asking for recipes, or hosting garden celebrations. Strengthen community ties by collaborating with local farmers through classroom visits, field trips, or seasonal outings like U-pick farm days. These shared experiences reinforce learning and build relationships across home, school, and community.

4. Don’t over build; start with enough to get started

Start with the type of garden that fits your space—whether container, raised bed, or indoor setup—and scale up gradually. While greenhouses can be an exciting addition, they require careful planning, and may involve permits and infrastructure upgrades. Visit other ECE sites that have gardens or small greenhouses to gather ideas before making any investments.

5. Seek training opportunities

Professional development is essential for success. Make sure all staff members have regular access to training that builds comfort and confidence in gardening, using local foods, and implementing a farm to early care curriculum.

Shipping Container Projects

(Examples: school purchase of shipping container that is managed by a farmer, farmer purchases shipping container to grow crops to sell to schools)

1. Understand the types of growing systems

Get familiar with various hydroponic growing systems such as Nutrient Film Technique (NFT), Deep Water Culture (DWC), Drip Systems, Wick Systems, and Aeroponics. Each system has unique features that influence how plants receive water, nutrients, and oxygen—understanding these options is the foundation for making informed decisions about your growing setup.

2. Explore the advantages and disadvantages

Take time to assess how shipping container systems align with your growing goals. Compare the benefits and limitations of each hydroponic method in relation to your space, crop needs, and business model. A thoughtful evaluation now will set you up for more efficient and effective operations.

3. Prepare for critical components before delivery

Before your container arrives, plan for key logistical elements. Ensure you've researched local permits and regulations, prepared a suitable foundation, and secured reliable access to electricity and water. Proper planning at this stage prevents costly delays and ensures a smooth set-up process.

4. Utilize resources for controlled environment troubleshooting

Controlled environment agriculture comes with its own set of challenges. Be proactive by having go-to resources ready to address fluctuations in temperature, humidity, and light, as well as water and air quality. Nutrient management and pest control are also critical areas—maintaining these systems ensures healthy plants and consistent yields.

5. Plan around the crops you want to grow

Choose crops strategically based on market demand, growth time, and space efficiency. Consider staggering crops with different growth cycles to ensure continuous production.

Whether you specialize in a few crops or aim for more variety, streamline your choices to match your goals and system capacity.