# Attachment A, SNP Memo No. 2020-2021-19

# September 2, 2020

## Harvest of the Month User Guide

Welcome to Virginia’s Harvest of the Month Program!

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### Acknowledgements

Virginia Department of Education would like to thank the following for their contributions:

City Schoolyard Gardens in Charlottesville, Virginia

Local Food Hub

Virginia Agriculture in the Classroom

Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

This project was funded in part by a USDA Farm to School Grant.

### What is Virginia Harvest of the Month?

Virginia Harvest of the Month (HOM) is a campaign to promote seasonal eating, increase fruit and vegetable consumption, and support local economies. Sponsored by the Virginia Department of Education’s Office of School Nutrition Programs (VDOE-SNP), Virginia HOM provides ready-to-use materials for classrooms, cafeterias, Summer Meals and Afterschool Meals programs, nonprofits, farmers’ markets, and early care centers to educate children about the joys of eating seasonal, local foods.

Developing robust Farm to School programming requires planning, communication, promotion, and education, and it is worth the effort; [research from the National Farm to School Network](http://www.farmtoschool.org/Resources/BenefitsFactSheet.pdf) shows that Farm to School activities can create jobs, improve local economies, and increase meal participation.

Procuring local foods for child nutrition programs can become a standard and valuable component of your overall procurement plan. This User Guide will help child nutrition programs plan HOM events, including menu planning, procurement, and engaging schools and communities to promote seasonal, local items.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that children ages two to 18 are eating more fruits but not more vegetables and are not meeting consumption targets for fruits or vegetables (CDC, 2014). The objective of HOM is to increase consumption of seasonal, Virginia Grown fresh fruits and vegetables so children establish healthy eating habits to last a lifetime.

### Contents of Harvest of the Month Toolkit:

This Toolkit consists of the following resources featuring one seasonal agricultural product for each month of the year:

* Harvest of the Month User Guide
* Harvest of the Month posters (set of 12)
* Virginia Harvest Map poster
* Harvest of the Month cafeteria point-of-sale signs (set of 12)
* Commercial-scale recipes and associated production records
* Family-scale recipes, English and Spanish versions
* Printable newsletters, English and Spanish versions
* [SOL-based lesson plans by Virginia Ag in the Classroom](https://www.agclassroom.org/va/teachers/harvest.cfm)
* Local Food Tracking Tool
* Virginia Harvest Map placemats

### How to Use These Materials:

The Virginia HOM Toolkit is designed to help child nutrition professionals integrate local, seasonal Virginia agricultural products into menus, promotions, and nutrition education in the cafeteria, school garden, and cafeteria. The materials in the Toolkit assist in menu planning, professional development, and special events and promotions for the entire school year. Your HOM program can be launched at any point during the school year or in the Summer Meals program.

This Toolkit provides marketing and promotional material for Farm to School initiatives. A good place to start is with one small initiative and build on each success. For example, begin with procuring locally the HOM item and feature it at a special event using the promotional materials provided in the Toolkit. Build on this by procuring local agricultural products and incorporating the featured item into your menus weekly or monthly. This can be done as a meal component, added to a recipe, or served on a salad bar.

School nutrition programs may consider establishing divisionwide campaigns including field trips to local farms, farmer in the classroom visits, cafeteria displays, and classroom [lesson plans](https://www.agclassroom.org/va/teachers/harvest.cfm) coordinated with the featured agricultural products. HOM can also be piloted in select schools with a special monthly event. This method will provide an opportunity to compare the effectiveness of marketing and staff professional development strategies. Schools participating in the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) can highlight HOM through tastings and procurement practices.

Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) sponsors, early care centers, At-Risk Afterschool Meals component of the Child and Adult Food Care Program (CACFP), and residential programs can use HOM programming to develop events and education opportunities for children in school gardens, at farmers markets, on farms, and in grocery stores. For example, Summer Meals and Afterschool Meals programs can present tastings of the featured crops and read the book featured on the poster as an enrichment opportunity for your program.

#### Harvest of the Month Posters

Each month the new HOM posters should be displayed. Establish a reminder and assign a staff member to be responsible for this duty. Identify a high-visibility location in the cafeteria or serving line for the poster. If possible, laminate the posters to reduce wear and tear and to reuse next year. Take them down at the end of each month and store flat or rolled in a clean, dry area. The Virginia Harvest map can hang year-round in the cafeteria, hallway, or classroom.

**Tip:** Consider moving posters to different locations after a few months to increase visibility.

Summer Meals and Afterschool Meals programs can feature the HOM posters at feeding sites on sandwich boards or other temporary information boards or hang them in prominent areas where participants are picked up. You may consider purchasing inexpensive frames so the posters can withstand movement without damage. Libraries and children’s organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs may want to feature the HOM posters for a month and develop taste tests, reading times, crafts, or gardens that feature the vegetables and fruits. For afterschool sites with kitchen access, consider hosting cooking lessons featuring the HOM item.

#### Point-of-Sale Marketing Materials

The point of sale marketing materials and signage should be displayed on the serving line. Include the name of the local farm providing the HOM feature during the month. Use a **black dry erase marker** to write the farm name legibly or print out the name **and place** in the box provided. Place the signage where the item is featured. **Please do not leave the farm name blank**. Encourage staff to inform students about farm to school, including the farm name and where the farm is located. If the featured items are from the school garden, clearly write the name of the garden or the class that provided the HOM feature. Before storing the point-of-sale signage, wipe clean with a damp paper towel.

**Tip:** If staff accidentally use a permanent marker, write over the permanent marker with a black dry erase marker to remove the ink. Use non-stick cooking spray and dish detergent to remove tape residue from plexiglass.

#### Commercial Scale Recipes

Feature the HOM recipes during each month. These recipes have been tested by Virginia school nutrition program staff for preparation, easy ingredient sourcing, and student acceptance. For increased student acceptance, adapt the name of the recipe to suit the target age level. For example, you may want to call Zucchini Parmesan “Zippy Zucchini Parm” or “Zeelicious Zucchini Parmesan” for elementary students. For more information on developing descriptive and age-appropriate names, utilize the [Smarter Lunchrooms resource](https://www.smarterlunchrooms.org/scorecard-tools/creative-fun-and-descriptive-names) pertaining to naming menu items.

As HOM recipes are incorporated into the cycle menu; provide samples one or two days prior to serving. This provides an opportunity for staff to familiarize themselves with the preparation and promotion of the featured menu item. Develop a process for students to provide feedback on all new menu items. Incorporate the feedback into your recipe modification and let students know you took their advice. If you have a student Nutrition Advisory Council, ask them to provide input on your HOM recipes and on the campaign.

#### Family-Scale Recipes and Newsletters

HOM provides an opportunity to encourage healthy eating habits at home. Send the family-scale recipes and newsletters to families in e-newsletters or hard copies and post them on the school division website. Inform families where they can find the HOM featured item at farmers’ markets or the grocery store. Consider providing copies of the recipes and newsletters to stores where the featured items can be found. Local grocery stores and farmers’ markets may be interested in these materials to connect the community with your initiative. Host a local chef at a Parent Teacher Association (PTA/PTO) meeting to demonstrate preparation techniques and allow parents to taste featured recipes.

#### Lesson Plans

Discuss the HOM campaign with building administrators ahead of time to garner support. Communicate with elementary school librarians and request that they order the books featured on the HOM posters. Request 10 minutes on the agenda at a school staff meeting before the campaign launch to inform teachers and request collaboration. At the meeting, demonstrate how to access the [lesson plans](https://www.agclassroom.org/va/teachers/harvest.cfm) developed by Virginia Agriculture in the Classroom (VAITC). Discuss your intent to make lunchtime a learning time and to foster students’ consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables. Helping students increase consumption of fruit and vegetables prepares them for learning and develops healthy eating habits for a lifetime. Connect with principals and teachers to identify opportunities connect to the classroom. Positive adult role modeling can amplify this messaging. Hosting a HOM taste-test at a school staff meeting can increase buy-in. Follow up with an email providing the VAITC [link](https://www.agclassroom.org/va/teachers/harvest.cfm) and a campaign overview.

#### Local Food Tracking Tool

The Local Food Tracking Tool is a spreadsheet that can assist with documentation of local purchases, Farm to School special events including HOM, and staff trainings by site or by division. You may modify this workbook as appropriate for your division. Tracking local food purchases is strongly recommended and encouraged.

#### Virginia Harvest Map Placemat

This placemat can be reproduced and used for special events in classrooms or cafeterias. You may want to utilize them as special giveaways to students who try the HOM featured item. Placemats could be used as an incentive to the class with the most students who try the HOM featured item.

### Plan

Planning is essential to all successful child nutrition programs. As you develop your menu, your procurement plan, and your promotional schedule for the year, incorporate Virginia HOM into your operation.

#### Plan Your Menu

Menu planning is the foundation of child nutrition programs. Menu planning occurs year-round based on student preferences, seasonal accessibility, special events, and feedback from production records. Cycle menus should be flexible enough to incorporate local, seasonal foods.

Consider seasonality a lesson and an opportunity for your school nutrition program. Purchasing foods in season ensures the best flavor, higher value, and regional availability of agricultural products. Local foods can be price competitive: Virginia Grown apples are an example of a local product that can be more affordable when available.

#### Incorporate Local Food Purchases into Your Procurement Plan

As you develop your procurement plan, consider the value of adding local food to the menu. Not only can local products be competitive in price when seasonal, they also offer marketing opportunities that can bring new customers into your meal program. Local food can be purchased from grocery stores, farmers’ markets, produce companies, broad line distributors, food hubs, and directly from the growers.

When considering value, child nutrition programs should consider social, economic, educational, and environmental impacts of purchasing local, sustainably produced products. These values can be incorporated into product specifications and as part of an overall procurement plan. Incorporating geographic preference into procurement documents and defining “local” for your school division ensures that all vendors understand the value your program places on local food and nutrition education.

#### Plan an Informational Meeting for Farmers

Ask your local [Virginia Cooperative Extension Agriculture and Natural Resources Agent](https://ext.vt.edu/offices.html) to help you plan a meeting with farmers. December and January are ideal months to hold farmer meetings.

#### Schedule Special Events

Children often need repeated exposure to new foods to generate acceptance and interest. Conducting taste tests, collecting feedback, and incorporating student-driven variations into annual promotion plans are good ways to connect with students. Farm to School efforts such as HOM can increase participation rates when used as a promotional tool. Be sure to announce events on menus, morning announcements, social media, school television, at staff meetings, and at PTA/PTO meetings. Invite local legislators to dine with students and invite media to cover your events.

Taste tests may be performed simply on the serving line or they can be more elaborate productions with staff, student, or volunteer support. Consider making a small batch of the featured HOM recipe a few days before it will be offered on the menu. Allow students to taste it ahead of time and train serving staff to state key points about the HOM featured item highlighting its flavor, the name of the farm where it was grown, or a key nutritional fact.

### Procure

As you develop your procurement plan, decide which special events you want to highlight with local foods (such as Virginia HOM) and whether you plan to use an informal or formal procurement procedure based on your division’s small purchase threshold. USDA prohibits the arbitrary splitting of bids to fall below the small or micro-purchase threshold; however, procuring local food for HOM, FFVP, or other special events is justification for developing a separate solicitation.

The federal micro-purchase threshold is $10,000 while Virginia’s micro-purchase threshold is $5,000. The federal small purchase threshold is $250,000 and in Virginia it is $100,000. Local purchase thresholds may be lower, and school food authorities (SFAs) and other entities must use the most restrictive (lowest) threshold.

#### Incorporating Geographic Preference

The 2008 Farm Bill directed the Secretary of Agriculture to encourage schools operating child nutrition programs to purchase “**unprocessed agricultural products, both locally grown and locally raised, to the maximum extent practicable and appropriate**,” and to “allow institutions to use a geographic preference for the procurement of unprocessed agricultural products, both locally grown and locally raised.” This legislation is meant to offer a defined advantage to products meeting the school division’s or child nutrition program’s definition of local. When you incorporate geographic preference into your bids, it informs vendors of your interest in purchasing local products and encourages them to label items that are local.

#### Defining Local

School food authorities must define “local” and incorporate this definition into solicitations to be to use geographic preference as a criteria for evaluating bids.

Sample definitions include:

* Products grown in Virginia
* Products grown within a certain radius from the division’s school nutrition office
* Products grown in a tiered system with different values associated with each tier *Example:* This [division name] school division defines local with a tiered value. While products that meet the first tier are preferred, products falling within any of the tiers are considered local.
1. Grown in this county
2. Grown within a 150-mile radius from [address]
3. Grown in Virginia

#### Defining Unprocessed

Unprocessed foods include foods that “retain their inherent character.” Acceptable processes include:

* Refrigerating
* Freezing
* Peeling
* Slicing
* Dicing
* Cutting
* Chopping
* Shucking
* Grinding
* Drying or dehydrating
* Washing
* Packaging
* Cleaning fish
* Pasteurizing milk
* Forming ground products into patties without any additives or fillers
* Vacuum packing and bagging (such as placing vegetables in bags or combining two or more types of vegetables or fruits in the same package)
* Adding ascorbic acid or other preservatives to prevent oxidation
* Butchering livestock or poultry

Geographic preference does not apply to foods that are canned, cooked, or heated. No fillers can be added to meat products. Flavored milk, cheese, and yogurt are excluded. Liquid eggs are excluded. Grains apply only in whole or ground form if they have not been baked or cooked.

#### Understanding Geographic Preference

While USDA prohibits using “local” as a product specification, there are other ways to target local foods in your procurement process. A first step is to be sure all potential vendors understand your desire for local foods and your reasons for wanting them. This can be included in the introduction of all solicitation documents.

#### Sample Language for Procurement Documents

“This [division name] school division or SFA or SFSP/CACFP sponsoring organization desires to serve Virginia grown products to its students. This division recognizes the value of serving local foods to its students for nutrition and agricultural education opportunities during lunch and recognizes the value that purchasing local, sustainably-produced products can have on the local economy and the environment. This division believes that every child should have access to fresh, healthy food and that serving local foods encourages students to try healthy fruits, vegetables, and other foods they may not have tried before.”

#### Tips for Targeting Local Foods in Specifications

There is no prescribed method for applying geographic preference, provided the solicitation provides sufficient competition and is not overly restrictive. Sample methods for targeting local foods in solicitations include:

* **Drafting specifications which target local items. For example:**
	+ Products must be harvested and delivered within 48 hours
	+ Local varieties are specified (i.e., Winesap or Stayman apples)
	+ Vendor must visit school or host field trip for one special event per year
	+ Vendor must label the farm, country and state of origin
* **Broadening requirements to allow for local suppliers to bid. For example:**
	+ Requiring farms have a written food safety plan rather than requiring Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification
	+ Allowing for some cosmetic damage in specifications, especially in foods that need additional processing
	+ Not requiring refrigerated trucks for items which do not need refrigeration (i.e., apples, sweet potatoes)
* **“One Penny=One Point”: utilizing a point system to give local products a cost advantage so they are more competitive in the informal or formal bid process.** In this method, a point system is developed that discounts the price of products that meet geographic preference for price comparison purposes. Local products become more competitive for the purpose of evaluating the lowest bidder. The buyer will pay the vendor’s original stated price, but local foods are given preference in the evaluation process for awarding the bid.
* **“Percentage Local”: providing a comparative advantage to bidders who procure a certain percentage of their products locally.** In this example, a school division issues a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a produce contract and indicates a preference for fresh fruits and vegetables produced within Virginia. For the purposes of evaluating, the school will award a 10 percent reduction in price for the purpose of evaluating the lowest bidder to respondents that can provide at least 50 percent of the requested items from within the Commonwealth. Again, the buyer will pay the vendor’s original stated price.

Other examples may be accessed in the USDA resource, [*Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Programs*](https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/f2s/ProcureLocalFoodsCNPGuide.pdf).

#### Finding Farmers

Farmers plan their growing season and order their seeds during the winter months. Consider hosting a farmer meeting of all local and regional producers in December to introduce your program and help farmers understand the procurement process.

#### Tips for Finding Local Producers

1. Request a meeting with your local [Virginia Cooperative Extension Agriculture and Natural Resources Agent](https://ext.vt.edu/offices.html). This professional knows producers in the region and can help connect farmers with schools.
2. Register your school division on [Virginia Market Maker](https://va.foodmarketmaker.com/), a website that connects producers and buyers. Register as a buyer and enable the “Farm to School” tag as you develop your profile.
3. Visit your local [farmers market](https://www.virginia.org/farmersmarkets/) toward the start or end of the market when it is less busy. Speak with farmers and inform them of your interest in providing fresh, healthy food for children. Provide a Request for Information (RFI) and an estimate of your local product needs based on your procurement plan. Follow up with a phone call or an email and invite them to your farmer informational meeting.
4. Connect with local food aggregators to express interest in procuring local foods for special events.
5. Ask produce distributors to label local foods and to provide monthly velocity reports to assist you in recording local food purchases. Velocity reports or local food labeling may be a request included in solicitations for bids. How does your produce distributor define “local”? Does their definition align with yours?

#### Sample Farmer Meeting Outline:

1. Introductions
2. About your school nutrition program—mission, general statistics, Farm to School objectives
3. Explain federal procurement guidelines
4. Explain Farm to School process
5. December: Farmer informational meeting.
6. January: Request for Information due. Post RFP on website.
7. February: RFPs due. Notify of contract awards.
8. Spring: Food safety workshop (Optional; Virginia Cooperative Extension or Virginia Department of Health may assist.)
9. Spring: Institutional sales workshop (Optional; invite farmers to see how their product is used and promoted in schools.)
10. May: Producers send food safety plan and water test
11. July: School nutrition professional performs site visit
12. August-June: Sell food to this division
13. List crops and quantities your division is considering purchasing local for the school year (i.e., all HOM crops)
14. Provide RFI to all attendees
15. Questions and feedback

#### Sample Specifications for Harvest of the Month Products:

| **Produce Item** | **Product Description** | **Pack Size/Description** | **Approximate Delivery Periods** | **Approximate Quantity Needed** | **Total Qty Needed for School Year** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Sweet Potatoes | Use baked or mashed. Large size preferred. Cosmetic issues are okay.  | Bushel (approx. 55 # or Crate (approx. 50 #). Rinsed, debris-free.  | Monthly delivery October-January or can drop for dry storage at one delivery time. | *x* bushels or *y* crates per week | *z* bushels or *a* crates total |
| Butternut Squash | Use roasted, mashed, in soups. Large sizes preferred. Cosmetic issues okay.  | Bushel (approx. 55 # or Crate (approx. 50 #). Rinsed, debris-free. | Monthly delivery October-January or can drop for dry storage at one delivery time. | *x* bushels or *y* crates per month | *z* bushels or *a* crates total |
| Kale | Use fresh or cooked. Minor insect damage accepted, bronze or slightly yellowish edge okay if the edges are not dried. Insect free.  | 10 # case or 25# carton or crate. Fully washed, partly trimmed, with stem.  | October-December as available; March and April (approx. 16 weeks) | *x* cartons or *y* crates per week | *z* cartons or *a* crates total |
| Lettuce, Hydroponic Head | Use fresh on salad bar, in chef salads, on sandwiches. Insect free.  | Carton packed, 24 heads or 10 # case. Root intact.  | Year-round.  | *x* cartons or *y* cases last week Aug-first week June; *x* cartons or *y* cases June-Aug for summer feeding program | *z* cartons or *a* cases total |
| Lettuce, Romaine Head | Use fresh on salad bar, in chef salads, on sandwiches. Insect free.  | Carton packed, 24 heads or 10 # case. Fully washed and trimmed.  | April-June and September-October as available (approx. 20 weeks)  | *x* cartons or *y* cases per week | *z* cartons or *a* cases total |
| Strawberries | Use fresh whole, sliced, and in smoothies. Can freeze bulk deliveries for later use. Blemish free.  | 24-quart crate (approx. 36 #) or 12-quart crate (approx. 18 #) | May-June as available (approx. 6 weeks)  | *x* 24-quart crates or *y* 12-quart crates per week | *z* 24-quart crates or *a* 12-quart crates total |
| Cucumbers | Use sliced or diced. Large size or cosmetic issues okay but not hard or over-ripe. | 1+1/9 Bushel Waxed Box or Carton. Fully washed.  | June-3rd week of Aug for summer feeding program; September-October (approx. 19 weeks)  | *x* 1+1/9 bushels, June-3rd week Aug; *y* 1+1/9 bushels September-October | *z* 1+1/9 bushels total |
| Zucchini | Use sliced, diced, or spears. Mostly straight. Large size or cosmetic issues are okay but not hard or over-ripe.  | 20# box. Rinsed, free of debris and soil.  | July for summer feeding program, last week August through first frost (approx. 10 weeks)  | *x* 20# boxes every two weeks.  | *y* 20# boxes total |

| **Produce Item** | **Product Description** | **Pack Size/Description** | **Approximate Delivery Periods** | **Approximate Quantity Needed** | **Total Qty Needed for School Year** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Tomato | Used sliced or diced. Cosmetic issues okay but no decay. Medium (2 ¼”) to large 2 ½” diameter) preferred.  | Lug Box (approx. 32 #), 2-layer flat (approx. 21 #), or Case (approx. 10#). Free of debris. ¾ ripe to fully ripe.  | July-3rd week of August for summer feeding program. Last week August-October as available (approx. 15 weeks) | *x* lug boxes, *y* 2-layer flats, or *z* cases every two weeks.  | *a* lug boxes, *b* 2-layer flats, or *c* cases total |
| Sweet Red Bell Peppers | Use fresh, sliced or diced and cooked. Medium or Large preferred | Bushel (approx. 25 #) or Carton (approx. 16-25#). Free of debris, ¾ ripe to fully ripe.  | September (approx. 4 weeks) | \_\_ bushels or \_\_ cartons every two weeks.  | \_\_ bushels or \_\_ cartons total |
| Apples | Primarily fresh, whole or sliced. 125-138 count preferred. 125s=2.75” diameter. 138s=2.68” diameter. Prefer Ginger Gold, Granny Smith, Fuji, Stayman, Winesap. No Red Delicious or Golden Delicious.  | Bushel (approx. 48 #) or loose pack case (approx. 38-42#) | September-March as available | \_\_ bushels or \_\_ loose pack cases every two weeks.  | \_\_ bushels or \_\_ loose pack cases total.  |

| **Produce Item** | **Product Description** | **Pack Size/Description** | **Approximate Delivery Periods** | **Approximate Quantity Needed** | **Total Qty Needed for School Year** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Cabbage, green and red | Use shredded in slaw. Untrimmed whole.  | Flat crate (1.75 bushels, 50-60 #) or Carton (53 #) | October-December as available (approx. 12 weeks)  | \_\_ flat crates or \_\_ bushels every week. Every other week delivery can be considered.  | \_\_ flat crates or \_\_ bushels total |
| Spinach | Use fresh.  | Bushel (approx. 18-20 #) or Case (approx. 10 #). Fresh, partly trimmed, fully washed.  | September-June as available (approx. 36 weeks) | \_\_ bushels or \_\_ cases weekly.  | \_\_ bushels or \_\_ cases total.  |

**Note:** Use the [USDA Food Buying Guide](https://foodbuyingguide.fns.usda.gov/) or the [Food Buying Guide Mobile App](https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/food-buying-guide-mobile-app) to assist with planning purchases. For agricultural products harvested on an ongoing basis such as cucumbers, peppers, and zucchini, farmers are more capable of accommodating smaller, regular quantities each week rather than a large, one-time purchase.

### Track

It is important to be able to report to parents, school board members, sponsors, and teachers the total food dollars you are spending on local agricultural products. The Local Food Tracking Tool included in this Toolkit will assist child nutrition programs as you gauge the impact local food purchases have on your operation and your local community.

Child nutrition programs already track total food dollars, milk cost, dry goods, and USDA Foods. Keeping track of local food purchases can be as simple as highlighting local food on each invoice and adding another column in managers’ spreadsheets. Local foods, tastings, and other promotional events should be noted on production records. This provides data to determine the effectiveness of HOM promotions. This information will help target staff trainings to improve suggestive selling techniques, parent outreach, and community-wide promotion of your HOM campaign.

Capturing data, analyzing trends, and developing action plans are key performance indicators that align with tracking local food sales. Try using the Tracking Tool included in this Toolkit, and modify it to meet your needs.

#### Tracking Tips

* Include tracking by the vendor as a requirement in the bid specifications.
* Enter local food purchases from invoices weekly.
* Note on the production worksheets.
* Ask produce providers for weekly or monthly velocity reports detailing local food purchases.

### Engage

Who are the school and community stakeholders invested in local food and how can you engage them through HOM? Assembling a Farm to School committee or team provides an opportunity to create allies and receive assistance from experts who support Farm to School efforts from classrooms to school gardens to cafeterias. This committee can develop Farm to School goals that fit into your overall strategic plan. Committee members may provide input, volunteer coordination, community outreach, and possible funding for special events.

#### Tips for Coordinating a Committee

* Develop a structure for the team and a preliminary meeting schedule.
* Invite already committed individuals and people whose expertise you seek.
* Create a SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time Bound) goals around your HOM campaign.
* Be sure committee members experience your HOM campaign in school cafeterias, gardens, and classrooms.
* Acknowledge partnerships in media coverage.
* Celebrate successes with a school garden celebration or child-written thank you notes for committee members.

#### Potential Recruits for Your Team

* Local summer food site sponsors and directors of school nutrition programs
* [Virginia Cooperative Extension agents](https://ext.vt.edu/offices.html)
* [Virginia Master Gardeners](https://ext.vt.edu/lawn-garden/master-gardener.html)
* CTE directors and culinary arts, agriculture, and business teachers
* Food producers (farmers, orchardists, ranchers, fisherman)
* Parents
* Students (FFA and culinary arts students)
* Administrators, especially school principal or assistant principal
* School garden personnel
* Local Garden Club members
* Local Farm Bureau members
* Leaders of local education and health foundations
* Food pantry representatives
* Local chefs
* School maintenance staff
* School nurses
* School board members

See the National Farm to School Network’s resource [*Getting Started with Farm to School*](http://www.farmtoschool.org/resources-main/getting-started-with-farm-to-school) for more ideas on assembling your committee.

### Plant

School gardens can be integral to the HOM campaign and offer educational opportunities connecting cafeterias to classrooms. Sparking a child’s wonder in a school garden can be a first step to getting students to accept new foods they have not tried before. School nutrition funds may be used to purchase school garden supplies that connect learning opportunities to the nutrition program.

All the HOM featured fruits and vegetables can be grown in school gardens. When growing apples, be sure to plant more than one apple tree or have a crabapple nearby for cross-pollination and ask local experts to assist with tree selection, site selection, annual pruning, and pest management. For student safety, it is a best practice to use minimal or no pesticides and organic practices in school gardens.

Currently in Virginia, there are 511 known school gardens. School gardens have been proven to increase academic achievement, increase the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, and provide a positive learning environment in the school setting.

Successful school gardens are built and sustained through a collaborative process that integrates student and teacher input into the design. How will the gardens be used? Who will maintain them? How will they be funded long-term? These questions and others should be answered by your Farm to School team before breaking ground on a potential school garden site.

For more information on starting a school garden, please see National Farm to School Network’s resource, [*Starting and Maintaining a School Garden*](http://www.farmtoschool.org/Resources/School%20Gardens%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf) To develop a program around using school garden produce in the school cafeteria, see the [*Garden to Cafeteria Toolkit*](http://www.farmtoschool.org/resources-main/garden-to-cafeteria-toolkit).

Whether starting a large school garden or planting in windowsill pots, students benefit from connecting with fruits and vegetables as they grow.

### Promote

For any campaign such as HOM to deliver the benefit of increased meal participation, you must promote your efforts to students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members.

#### In the Home

Use the family-scale recipes and newsletters to connect parents to your HOM campaign. Send materials through monthly e-letters and post the resources on your website if possible. Consider inviting parents to dine with their children during the HOM feature.

#### In the Community

Ask local farmers markets, corner stores, and grocery stores if they are interested in partnering with you on your HOM campaign. Provide them with the electronic files so they can print out posters and other materials. When children and their families start making connections between what they eat in school and what they eat at home, it can benefit their long-term health and your child nutrition program.

It is important to alert the media of upcoming HOM events by sending a brief press release two weeks prior to the event. On days when you have a special event planned with local food, consider inviting your [local legislators](https://www.virginia.gov/services/whos-my-legislator/) to have lunch with the farmer whose food is featured.

#### In Summer Food Service Programs (SFSP) and At-Risk Afterschool Meals component of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

Hang posters in locations visible to parents. Consider allowing parents to taste the HOM featured vegetable and fruits each month, and send home recipes with your afterschool participants.

In the School

Ask key nutrition personnel to attend staff meetings and PTA/PTO meetings to provide updates on the HOM campaign. Ask for teachers’ input on how HOM aligns with learning objectives. Show them the HOM posters and provide them with family-scale recipes and [lesson plans developed by VAITC](https://www.agclassroom.org/va/teachers/harvest.cfm) that align with Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL). Providing connections between learning objectives and school nutrition programs enhances opportunities for children and improves your program. When staff and parents know of your good work to provide healthy, nutritious meals incorporating fresh, local foods, they can become ambassadors of your program.

As lunch educators, school nutrition staff should use key talking points to encourage students to try new items. Before a shift featuring the HOM, ask managers to tape one to three brief prompts about the featured vegetable behind the serving line. Have staff practice promotions and responses to negative feedback ahead of the shift.

##### **Prompts can include:**

* Farm name that grew the agricultural product
* Town of origin of the featured item
* Vitamins found in the featured item and how that nutrient helps your body
* Pairing: this vegetable goes well with [entree name]
* “I tried it and liked it; maybe you will too?”

Other promotional prompts can be found on the [Smarter Lunchrooms Positive Communication Cues training](file:///C%3A/Users/xeb83765/Downloads/SCRIPT%20Oct%2C%20Positive%20Communication%20Cues%20NTTT.pdf) under [Positive Communication Cues with Students and Staff](https://www.smarterlunchrooms.org/sites/default/files/documents/WORKSHEET%20Cues%20for%20Positive%20Communiction%20with%20Students%20and%20Staff%20NTTT.pdf).

To obtain data on the effectiveness of your HOM campaign, consider developing a pre and post-survey of students. A survey may be as simple as the below HOM survey from Community Alliance with Family Farmers:



#### Simple Taste Test:

Use sample cups or provide small tastes on plates to students as they come through the serving line. Provide them with a small slip of paper and ask them to vote on the new local food feature. On each dining table or in a designated location in the dining room, place two jars: one with a “thumbs up” and one with a “thumbs down” sign. Students place their slip of paper in the jar indicating their preference.

#### Don’t Give Up!

Part of a child’s learning process is repeated exposure to new foods. It can take many tastes before a child accepts a new food item. Make small batches to present new menu items without creating waste.

Students want to know you have heard them and are responding to their opinions. You will have greater success with new menu items when you use student input to modify and standardize your recipe.

#### For Additional Buy-In:

Research from [Cooperative Extension](https://articles.extension.org/pages/71199/how-peer-and-parental-influences-affect-meal-choices) suggests that peer influence and family choices can influence food choices.

* Ask culinary arts students, FFA members, a student advisory council, a sports team, or PTA/PTO members to help you encourage healthy eating in your schools.
* Host star servers on your serving line and ask them to use your prompts.
* Send home HOM family-scale recipes and fliers in English and Spanish to your families.

#### Tips for Student or Parent Volunteers:

* Set up an informational table in the dining room with HOM signs, take-home recipes, and a colorful display of the uncooked feature.
* Take shifts handing out samples, following all Virginia Department of Health guidelines.
* Discuss the benefits of eating the featured item, and ask for additional feedback on the flavor, appearance, and other qualities of the featured item.

For summer meal service programs, use these materials to plan kickoff events or spike events that build interest and participation in your summer meals.

#### Summer Meal Service Program Tips:

* Invite the farmer who grew your HOM feature to visit your site(s).
* Coordinate with local distributors to provide free samples of the featured product for parents.
* Host a chef at your feeding site to demonstrate preparation of the family-sized recipe; hand out the recipes with information on where to obtain the foods.
* Coordinate workdays in the school garden; allow students to cook or take home their harvest.
* Plan a trip to a local farm; assist with the harvest of the featured product.
* Host a field trip to a local farmers’ market and educate students and families about the [Virginia Fresh Match](http://vafma.org/programs/virginia-fresh-match/) program.

Below is a list of other special events during which you could incorporate local foods.

#### Special Events and Promotional Opportunities At-a-Glance:

* **January:** National Oatmeal Month, National Soup Month
* **February:** National Hot Breakfast Month, American Heart Month
* **March:** [National School Breakfast Week](https://schoolnutrition.org/Meetings/Events/NSBW/2019/) (first full week), Dr. Seuss Day (March 2), [Virginia Agriculture Literacy Week](https://www.agclassroom.org/va/volunteers/literacy.cfm) (third full week), [National CACFP Week](https://www.cacfp.org/news-events-conferences/national-cacfp-week/) (third full week), [National Ag Day](https://www.agday.org/planning-an-event) (March 14), National Nutrition Month, National Peanut Month
* **April:** [National Garden Month](https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2015/04/17/april-national-garden-month)
* **May:** National Teacher Appreciation Month, Teacher Appreciation Week (first full week), School Staff Appreciation Week (first full week), School Nutrition Employee Week (first full week), School Lunch Hero Day (Friday of School Nutrition Employee Week)
* **June:** National Fresh Fruit and Vegetables Month, National Dairy Month
* **July:** National Grilling Month, National Culinary Arts Month, National Picnic Month
* **August**: National Back to School Month, National Sandwich Month, National Catfish Month, National Peach Month
* **September:** Better Breakfast Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, National Blueberry Popsicle Month, National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month, Whole Grains Month
* **October:** [**National Farm to School Month**](http://www.farmtoschool.org/our-work/farm-to-school-month), [Virginia Farm to School Week](http://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/marketing-virginia-farm-to-school-program.shtml) (first full week), [National School Lunch Week](https://schoolnutrition.org/Meetings/Events/NSLW/2018/) (second full week), Eat Better, Eat Together Month, Head Start Awareness Month, National Apple Month, National Chili Month, National Pickled Peppers Month, Spinach Month, Vegetarian Month, [World Food Day](http://www.fao.org/world-food-day) (October 16)
* **November:** National Native American Heritage Month, National Pepper Month, National Pomegranate Month, National Gratitude Month
* **December:** National Pear Month, Root Vegetable Month

### Conclusion

Starting a HOM campaign can be as simple as serving and promoting a featured fruit or vegetable once each month, or it can be a more elaborate component of a long-term strategic plan. Start with achievable goals and build upon your successes. Procuring local food for child nutrition programs can become a normal component of your overall procurement plan. As a marketing tool, Virginia HOM can help increase participation in your child nutrition program. The goal is to increase consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables so children develop healthy habits that last a lifetime.

Join the [Virginia Farm to School Network](https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/VAF2SNetwork) to connect with others in your region who are interested in sourcing and serving local food to children in schools, summer feeding programs, early care sites, and residential care facilities.

Virginia HOM provides opportunities for children to engage with fresh fruits and vegetables growing seasonally in Virginia. For questions regarding this User Guide, please contact the SNP or CNP Regional Specialist at VDOE-SNP or Trista Grigsby, Farm to School Specialist at trista.grigsby@doe.virginia.gov or (804) 225-2331.

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