

FARM TO SCHOOL TASTE TEST GUIDE:

Testing Local Food in Schools



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1. TELLING THE STORY OF FARM TO SCHOOL

“Farm to school enriches the connection communities have with fresh, healthy food and local food producers by changing food purchasing and education practices at schools and early care and education settings.

- National Farm to School Network”



Farm to School is a movement that emphasizes community-based food systems through local procurement, scratch cooking, taste tests, and education. By incorporating fresh, high-quality local ingredients in school meals, farm to school programs can also have an important impact on student health and food security.

We believe that through experiential learning opportunities in the cafeteria, classroom, and gardens, we can encourage healthy relationships with food from a young age. With an appreciation of our local food system, young people have the power to encourage local purchasing and support producers in our region.

2. WHY TASTE TESTS?

There are numerous ways in which different schools and districts around the country participate in the Farm to School movement. For many, taste tests are an effective way to engage multiple stakeholders within schools with the common goal of cooking and tasting new foods. Taste tests can serve several important goals for farm to school programs, including:

1. Gain student and staff feedback on new recipes and items before putting them on the menu.
2. Increase students familiarity with newer menu items.
3. Provide hands-on learning experiences and introduce students to the sources of their food.
4. Build support from school staff, raise community awareness, and promote the farm to school program.

The Rural Health Network hosts taste tests in two settings: **cafeterias** and **classrooms**. In the cafeteria, food is prepared in the school kitchen and served in the cafeteria. Classroom taste tests are typically part of an educational activity, and the food is prepared in advance.

Cafeteria:

By preparing taste tests in the school kitchen, you spark conversation among kitchen staff about the process for preparing fresh foods and Farm to School in general. Additionally, this method provides opportunities for both community partners and food service staff to build relationships and discuss any potential questions or concerns about future Farm to School menu items.

Cafeteria taste tests are typically set up at a table to the side of the cafeteria in a place that is easily accessible to the students and avoids disrupting the normal flow of students. It is important to receive staff input on the best location and system for how students will participate, whether it's on their way from the line to their tables, or being called up by table by staff. The taste test should include some type of evaluation or voting station to get feedback from the students. Passing out stickers are normally a welcomed addition!



Classroom:

Taste tests in the classroom are often paired with an educational activity about fruits and vegetables, gardening, local agriculture, or exploring new flavors with the students. It is recommended that the food is prepared in the school cafeteria, however it could also be prepared in advance in a kitchen off-site. In some cases schools may have a cooking cart, which can be a great opportunity to involve students directly in the cooking process.



Farm to School Impacts

Farm to School Programs have proven to have a positive impact for all parties involved. This includes students, families, schools, and farmers.

Students benefit from Farm to School in several ways. Since they are educated on healthy, local foods they are equipped with knowledge about the food on their plate and the journey it took to get there. Additionally, students have amazing educational opportunities such as school gardens, cooking lessons, and farm field trips.

Schools benefit from Farm to School programs as well. These programs provide opportunities for schools to build family and community engagement. School meal program costs have even lowered, and meal participation has gone up 9% on average with implementation.

Farmers benefit because they are given a new market opportunity that ensures consistent sales and business promotion to school communities. This has created an average increase in income of 5%.

Data contributed by National Farm to School Network's "The Benefits of Farm to School Fact Sheet" (May 2020)



3. TIPS FOR PROFESSIONAL BEHAVIOR

For those of us that travel to new classrooms and buildings on a regular basis, it can be helpful to stick to a set of directions for yourself that help you navigate these new spaces. Some helpful practices include:

- Introduce yourself
- Share a brief sentence about your background and the work you represent
- Explain an overview of the day, and make sure to ask teachers/kitchen managers for confirmation or clarification of the space and steps along the way

If you feel your needs to complete a successful taste test are not being met, just ask! Any prolonged issues should be addressed through your supervisor and/or the kitchen manager.

Though a taste test may seem more casual than a presentation for example, please dress and behave in a way that represents your organization and respects the space you are working in. For example, please avoid wearing sweatpants, using your phone excessively when it is not necessary for your work at hand, swearing, carrying out loud conversations, or standing around. In general, we emphasize respect for others and their space, staying focused on the job at hand, and making connections.

Communication

An email should be sent to all involved at least one week prior to summarize the plan. The email should include:

1. Who will be there
2. If there are any additional visitors
3. What time you will arrive
4. Confirm number of samples needed
5. If any additional ingredients or kitchen supplies/equipment are needed
6. If a space is needed and where

Adjust these details depending on your audience.

The more taste tests you coordinate or participate in, the easier it will be to recognize your needs.



4. THE NITTY GRITTY: STEPS FOR PERFORMING A TASTE TEST

Regardless of the location of your taste test, the day of the event can often feel like a whirlwind between preparing and serving food, evaluation, and capturing the attention of the students. To help ensure a productive taste test it is important to prepare the day before, or several days in advance. The better you prepare for your taste test, the more smoothly it will run!

Pre-Taste Test Checklist:

1. Gather a core group for a taste test team. (This could include volunteers, food service employees, teachers, etc.)
2. Confirm location and time.
3. Select recipe or item to sample.
4. Verify number of students and sample size for your test.
5. Scale the recipe according to test group size.
6. Confirm kitchen space availability and equipment with cafeteria managers. (If you do not have access to a kitchen in the building you will be testing, you should secure kitchen time in another space, like Cornell Cooperative Extension, a church, or a Community Kitchen Space.)
7. Invite teachers, staff, and administration to participate.
8. Purchase and/or harvest ingredients according to your sample size.
9. Clarify roles before, during, and after the taste test. (We have found that it is best if everyone knows where they are needed and when in advance.)
10. Gather promotional materials and any additional items needed. (i.e. forks, sample cups, table cloth, table)

During the Taste Test

During the taste test:

- Gather ingredients.
- Gather equipment and materials.
- Set up workspace with equipment and produce.
- Wash produce.
- Preheat oven if necessary.
- Complete the recipe.
- Dish samples into 2oz. soufflé cups.
- Serve samples on large sheet trays or whatever is available.
- Display voting board directly near sampling station.
- If students aren't actively participating, feel free to walk around between tables offering samples and asking for feedback!



During the Taste Test

- Offer samples to teachers and other staff. If possible, bring samples to administrators.
- Clean up all spaces used in the kitchen and otherwise.
- Ask food service staff questions like, “Where can I wash these dishes?” Sometimes staff will wash dishes in the machines for you, but do not expect them to do this.
- Take pictures!
- **Always get approval for use of any photos from the taste test with the Public Relations contact for the school.** You are never permitted to share/use a photo from the school without receiving this approval first.

If you have questions or concerns, never hesitate to reach out to your supervisor!



5. EVALUATION

Lastly, evaluation is a crucial step to completing a successful taste test. Supplying a place for student feedback shows students that their opinions are valued, while getting responses on new recipes in real time. As we often use taste tests for developing recipes using local food, it is important that the students want to eat it!

We normally provide a vinyl poster board for dot sticker voting. Different colored stickers can be used to represent each grade in order to get more accurate data. After students try the sample, they can come back up to the table and vote whether they “loved it,” “liked it,” or “it’s not my favorite.” It will depend on the age group or behavior culture of the individual cafeteria, but some situations may call for more hands-on testing styles that require walking around to each table. This is a more time-consuming method, and if students are able to be lined up by table or directly after the lunch line, you will save time and energy. We have also conducted taste tests with very large groups using raffle tickets and voting boxes to conserve time.



Thank you for exploring our guide on
conducting taste tests in public schools!

If you use our guide and have any
feedback to share, please contact the
Food and Health Network at
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We love to hear stories!