

How-to: Starting a School Farmers' Market

Imagine a school farmers' market that provides a low-income community with the opportunity to purchase fresh produce, while students share in the profits from selling their homegrown or locally grown goods. In schools and communities across the country students are using their campus gardens and local farm produce as fodder for business ventures. As they plant, plan, calculate, design, and promote their produce, they grow socially, academically, and personally. Their communities, too, reap rewards.



Some educators see these enterprises as springboards for youngsters to develop general job skills or consider horticultural careers. Others recognize the motivational value of engaging students in meaningful projects that present real-life challenges. Most concur that planning, launching and maintaining such a venture builds skills and teaches lessons that support academic goals. For instance, students employ math and accounting skills when they decide how to price their produce, keep records, and figure out expenses and revenues. When students write brochures and flyers, work with local volunteers, or pitch the market to a community group, they hone their communication skills. Budding artists stretch their abilities as they design logos and marketing materials. Meanwhile, students and communities alike reap lessons about nutrition, health, and the value of local foods.

The academic benefits, it turns out, are just part of the picture. When young people collaborate with peers to make decisions, tackle problems, reflect on ethical dilemmas, and maintain relations with customers, they develop some of the social skills that make success in business – and in life – possible. As they take on job roles, create something of value and showcase their garden goods to enthusiastic customers, their confidence and self-esteem flourish.

Before launching a school farmers' market, invite your students to ponder how, where, and to whom they'll promote it. If your inclination and time allow, the following types of activities can help build your learners' thinking and communication skills.

Imagining What People Want

A first step in promoting your market is learning about your potential customers. Invite your young entrepreneurs to explore questions such as these:

- Who do we think or hope will shop at our market? What do we know about their needs and values? Where do they shop for fresh vegetables now?
- How can our farm stand help meet their needs? (Think beyond the items you carry. For instance, consider factors such as market hours or services you might provide. Perhaps you'll deliver bags to cars or set up a babysitting service so parents can more easily shop!)

If you have time for a more in-depth lesson that builds math and communication skills, have students conduct a written or online survey to better understand their potential shoppers wants

and needs. Here are some of the types of survey questions that might result from a class brainstorm session:

- Where do you usually shop for vegetables? What would convince you to come to our market?
- What would you like to see us carry at our market?
- Which of these garden items would you be likely to buy from us? What would you pay?
- Are there fresh fruits or vegetables that are important to your culture?
- Would you be interested in having recipes to go along with our garden vegetables?
- Which market hours would work best for you?

By collecting, organizing, and analyzing the results of survey data, your young marketers will be better able to plan and pitch their produce and other products.

Language Arts: Exploring What Makes Yours Special

Once you have a handle on your customers' desires, invite students to think about what makes their own fresh goods unique.

1. Ask the following types of questions:
 - What makes our market offerings special and desirable? Why would someone want to buy them?
 - How would we describe their tastes?
 - What can we say about how they will improve shoppers' lives or meet their needs?
 - How will we get our customers' attention and convince them to visit the market and buy our goods? How can we make it seem too good to pass up?
2. As you discuss these questions, have your sales force jot down words or phrases that capture some of these ideas. They'll be able to draw on this language as they develop the market and promotional efforts. Here are some sample enticements from actual school advertisements, labels, posters, and brochures: Nutritious and delicious, organically grown, produced with hard work and dedication, taste the sweet juices, grown by students to put food on your table, low prices, proceeds will go to support our garden program.

Testimonials from satisfied customers singing the praises of your edibles or project can also go a long way in advertising. Consider creating a file of customer quotes from year to year. You can use them to lend weight and credibility to your pitch.

Cultivating Savvy Advertisers

Here's an exercise you might use to deepen students' thinking about how to promote their market:

1. Bring in or have students locate a variety of ads for products or services. Encourage the class to be clever detectives by zeroing in on a variety of formats: print ads, videotapes of television ads, audio tapes of radio pieces, T-shirts, and so on.
2. Have pairs or small groups of students examine some samples. They should jot down which visual and language elements or techniques draw their attention.

3. Discuss these types of questions as a class:
Which ads hooked you most easily? Why did you choose them? What techniques did the advertisers' use to draw attention and be persuasive? Which techniques or pitches would make you look twice at a product or attend a sale? What do you think our customers would respond to?
When youngsters later create their own promotions, they may want to employ some of the same techniques they identified.

Considering How and Where to Pitch Your Market

If you are planning to involve students in the “sell,” also ask, What locations and advertising formats might work well for us? Which ones can we afford? Who can help us get the word out? Consider the following options:

- a “commercial” that airs on a school or local radio or television station
- a notice or ad in the school, PTO, or community newspaper
- letters, flyers, and coupons distributed to parents and community members
- ads posted on telephone poles or bulletin boards around town
- posters hung around school, at the local library, or in nearby stores
- a student-run presentation for a community group
- kid-made “business” cards
- school garden/market Web site
- t-shirts or stickers

Creative Marketing Ideas from Successful School Farmers' Markets

Arna Caplan, volunteer director of a school garden program at an inner-city K-8 school in Denver that started a weekly school farmers' market, wanted her students to take charge of designing the farm stand when the project was in its planning stages. She figured that in order to become excited and engaged, students needed to see some models and understand what makes a good market tick. So the group trekked with some adults to the big Denver farmers' market. Armed with a scavenger hunt page that asked them to make observations – how stalls were designed, how people approached customers, what new foods they saw and tasted, and so on – they took down notes. The young researchers went back to school prepared to discuss what they noticed, liked, and wanted to try to replicate in their enterprise.

“Students liked the stalls that were visually pleasing,” says Arna. “When we asked how we might recreate that, the group decided they needed a logo, tablecloths, and baskets to put produce in.” They were also impressed by how welcoming the growers were and how well they engaged the public. Offering food samples was a must, they decided. Through the season, the group would routinely ask, “Is this working?” and rearrange their project accordingly.

Students at Steele Elementary School in Denver were successfully cultivating, cooking, and consuming chard, carrots and more from their campus garden when volunteer garden manager Andrew Nowak launched an after-school farm stand project with an eye toward introducing students to local food systems and seasonality, honing their academic and social skills, and building community. To add value to their customers' shopping experience, the students running the farm stand decided to offer free recipes for the less common vegetables they carried, such as

leeks and kohlrabi. Then they figured they could seal the deal by assembling bags of produce to go along with each recipe. Shoppers could pick up a bagful of vegetable ingredients and a recipe for garden-inspired dishes such as “carrot and red pepper soup” and “quick tomato and basil pasta.”

“In the extracurricular harvest-based cooking classes I offer, we sometimes try out the recipes that we give to customers,” says Andrew. That way, students are ever more able to sing the items’ praises to potential buyers. The group also brings in guest chefs to do cooking demos for customers. Students help out, when appropriate. Shoppers and sellers alike can sample the fare and buy all they need to prepare it.

More Advice from School Farmers’ Market Pros

- **Start Small** Start small and slow by just selling school produce at first. See how the community and students react to a project and respond to responsibilities before expanding the size or bringing in food from local growers. Bringing in local farm goods can have real educational benefits and helps the market look full and appealing, but to get to that level you’ll likely need committed support from a group of parents or outside organization.
- **Get Support** It’s crucial to get support from two school entities: the principal and the grounds and facilities people. “We find that principals support this kind of project when they see it as an opportunity for community involvement and health benefits,” says Andrew. “If they’re on board, they will help promote the program and find time to fit in the schedule. Build trust over time; once they see that this is a long-term commitment, they will be supportive.”
- **Find Funding** Consider these sources of funding for a school- or district-wide farm stand project: Parent-teacher organizations, health departments and health foundations, hospitals interested in healthy living strategies, local Slow Food programs, urban gardening programs, local school foundations, State Department of Agriculture grants (including grants designed to look at new markets for local produce).
- **Recruit for Farm Stand Duty** Each year, Andrew enlists one class of students – typically from grades three to five – to be the farm stand proprietors. He pitches the concept to receptive teachers as a special class project that involves hard work, responsibility, and critical thinking, one that is rife with opportunities to learn and build important life skills. In the fall, the budding entrepreneurs discuss logistics and students make posters to plug their produce. They hang these around school and in neighborhood stores and churches.
- **Market Day Logistics** At the market Andrew managed participating students are split into four teams with 6 or so students on each. Each week for at least two months during the growing season, students from one team don their sales hats and run the weekly event. Just before classes let out, half the group goes out to the garden to pick what’s ripe and the other half sets up tables and fill display baskets with the harvest. A couple of parents usually help set up and supervise the youngsters. In the end, everyone has a chance to do each task.

- **Incorporate Math Lessons** To help give kids practice in doing math in their heads, which Andrew feels is an important skill, all products are priced to the quarter or dollar. Youngsters also keep track of the weight of all the produce sold and mark down each transaction and the total charge for it.
- **Conduct an End of the Season Assessment** At the end of the season, Andrew's students calculate their profit and adjust what they'll plant the following season. The numbers can also help pique the interest of potential funders. "When the kids see their profits – along with grant funds – being invested to enhance the program, they feel even more like it's a project worth doing," says Andrew. Arna also recommends securing funding beyond profits made from sales. "We couldn't have run this as a self-supporting business because we wanted to keep prices low so we could put good, low cost food on people's table."