

The State of Farm to School in Orange County

2014-2015
District Report

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Introduction

Orange County, California (OC) is home to a diverse population of 3.1 million people. Of these, 43% are White, 34% are Latino, 19% are Asian, and 1.4% are African American. OC is often seen by both residents and nonresidents as a very affluent county, but there are 12 cities within the county that have been identified as having low-performance indicators in relation to the nation, state, and/or peer regions over the course of five to ten years. These communities face high chronic disease rates, high rates of unemployment, low educational attainment, and poverty (Children and Families Commission of Orange County, 2014). In a study conducted by the County of Orange in April of 2014, diabetes was found to be the 8th leading cause of death overall, 5th among Latinos, and 6th among Asians and Pacific Islanders. This shows the imminent need for more widespread chronic disease prevention efforts.

OC Food Access Coalition (OCFAC) works to develop innovative, community-based strategies to end hunger and deliver nutrition - not just calories - to the underserved in the community. Our vision is to create access to healthy, local food options for Orange County's most nutritionally vulnerable residents by working to transform the food system to one that supports all OC residents with nutritious, affordable, and sustainable food options.

In November of 2013, OCFAC developed its Farm to School Task Force with three specific objectives in mind: 1) Increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables amongst K-12 students; 2) Better connect students with the source of their food through food literacy programs; and 3) Increase procurement of local food, which in turn, would support local farmers. In an effort to make progress on these goals and to better understand the current state of Farm to School (F2S) in Orange County, the task force decided to survey all school districts, asking about their level of participation in F2S activities, their food purchasing practices, and the demographics of their current school food program. This report discusses the preliminary findings from these surveys and the next steps for OCFAC and its OC Farm to School Task Force for growing Farm to School programming throughout Orange County.

About F2S

The Farm to School movement began amidst growing public concern over childhood health and increasing awareness about environmental and economic concerns over the state of the food and agricultural system in the United States. It eventually developed into an idea of creating a “win-win” between farms and schools in the early 1940’s. In fact, the notion of supporting America’s farms while simultaneously feeding hungry school children was first institutionalized in the 1946 National School Lunch Act (Feenstra, 2012). However, it was not until the 2010 Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) that the Farm to School Program within the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) was officially formed.

Farm to School is a program administered by the United States Department of Agriculture. F2S incentivizes school districts to buy and serve locally sourced food in their daily meals. Schools are also encouraged to incorporate nutrition-based curriculum and provide students with experiential learning opportunities such as farm visits, school gardens, cooking classes, and taste tests. Farm to School implementation differs by location but according to the National Farm to School Network, it always includes procurement, education and school gardens. The OC Farm to School Task Force expanded on these three main elements and has chosen to focus on the following F2S activities: 1) Salad Bars; 2) Harvest of the Month; 3) Classroom Education; 4) School Gardens; 5) Smarter Lunchroom; 6) Local Food Procurement; 7) Community Programming; 8) Garden to Cafeteria; and 9) California Thursdays.

For the purpose of this survey, poster/menu contests and celebration of F2S month are both F2S activities that are included under Classroom Education. Similarly, farm field trips are represented as part of Community Programming. We have decided to separate School Gardens from Garden to Cafeteria since a school could have a school garden and not use the garden produce in the school meals. It is also important to mention that for the purpose of this survey, Local Food Procurement means that Food and Nutrition Services purchase directly from a local grower/producer OR they purchase from a vendor that purchases product directly from a local grower/producer. Although CA Thursdays is a program that highlights local food procurement, OCFAC chose to keep this as a separate category to highlight Tustin Unified School District as the first and only district in Orange County to currently participate in this program.

Defining “Local”

Because a large part of this survey focuses on local food procurement, the OC Farm to School Task Force adopted a three-pronged definition of “local.” According to the task force, “local” is defined as food grown, raised, or produced: 1) Ultra-locally within the County of Orange; 2) Regionally within 250 miles of Orange County (within a 7 county radius including Orange, Los Angeles, Ventura, San Diego, San Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial); and 3) Within the state of California. This three-pronged definition is designed to prioritize food grown in Orange County but allows for a greater volume and range of products at competitive prices to be considered in districts’ efforts to source local.

Benefits

Studies suggest that F2S has increased students’ access to fresh, local foods. Studies also find that farmers have access to new markets through school sales. According to the National Farm to School Network, F2S enriches the connection communities have with fresh, healthy food and local food suppliers by changing food procurement practices and educational practices at schools.

Today, in addition to providing local food, F2S programs often strive to incorporate various types of food, agriculture, and nutrition education into K-12 curriculum. These educational experiences often emphasize hands-on activities, such as school gardens, field trips to local farms,

cooking classes, and Harvest of the Month (HOTM) taste tests. All of these activities contribute to an integrated approach to learning centered on food, agriculture, and nutrition. These types of F2S activities - bringing local foods into the cafeteria, building school gardens, and teaching children where their food comes from - are proving to be very effective tools in implementing the changes called for in the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. Preliminary results from the 2015 USDA F2S Census suggest that schools with robust F2S programs are reporting reductions in plate waste, increases in school meal participation rates, and an increased willingness on the part of children to try new foods, notably fruits and vegetables (USDA, 2016).

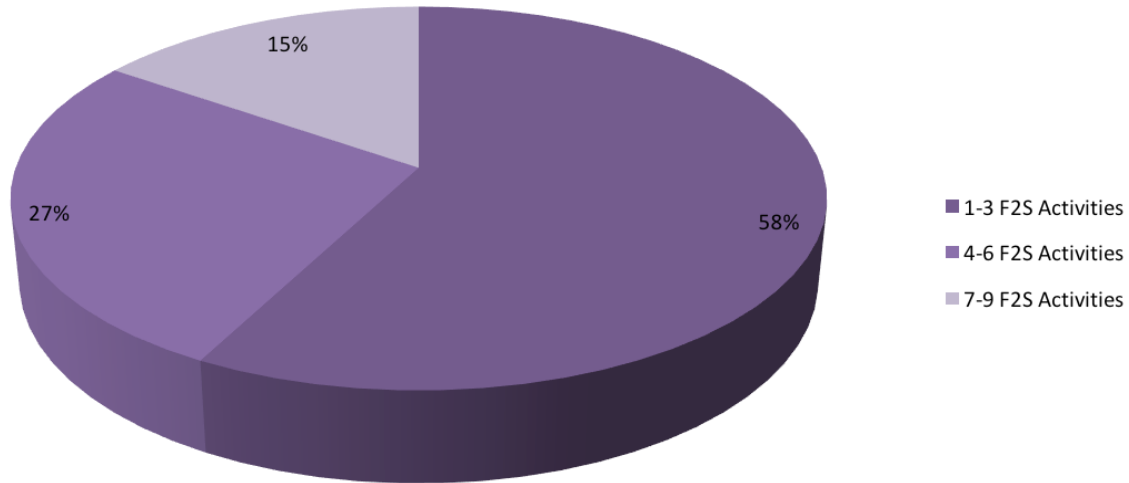
Methodology

In December 2015, OCFAC distributed its 21-question 2014-2015 State of Farm to School District Survey to all Food and Nutrition Service Departments countywide. Surveys were created using GoogleForms and distributed by email to the Food and Nutrition Service Directors. There are 28 school districts in Orange County and each district has its own Food and Nutrition Services Department, with the exception of Anaheim Union High School District and Anaheim City Elementary School District. For the purpose of this report, results for both Anaheim school districts were combined since they share the same Food and Nutrition Services Director and purchasing data.

Findings

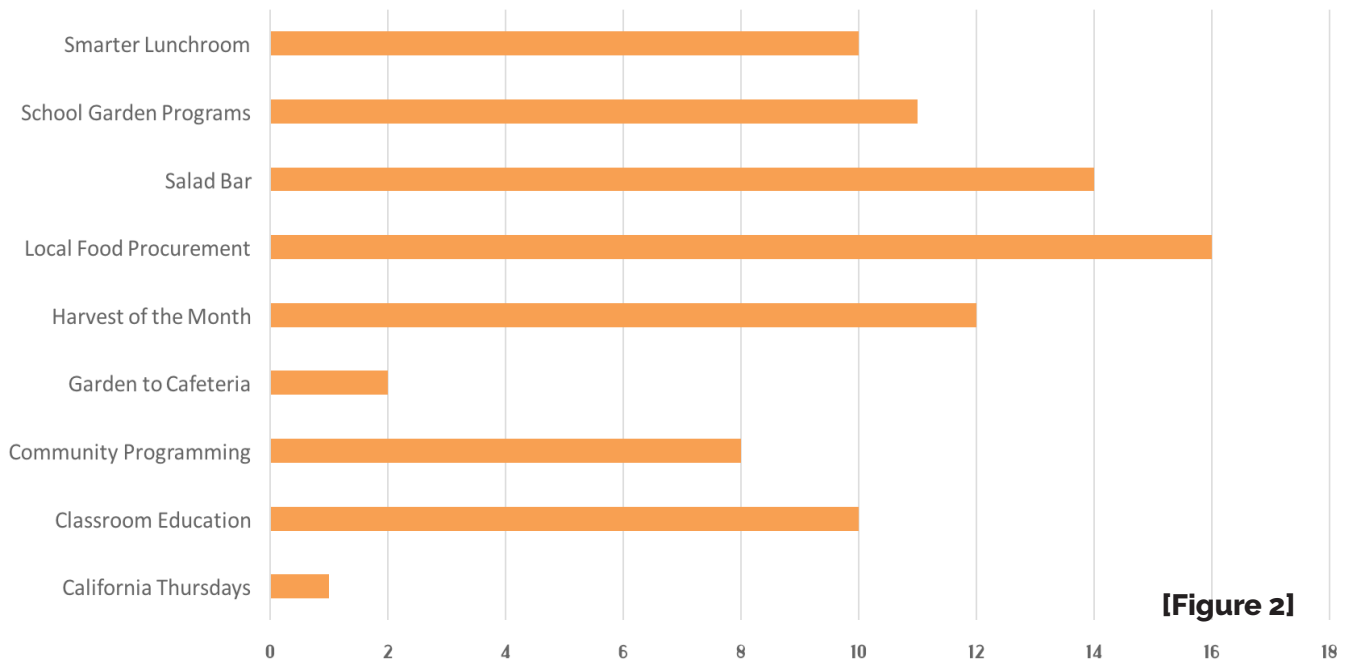
OCFAC is proud to represent all districts throughout Orange County in this report, having a 100% response rate to the survey.

School District Participation in Farm to School Activities



[Figure 1]

School District Participation in Farm to School Activities (# of districts)



[Figure 2]

As shown in *Figure 1* above, all school districts in Orange County participate in 1 or more Farm to School activities. 58% of all districts participate in 1-3 F2S activities, 27% participate in 4-6 activities, and 15% participate in 7-9 F2S activities. Out of the F2S activities identified in *Figure 2*, the most common form of participation is in local food procurement, with 16 districts reporting to purchase local produce. This could mean that all produce purchased by the district is grown locally OR one product purchased (i.e. apples) is grown locally. Most districts start incrementally with the intention of increasing their local food purchasing over time.

Districts also participate in F2S by setting up salad bars in their school cafeterias. Also as seen in *Figure 2*, 14 districts have put salad bars in their schools. Supporting research shows that incorporating salad bars into school lunches increases children's consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables. When offered healthy food choices, children respond by trying new items, incorporating greater variety into their diets, and increasing their daily intake of fruits and vegetables (USDA, 2013).

After local procurement and salad bars, Harvest of the Month (HOTM) came in as a close third with 12 districts participating. HOTM is an initiative of the California Department of Public Health that features nutrition education tools and resources to support healthy lifestyle habits. This program, much like the inclusion of salad bars, promotes the long-term health of children by making changes to the school food environment

that encourage children to eat more fruits and vegetables. It ties in the food literacy piece which is very important, teaching children about produce they've never seen or tasted and helping them understand where their food comes from.

The least amount of districts participate in CA Thursdays and Garden to Cafeteria. CA Thursdays is collaboration between the Center for Ecoliteracy (CEL) in Berkeley, CA and participating school districts to serve healthy, freshly prepared school meals featuring California-grown foods. Participating districts commit to serving this meal on Thursdays (once a month in year 1 and once per week in year 2) and receive support from CEL including school food service staff training, scaled recipes, curriculum resources, marketing and communications support, and access to a collaborative, statewide network of school food innovators. This statewide movement began in 2013 and is still fairly new. Tustin Unified School District is the first district in Orange County to introduce CA Thursdays. Other school districts have expressed an interest and are hoping to implement the program during the 2016-2017 school year.

Garden to Cafeteria takes school garden programs a step further by using the school garden produce in the school meals. This has been implemented successfully in 2 OC districts (Newport-Mesa and Fullerton Joint-Union) and many other districts have reported barriers to serving the garden produce in their school cafeterias. Some of these barriers include limited time/staff for

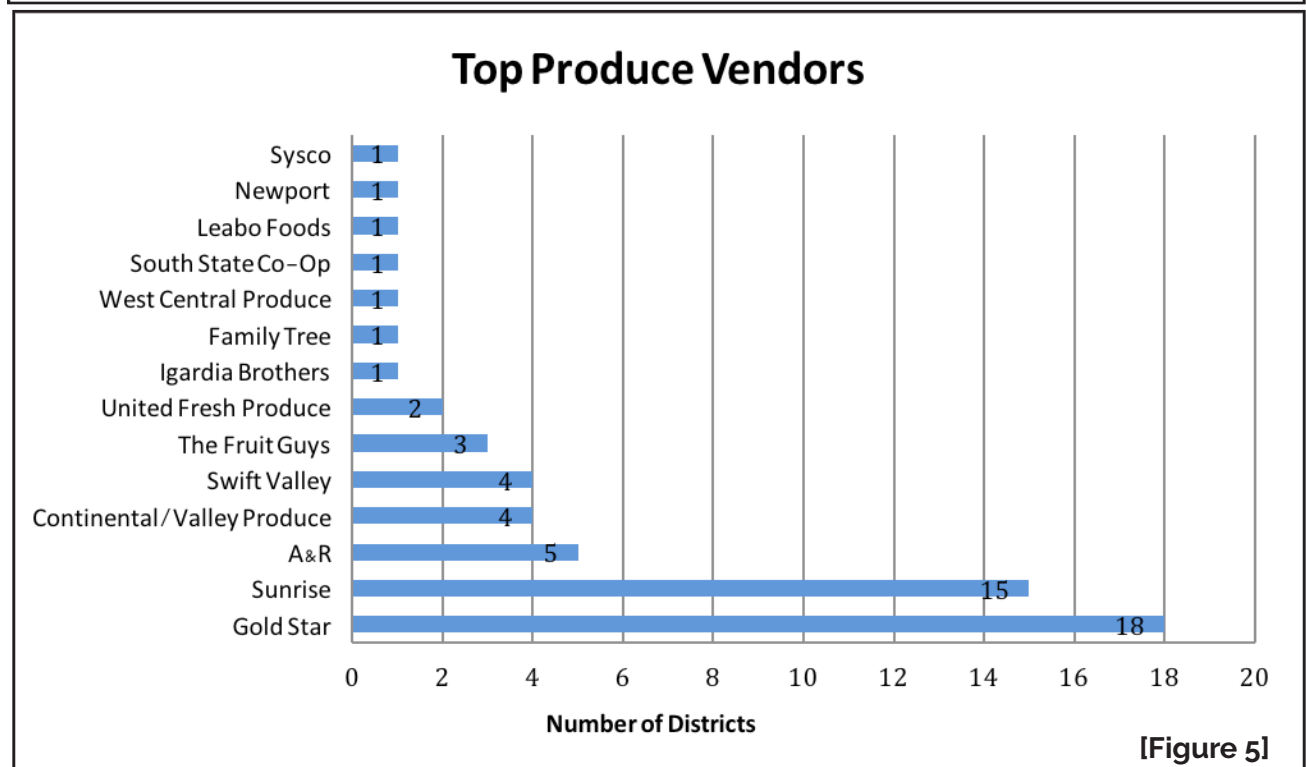
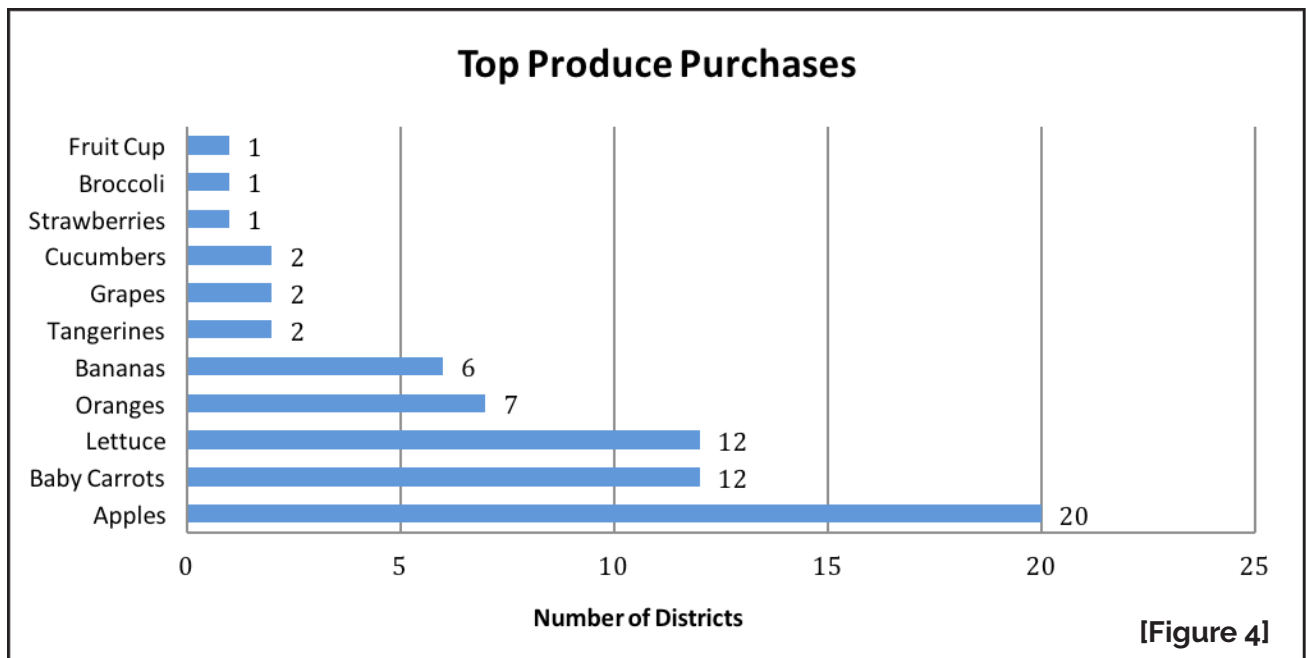
processing the produce as well as limited equipment for processing and/or no salad bars at the schools.

Out of OC's 27 school districts, 22 districts prepare their school meals in a production kitchen and 2 districts prepare food for other districts, but 8 reported not having adequate kitchen equipment to process fresh produce. This is important to note because the second most common barrier to local food purchasing reported by all districts was processing. Due to limited staffing on both the production end and that of school foods, there is limited capacity to process fresh produce and often times, inadequate kitchen equipment and storage for processing. The top concern across the county was delivery. Districts had concerns with coordinating the delivery with their other vendors, and also expressed concern over reliability and on-

time deliveries. *Figure 3* below shows the top concerns across the whole county. Santa Ana Unified School District is the only district that did not report any concerns. Also worth mentioning, out of all 27 school districts, Santa Ana was the district with the highest percent of students who receive free or reduced price lunches at 91.6%, with Buena Park as the second highest with 74.9% and Anaheim as the third with 72%.

What common produce are districts purchasing and where does the produce come from? Districts were asked to report on their top three produce purchases. As seen in *Figure 4*, the top produce purchased by districts is apples. After apples, baby carrots (less processing than standard carrots) and lettuce were amongst the top purchases countywide. As seen in *Figure 5*, Gold Star and Sunrise are the most commonly used vendors.





The survey responses also showed that 4 districts participate in the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP). This program provides fresh fruits and vegetables to students in participating elementary schools. The goal of the program is to improve children’s overall diet and create healthier eating habits to impact their present and future health. FFVP has been successful in introducing kids to a variety of produce that they may not otherwise been able to try.

Similarly, 17 of the OC school districts participate in the Department of Defense (DoD) Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. This program allows schools to use USDA entitlement dollars to buy fresh produce. Also important to note, Capistrano, Newport-Mesa and Fullerton Joint-Union report having set defined goals for advancing F2S Programs within their districts.

Next Steps

[1] Increasing awareness of F2S and all of the associated activities is an essential first step to increasing F2S participation in Orange County. All school districts are already participating in F2S activities, but some seem to be unaware that they are participating and that incentives exist to assist them in implementing such activities. Through the OC Farm to School Task Force, OCFAC should continue to increase awareness around F2S programs and focus on highlighting successes in hopes that other districts will follow the innovative champions.

[2] All of the districts could benefit from a better understanding of what purchasing local means, and what the definition of local is. This might allow food service directors to set small goals for increasing local purchasing. For example, maybe it's feasible to set a goal for 5% of school food purchases to be grown or produced locally. Once this goal is met, they can set the bar higher for increasing local food procurement. Accordingly, OCFAC wants to begin looking at the economic costs/benefits associated with ultra local food purchasing in comparison to regional food purchasing and purchasing California (statwide) grown products.

[3] The most common concern that the districts had over purchasing locally is in regards to delivery. This could be solved by better communication between schools and local vendors, along with local vendors being more flexible. In the upcoming year, OCFAC plans to meet with the top 2 produce vendors (Gold Star & Sunrise) to better understand the school food supply chain and how local purchasing connections are made and sustained, and what barriers/challenges vendors face in terms of local procurement. Also, it is important to understand how vendors are making their purchasing decisions and how they can work with the growers/producers to ensure that larger volumes of regionally local product is made available to institutional buyers.

[4] The second most common concern over purchasing local is the farmers' and/or the district's ability to minimally process foods, such as slicing fruit. Steps should be taken to attempt to mitigate this issue, perhaps through a shared kitchen space. OCFAC plans to explore this option and how to open up a dialogue around shared production kitchen space, especially since 22 districts currently prepare food in a production kitchen and 2 of those districts also prepare food for another district.

[5] Many schools reported lack of local vendors as a major concern over purchasing local. Continuing to assist schools in locating and making connections with local vendors would increase local purchasing. OCFAC would like to facilitate trainings for Food Service staff on utilizing the CA Farmers Marketplace website which was built expressly for the purpose of allowing school districts to expand local purchasing.

[6] Many districts reported lack of kitchen equipment to process fresh produce as a major concern. There are grants available to help schools obtain new kitchen equipment. Schools should be made aware of these grants and possibly aided in applying for the grants. Similarly, although 14 districts already have salad bars in some of their schools, there are several grant opportunities for funding salad bars in schools and OCFAC hopes to aid districts in applying for these opportunities as well and to expand the number of salad bars in Orange County schools.

[7] On-site evaluations/observations at each of the 27 school districts on F2S activities could help determine whether changes in food waste and consumption are discernable. These observations could help school districts build their evidence base for funding in the future or help ascertain whether better awareness building programs need to be implemented for future program development.

Conclusion

All of the school districts in Orange County are participating in some F2S activities and are currently purchasing some amounts of local foods. This is encouraging since studies have shown F2S to be extremely beneficial to the health of children. It is very likely that participation in F2S will increase if work is done with the school districts to increase their awareness of F2S, and by creating and nurturing connections between school districts and local vendors to help alleviate and resolve concerns on both sides.

OCFAC is using the results from the 2014-2015 survey as a baseline for developing goals for how to work with its district Food and Nutrition Services Departments. The hope is to provide technical assistance to the OC districts for growing their F2S programs. Moving forward, OCFAC hopes to expand the scope of the survey to reflect not only Farm to School throughout the county, but the state of our school food system. The 2016-2017 report will include data around efforts to reduce food waste. Additionally, OCFAC is interested in Adequate Time for School Lunch, Recess Before Lunch, and Breakfast After the Bell and will look at how districts can get involved in these policy initiatives.

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