

Institutional Markets

A practical guide for local farms and food hubs

SCHOOLS | UNIVERSITIES | HOSPITALS



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About Local Food Marketplace (LFM)

Institutional Markets: A practical guide for local farms and food hubs was produced by Local Food Marketplace (LFM), the market-leading technology that powers more than 350 food hubs, farms, CSAs, and farmers markets to build stronger, more diverse local food systems. From custom pricing and wholesale ordering to order fulfillment and inventory management, our customizable, white label platform is built to handle every customer type you sell to.



Introduction



Farmers and food hubs have always known that fresh, local food belongs on every table, including the lunch tray and the hospital plate. Institutions are coming to the same conclusion. Schools, universities, and hospitals serve millions of meals every day, and a growing number of them are actively looking for local suppliers, backed by new funding, new procurement rules, and real commitments to their communities.

That makes this one of the most promising growth channels in local food. This guide is here to help you approach it prepared, with a clear picture of what these buyers need and what it takes to serve them.

Excellent resources already cover parts of this ground. USDA's producer fact sheets and the [Bringing the Farm to School Agricultural Producers' Toolkit](#) from NCAT and the National Farm to School Network are strong starting points for school sales, and we link to them and many others throughout. This guide adds the view across all three sectors, written from the seller's side: the money, the paperwork, the logistics, and the relationships. It draws on the experience of operators doing this work today, including [Dave Prather](#), who ran Western Montana Growers Cooperative for 17 years before joining the LFM team.



Executive Summary

Schools, universities, and hospitals represent one of the most promising growth channels in local food.

K-12 school food authorities alone spent an estimated \$1.8 billion on local food in the 2022 to 2023 school year, universities are setting local purchasing goals, and hospitals are connecting fresh food to patient outcomes through food as medicine.

These markets work differently from your other channels, and the operations that succeed prepare for that. Institutions plan menus months ahead, buy through structured procurement, and require insurance and food safety certification beyond what restaurants or grocers ask for. The costs of becoming a vendor land before the first order does, so the smartest first step is running the numbers on the whole account, not just the volume.

Three ideas carry this guide:

1. **Readiness before revenue.** Know your margin by channel, understand each buyer's vendor requirements up front, and forecast conservatively. Chapters 1 through 5 cover how.
2. **You do not have to do it alone.** Food hub networks, sales brokers, and processing partners let farms and hubs reach contracts none could serve individually. Chapter 6 shows working examples.
3. **Operations win the renewal.** Reliable delivery, easy ordering, and producer level purchase reporting are what turn a first order into a standing account. Chapters 7 through 11 walk through winning, serving, and growing the relationship.

Use the readiness checklist in Chapter 1 and the companion Institutional Readiness Calculator to decide whether this channel fits your operation today.



1 THE OPPORTUNITY

Why Institutions are Worth Considering

Schools, universities, and hospitals feed people every day, at scale, on a predictable calendar. For an operation used to the volatility of farmers markets and the churn of restaurant accounts, that steadiness is appealing. A single university dining program can move more volume than a dozen small retail accounts.

The scale is real. Per the [USDA Farm to School Census](#), school food authorities (SFAs) spent an estimated \$1.8 billion on local food in the 2022 to 2023 school year, roughly 16 percent of total food spending, with 74.1 percent of SFAs participating in farm to school activities. That is K-12 alone.

\$1.8B

Local food spend by
SFAs, SY 2022–23

74.1%

Of SFAs participating
in farm to school

49.7%

Of those programs
started within the
previous 3 years

The market is also still forming. Nearly half of those SFAs, 49.7 percent, started their programs within the previous three years. Many of your potential buyers are figuring this out at the same time you are.

Policy and funding. Effective July 1, 2024, child nutrition program operators may use "locally grown," "locally raised," or "locally caught" as a procurement specification for unprocessed agricultural products, a meaningful shift for producers who previously could not compete on a level field ([USDA memo SP 22-2024](#)). USDA also runs the [Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program](#). Many states fund their own incentives: Vermont reimburses schools up to \$0.25 per meal when they document 25 percent local purchasing. The National Farm to School Network tracks these on its [Local Food Purchasing Incentives page](#).

.....
"The local purchasing incentive really helped our school customers return to normal purchasing habits."

— Becca Perrin, [Green Mountain Farm Direct](#)



Track the funding, not just the relationships

A pattern experienced operators will recognize: a farm or hub steadily grows the number of schools it sells to, the outreach works, and yet school revenue stays flat, because the discretionary dollars those schools drew on have shrunk. They keep ordering, just in smaller amounts.

This is worth knowing going in, because it is structural rather than anything the operation did wrong. Institutional local food purchasing often runs on money outside the core food budget: grants, pilots, and state incentives that expand or contract on their own schedule. Programs change too. The federal programs that boosted this channel in recent years, including Local Food Purchase Assistance and Local Food for Schools, have ended, and USDA [wound down the Regional Food Business Centers program in 2025](#). In most states the market is competitive again, though some, Colorado among them, still fund robust incentives of their own. A quick check that the funding you are counting on is currently active belongs in every plan.

The practical takeaway: **measure the channel by revenue, margin, and staff hours per account, not by account count**, and keep an eye on the funding environment your buyers depend on. Operations that do both catch shifts early and adjust their mix before it hurts.

.....
"It's a fantastically helpful channel when you know exactly what you're getting out of it."

— Elliott Smith, [Kitchen Sync Strategies](#)





Institutional commitments. Many universities have local purchasing goals, often driven by student advocacy, and hospital systems increasingly have sustainability commitments that touch food. Health Care Without Harm's [Healthy Food in Health Care](#) program partners with more than 1,000 hospitals on this work. Where a commitment exists, someone inside the building may already be looking for you.

Reporting requirements. Because this purchasing is tied to grants, corporate goals, or marketing claims, institutions must document what they bought and from whom. Supply that easily and you are solving a problem, not just selling produce.

Is This the Right Time for Your Operation?

Institutional sales reward operations that are ready for them. A useful question before committing: **where are you in your wholesale journey?**

For a younger hub or a farm building direct sales, restaurants and independent grocers are often the natural first step. Onboarding is simpler, terms are friendlier, and the buyer can decide without routing it through three departments. The wholesale muscle you build there transfers directly to institutional accounts later.

Two things can move the timeline up. **Funding:** if your state has a well funded farm to school program, it can absorb the price gap and make these accounts work sooner.

Partners: farms and hubs increasingly reach institutional buyers through networks and brokers, so the requirements in the next few chapters do not all have to be met alone. Chapter 6 covers those options.





Readiness Checklist

Before you pursue institutional accounts, you want to be able to answer yes to most of these:

- ✔ **Do you know your gross margin by channel?** Without it you cannot evaluate whether an institutional account is worth taking.
- ✔ **Do you have staff bandwidth to spare?** These accounts demand more meetings and follow up than any other type, especially in year one. That time should not come out of the accounts already paying your bills.
- ✔ **Can you absorb up front costs before revenue arrives?** Certification and insurance land before your first order does. See Chapter 2.
- ✔ **Can you forecast supply months in advance?** Buyers will ask you in April what you will have in October.
- ✔ **Do you have the cold storage, truck capacity, and cash flow for wholesale volumes?** Institutional orders run larger than direct to consumer, and payment arrives on net terms, weeks after you have paid your producers.
- ✔ **Can you report what was purchased, by producer?** Often the difference between a nice conversation and a signed vendor agreement.

If you are missing two or three of these, you are not out of the running. It just tells you what to work on first, and the readiness you build will strengthen every channel you sell into.





2 WHAT IT COSTS TO BECOME A VENDOR

The chef is not the approver

You meet a chef. They look at your product list and light up, talking about how much lettuce they go through and how their students or patients would love a real tomato. You get excited too, and start thinking about what you would need to plant. They tell you it is easy: just fill out a little paperwork to become an approved vendor.

Then the paperwork starts and other departments appear. Risk management says your insurance is not sufficient. Procurement says your food safety certification is not the one they accept. Finance sends a vendor packet with payment terms you were not expecting. None of those people were in the room when you and the chef got excited.

Institutional sales don't happen overnight. As the [Northwest Food Hub Network's experience with its dedicated broker](#) shows, it can take months or even years of relationship building to achieve vendor approval or realize a large-volume sale.

The rule: fully understand the vendor onboarding process before you plant anything, promise anything, or spend real time on the account. Ask early, ask the right people, and ask specifically. The chef is your champion, not your approver. Find out who owns vendor approval and talk to them directly.

Insurance

Institutional customers carry more liability exposure than a restaurant does, and they push that exposure onto their vendors through insurance requirements.

Operators serving hospitals and school districts commonly report carrying limits several times higher than the rest of their customer base requires, sometimes an order of magnitude higher. Each institution's risk management department sets its own number, so there is no standard. You have to ask. This is a recurring annual line item.

What to ask for: exact coverage types and limits, if the institution must be named as an additional insured, if they require proof of workers' compensation, and any separate auto liability requirement if you deliver. Get it in writing and get a quote from your broker before committing.



Food safety certification

Institutions serve more vulnerable populations than a restaurant does, so their food safety requirements are stricter. Expect to need third party audited certification. For produce that usually means [USDA Good Agricultural Practices \(GAP\)](#). Certifications are not interchangeable: some buyers require USDA GAP, others Harmonized GAP, others a GFSI-benchmarked scheme. Confirm the specific audit type in writing before you pay for one.

What it costs. Under the fee schedule effective October 1, 2025, Audit Verification Services for fresh fruits and vegetables run \$171 per hour, plus a \$250 GFSI certification fee per audit ([AMS Service Fees](#)). Your total depends on your operation's size, so request an estimate from your [local audit office](#).

Cost share exists. USDA's [Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crops program](#) reimburses small and medium operations for part of the cost of obtaining or renewing certification, including food safety plans, testing, and training. Eligibility has been tied to operations averaging up to \$1 million in annual specialty crop sales. Availability changes year to year, so check with your [local USDA Service Center](#) before assuming you will pay full freight. Operations certified through a group model can apply for their share of the group's expenses.

GroupGAP is worth knowing about, with a caveat. [GroupGAP](#) lets farmers, hubs, and marketing organizations pursue USDA GAP certification together, and it has historically helped small farms reach institutional markets they could not certify for alone. Recent changes to the program's rules have reduced the economic benefit of managing a group, though, so it is no longer the clear win for hubs it once was. If you are considering it, ask your local audit office to walk you through the current requirements and economics before building a plan around it.

Budget for the audit fee and the internal time to document the program, and remember that certification is not one and done: the audit, prep, and follow up recur every year. The paperwork is usually the bigger lift.

Useful Resources:

- [GroupGAP User's Guide](#) and [GroupGAP for Growers](#)
- [NASDA GAP Certification Programs hub](#), covering audits, costs, training, and common misconceptions
- [USDA Farm to School fact sheets](#) on GAPs, FSMA, and HACCP
- [Quality Management Systems guide](#) and free [training course](#), for hubs building the system GroupGAP requires





Time

The least visible cost is staff time. Site visits, tastings, procurement conversations, and follow ups that go quiet for weeks. There is no invoice for it, which is exactly why it gets underestimated.

Decide how many hours per month you can commit and who owns the relationship, and make sure that person is not the one who will drop your existing accounts to do it.

Put it all together before you commit

The trap is looking at a big volume number and stopping there. A district wanting several hundred cases sounds like a great account. It may still lose money once you stack up the pieces: a lower price point, higher insurance, certification fees, outsourced processing, extra delivery stops, and dozens of unbilled hours.

Run the whole calculation first, with real quotes rather than estimates. If it still works, pursue it with confidence. If not, you just saved yourself a season.

We created a fillable readiness calculator that shows your projected margin.

ACCESS



3 KNOW YOUR SECTOR

Universities

For a first institutional account, higher education is generally the best place to start.

Why they are easier:

- Paying customers. Meal plan revenue funds a budget with more room than K-12 has.
- Food quality is part of their pitch. Universities compete for students, and dining is a recruiting asset.
- Explicit local purchasing goals, often student driven. A program with a percentage target to hit is far more willing to meet you on price and specifications.

Finding those goals: they are rarely published where a supplier would look. Check prospective student materials, sustainability reports, and admissions marketing, since that is the intended audience. Or call the dining services director and ask. That call is also your first sales conversation.

The catch: seasonality is severe. Summer demand collapses, then spikes hard when students return in late August, right as many growing seasons wind down.

UNIVERSITIES



K-12

HOSPITALS



K - 12 Schools

The core challenge is money. Budgets are tight with little discretionary room. Whether farm to school works in your region depends heavily on whether your state funds a local purchasing incentive. Without one, you may find yourself competing on price against a national supply chain, and that is a hard race for any local supplier to win on price alone. Check your state against the [Local Food Purchasing Incentives tracker](#) and [state Farm to School Census data](#) before investing.

Schools buy under federal procurement rules. A school food authority cannot simply decide to buy from you. Purchases follow federal regulations governing informal and formal solicitations by dollar threshold. USDA's [Procuring Local Foods guide](#) is written for buyers, but its chapters on [procurement methods](#) and [sections of a solicitation](#) are the best way for a seller to see what is happening on the other side of the table. Read them before your first bid. USDA flags that guide's geographic preference chapter as out of date after the July 2024 rule change.

Structure changes your cost to serve. Two districts can order the exact same volume at the exact same price and still be completely different accounts, because how a district organizes its kitchens determines how much work each dollar of revenue takes:

- A district with a central processing kitchen receives one large delivery at one location and handles distribution internally. That is the best case for you: one stop, one dock, one relationship with receiving.
- A district where each school preps its own food may need ten separate small deliveries for the same total volume. Same revenue, several times the driving, unloading, and paperwork, and each site can have its own receiving window.
- Many schools have no real kitchen at all. They receive prepped product, heat it, and plate it. If you cannot supply pre cut or processed items, these schools cannot buy from you no matter if they want to. Chapter 5 covers processing options.



None of this shows up in the bid price, which is why it catches sellers off guard. Ask about kitchen infrastructure and delivery structure in your first conversation. The answer tells you whether the account is viable and what it will really cost to serve.

Schools are dormant in summer, when many farms peak. Demand starts in late summer and fall, so you are planting months before the buyer confirms anything.

Hospitals

Hospitals have two things schools and universities do not: steady demand twelve months a year, and a mission that connects directly to what you grow. Healthcare is waking up to the link between fresh, nutrient dense food and patient outcomes, and that shift is opening doors for local suppliers.

The key to selling here is understanding that a hospital is not one customer. It is usually several, each with its own budget and its own appetite for local:

- **Patient meals** are the most cost constrained and the most regulated by nutritional requirements. Food service here is a support function inside a much larger operation, so expect the sharpest price sensitivity in this segment.
- **Cafeteria and retail dining** serves staff, physicians, and visitors, a population that wants better food and will pay for it.
- **Catering and events** for conferences, donor functions, and board meetings carry more generous budgets and often actively want a local story to tell.
- **Food as medicine programs** are the newest opening, and often the most mission aligned. A growing number of health systems run produce prescription programs, medically tailored groceries, and food boxes for patients. These programs need fresh, source identified produce on a reliable schedule, and many are actively choosing local suppliers because fresher food supports the health outcomes the program exists to produce. Chapter 10 covers how to plug in, and our [Food as Medicine Programs guide](#) walks through the partnership models in depth.

Many hospitals have local or sustainable procurement commitments (see [Healthy Food in Health Care](#)). If the system you are approaching has one, you have leverage: someone inside is already accountable for finding suppliers like you.

One operational note: hospitals have strict receiving windows and dock procedures. Assume less delivery flexibility than any other customer, and plan routes accordingly.



Food service management companies

Many institutions do not run their own food service. They contract it to an FSMC such as Sodexo, Compass Group, or Aramark. In those buildings the kitchen staff are FSMC employees, and purchasing runs through the FSMC's systems and approved vendors.

The institution is the location, but the FSMC is the customer. Approval may require a corporate process entirely separate from anything the local dining director controls. Sometimes there is a regional sourcing program to plug into. Find out who runs food service in your first conversation. It changes the entire sales motion.

Build your relationship with the institution itself: when a college's or hospital's leadership tells its food service company they want local food on the menu, the FSMC has a real reason to make an exception to its vendor rules. The FSMC's own client is the institution, and keeping that client happy outranks standard procedure. Kitchen Sync Strategies has onboarded several food hubs into FSMC run accounts this way. Expect extra paperwork and negotiation, and know that as your volume grows, so does the pressure to operate like the broadline distributors these companies are built around.

	Universities	K - 12	Hospitals
Budget flexibility	Better	Very limited	Constrained, varies by segment
Motivation	Student demand, purchasing goals, recruiting	Mission, grant funding	Sustainability commitments, staff dining, food as medicine
Seasonality	Summer collapse, fall spike	Dormant in summer	Steady year round
Kitchen capability	Usually strong	Often minimal or none	Usually strong
Delivery complexity	Moderate	High if site based	High, strict windows
Entry point	Dining services director	District nutrition director	Retail dining or catering



You can serve more than one.....

Nothing requires you to pick a single sector permanently. Some operations sell across all of them: **Kitchen Sync Strategies, brokering on behalf of the Northwest Food Hub Network**, sells into K-12, higher education, healthcare, and corporate dining at once. A mix like that has a practical advantage, since the sectors' seasonal and budget cycles offset each other.

Start with one so you learn the motion. Add others deliberately, as capacity allows.



4 FORECASTING SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Why institutions need this from you

If there is one capability that separates food hubs and farms who succeed with institutions from those who do not, it is forecasting.

Institutional kitchens plan menus months ahead. A school nutrition director may build a spring cycle menu in the fall, feeding into procurement systems, nutritional analysis, and budget planning.

So when a buyer asks what you will have in March, they are asking whether they can put your product on a menu that gets printed, costed, and committed long before March arrives. If your answer is "we will see how the season goes," you are asking them to absorb a risk their system cannot. They will default to the distributor who can guarantee it.

Forecasting runs in both directions

Supply: what will you and your producers actually have, in what volumes, in what weeks? For a hub that means aggregating grower crop plans into a realistic availability picture. For a farm it means planting against committed demand rather than hope.

Demand: what will the institution order, and when? Collect it from buyers and translate it back to producers early enough to act on. A grower cannot respond to a September order in September. They needed to know in May.

For a hub, sitting in the middle of those two flows is arguably the core service you provide an institutional account. For a farm selling direct, the same two flows just both run through you.

Watch your order cycles too. A storefront window that opens Friday and closes Sunday night works for households, but a food service director is not at work on the weekend. Institutions can tell you what they need weeks ahead, so give them a longer ordering window with an earlier deadline, and work backwards from their commitments to line up supply with your producers.



The seasonality mismatch.....

Your peak production is mid to late summer. School and university demand is near zero in July, then spikes when students return. You are asked to supply exactly as your season winds down, and have nothing to sell during your most abundant window.

Ways to work with it, all requiring planning:

- **Plant for the calendar, not the season.** Storage crops, late plantings, and season extension become strategic rather than optional.
- **Look for summer programs.** Universities often run athletics camps, conferences, and summer sessions. The volume is much smaller, but it is not zero, and it keeps the relationship warm.
- **Use the fall spike deliberately.** Storage crops, brassicas, and fall produce align well with the return to campus. Build your institutional offering around what genuinely peaks when they need it.
- **Hospitals fill the gap.** Hospitals run year round. A portfolio that includes hospital accounts smooths the school calendar.

Commit conservatively, deliver reliably



The strongest position with an institutional buyer is being the supplier who does what they said they would.

Forecast on the conservative side. Better to commit to 60 cases and deliver 60 than commit to 100 and deliver 70. Institutional kitchens build production around what they expect, so a short delivery is not an inconvenience, it is a menu they cannot execute for hundreds of people.

Reliability is what earns you the second year contract, and it is worth far more than the extra cases you might sell by promising too much.



The right system



Make forecasting an operational habit

Practically, this means forward commitments living alongside current inventory: accepting orders well in advance, seeing committed volume against projected availability, and sharing availability in a form buyers can plan against.

The habit matters more than any tool. Forecast conservatively, collect demand early, and commit only to what you can deliver. The right system just makes that habit much easier to keep.



How LFM helps forecasting

Storefront Pre-Orders let buyers shop weeks or months ahead, align purchases with menu and program schedules, manage multiple delivery days in a single order cycle, and secure supply without last-minute coordination.

Future demand becomes committed orders your producers can plant against, with more predictable volume and less back and forth during busy periods.



5 PRICING, PRODUCTS, AND MARGINS



The price reality.....

Institutional buyers are more price sensitive than most restaurant or retail buyers, for a structural reason: **food is not their product.**

A farm to table restaurant sells the story of your farm; your name on the menu is part of what they charge for. An institution serves a captive population, and food is a cost of delivering that service. Even a buyer who cares deeply about local food answers to a budget that treats it as an expense line.

Expect price pressure. The question is what you do about it.

Do not confuse volume with profit

The tempting logic goes: I can drop my price and make it up in volume. Sometimes true. But the price concession is rarely the only cost. Add the insurance increase, certification, outsourced processing, extra delivery stops, and staff hours, and a survivable discount becomes a loss.

Monitor gross margin by channel, continuously. If you cannot say what a case of carrots earns at a school versus a restaurant versus your CSA, you are flying blind on the most important decision in this guide.

Channel allocation is part of the same discipline. If a limited crop would sell out at a 40 percent margin direct to consumer, committing it to an institutional account at 20 percent needs a clear reason: predictability, scale, or a deliberate step in your growth plan. Make that choice on purpose, for your operation and your producers, rather than defaulting to whoever ordered first.

How LFM helps:



Sales reports by channel, customer, and product show what you actually earn in every market you serve.

Institutional margins sit right next to your CSA and restaurant numbers in real time, rather than buried in a spreadsheet project that's always out of date. You see profitability by customer type and by product, so when a buyer pushes price, you have the data to make a clear decision: is this account worth keeping, or should you allocate that crop elsewhere?



What you are selling besides food

You will not win institutional accounts on price alone, and you should not try. Your real competition is the broadline distributor: the large, full line food service suppliers such as Sysco, US Foods, and Gordon Food Service that most institutions buy from by default. Here is where you have advantages they will struggle to match:

Traceability and reporting. The big one. Institutions buying local usually need to prove it, for a grant, a sustainability goal, a state incentive, or their own marketing. The major broadline distributors do run local sourcing programs, but what they rarely deliver is farm level traceability on every order line. If you can hand a buyer a clean report showing exactly which farm grew what, in what quantity, and when, while their broadline invoice says "carrots, \$1,200," you have created value unrelated to price. Product attributes and by producer reporting turn this from a manual favor into a standing capability.

Freshness and quality. Shorter supply chain, better shelf life, less shrink. Shrink is a real cost, and reduced waste is a legitimate part of your value argument.

Source identification. Being able to name the farm is not a soft benefit. It is what makes the purchase reportable, marketable, and meaningful to students and staff.

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"Everything we offer is local and source identified. So schools can know exactly where products came from. And oftentimes, those farms are right down the road. The students know these farmers, or have taken field trips to the farm before, and they're excited about that."

— Becca Perrin, Green Mountain Farm Direct

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Responsiveness. You can answer the phone, adjust an order, and solve a problem in a way that a national account rep cannot.

Story. Covered in Chapter 9, but worth naming here: for universities and hospitals especially, the marketing value of your farm's story is part of what they are buying.



Variety. Broadline catalogs are built around a narrow set of standard items. You can offer things a distributor cannot, and some buyers will find that genuinely exciting once they know it is an option.

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"There's so much produce out there in the world and most consumers are only familiar with a couple of things. So we've really tried to work with schools and farms to expand what's possible. We're working to understand what the foods are that kids get excited about and what works well for kitchen staff."

— Jacob Weiss, [Spork Food Hub](#)

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Secondary grade product

Most produce is graded against [USDA grade standards](#). Product that will not make it onto a grocery shelf, because of size, shape, or cosmetic blemishes, is frequently perfectly good for a kitchen that is going to chop and cook it anyway.

Institutional kitchens can be a good outlet for it at a lower price point. It is one of the few ways to hit an institutional price without eating margin, because you are moving product with limited value elsewhere. Two caveats:

- **Most farms and hubs do not grade to this level.** A typical hub might have a rough number two designation at best. Formalizing it takes work, and you must describe consistently what you are selling.
- **The labor tradeoff has to work for them.** If a kitchen trims significantly more waste off cheaper product, the savings vanish into labor.



Minimal processing.....

This is often the real barrier, more than price. Many institutional kitchens, especially K-12, cannot process whole product; some simply reheat and plate. They need pre cut, chopped, or peeled product, and most farms and many hubs cannot supply it.

Your options:

- **Build it.** Capital intensive, with regulatory requirements beyond what a farm faces (see USDA on [HARPC and HACCP](#)), but it opens doors and gives your seconds a home. Processing is where a number two carrot becomes a perfectly good diced carrot. USDA AMS's [Many Hats: A Food Hub Operator's Toolkit](#) covers the operational and capital questions.
- **Partner.** Find a processor, co packer, or hub with capacity. The more common path, and far faster to establish.
- **Sell only where whole product works.** Universities and hospitals with real kitchens can take it. Focus there and be honest with the rest.

Processing capability, yours or a partner's, expands your addressable market and solves your seconds problem at once. If you are serious about K-12, it is close to a prerequisite.

A working example.

The [Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center](#), a shared-use facility operated by Mission West Community Development Partners, sources from member farms to make value-added products. Facilities like it let you access processing without building it. Montana Marinara, a red sauce served in Montana school districts, came out of exactly this arrangement: vegetables sourced through the Western Montana Growers Cooperative, combined with USDA canned tomatoes, into something a school kitchen can use.



6 YOU DO NOT HAVE TO DO THIS ALONE

The previous chapters describe a demanding channel: certifications, insurance, forecasting, volume, tight pricing. Together they can make institutional sales look like something only a large operation can attempt.

That is not the whole picture. Much of the most successful institutional supply in the country comes from small hubs and farms who found partners instead of going it solo.

Food hub networks

A food hub network is a group of hubs collaborating to reach buyers none could serve individually. They share availability, trade inventory to fill gaps, and give large buyers a single point of contact.

The Northwest Food Hub Network, formed in late 2021 by Puget Sound Food Hub, LINC Foods, and Western Montana Growers Cooperative, is a working example. In two years it helped over 200 farmers increase sales by nearly \$3 million and won a Washington state procurement bid worth more than \$600,000.

What a network makes possible: volume without consolidation, so local food scales to institutional order sizes while producers stay independent; a broader catalog spanning several regions; season extension through hub to hub trading; and shared resources, including the free or low cost food safety certification assistance the NWFHN provides, exactly the barrier described in Chapter 2.

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"We were able to capture a larger contract because we have a wider variety of products from the other food hubs. We wouldn't have been able to say yes to this contract if the other hubs hadn't made it easy for us to say yes."

— Andrew Yokom, Puget Sound Food Hub

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The honest caveats. A network is not a rescue plan, and it adds work before it adds revenue. Your operation has to be sound first. Coordination is a distinct skill on top of running a hub. Trading between hubs carries real distribution cost, so trades must be big enough to justify the miles. And someone has to manage it: for the NWFHN, that is a nonprofit partner, Mission West Community Development Partners. You also do not need a formal network to start capturing the benefits.



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"Keep an open mind. It's a hard business that we're in. Any chance we get to run ideas back and forth is worth it. We've certainly benefited from the knowledge of others. I think even making an informal network has its benefits."

— Dave Prather, formerly Western Montana Growers Cooperative

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"If you're engaging with a network to save or fix your hub, that's not going to work. You have to have your own business sorted, and then find the value-add from collaborating."

— Andrew Yokom, Puget Sound Food Hub

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The honest caveats. A network is not a rescue plan, and it adds work before it adds revenue. Your operation has to be sound first. Coordination is a distinct skill on top of running a hub. Trading between hubs carries real distribution cost, so trades must be big enough to justify the miles. And someone has to manage it: for the NWFHN, that is a nonprofit partner, Mission West Community Development Partners. You also do not need a formal network to start capturing the benefits.



Sales brokers.....

A broker sells on your behalf. Where the sales cycle runs months to years and demands sustained relationship work, this can beat building the capability in house.

Kitchen Sync Strategies plays this role for the Northwest Food Hub Network, brokering into hospitals, universities, corporate dining, and K-12 for all three hubs and facilitating trades between them to fill an order.

What a good broker does:

- Learns your operation in detail: inventory, delivery areas, order periods, constraints
- Identifies what a specific buyer needs before proposing anything
- Maintains ongoing contact, including regular availability sheets
- Carries the long vendor approval process so your staff does not have to

.....

"Food hubs are complicated and intricate. The last thing we want to do is add to that. So that means we need to understand their inventory, understand their delivery areas, their order periods, you name it."

— Elliott Smith, Kitchen Sync Strategies

.....

Shared technology does a lot of the quiet work in these arrangements.

Everyone needs to see the same availability, and nobody has time to re-enter it.

How LFM helps:



Local Food Network

connects hubs running on LFM so availability, pricing, and pack sizes flow between them, with hub to hub purchase orders, farm-to-plate traceability across transfers, and syncing into institutional buyers' procurement platforms.

It eliminates the double entry that otherwise makes multi hub sales unmanageable.



Processing partners

Covered in Chapter 5, and worth repeating here: if you cannot supply minimally processed product, a processing partner may be the difference between qualifying for K-12 accounts and not.

Network managers

Coordination is real work. Where networks succeed, someone is usually paid to hold the pieces together, often a nonprofit or economic development organization. Decide early who does this and how it is funded.

Deciding which path fits

Notice the shared prerequisite. None of these options substitutes for having your own operation in order. What they change is what you can reach once it is.

	Go it alone	Join a network	Work with a broker
Best when	You have volume, certification, and staff capacity	You cannot fill orders alone	You lack sales capacity, not supply
Main cost	Everything in Chapters 2 through 5	Coordination time, trade logistics	Commission or fee
Main gain	Full margin and control	Access to larger contracts	Relationships and time
Prerequisite	A sound operation	A sound operation, plus partners	Reliable supply and fulfillment



7 WINNING THE ACCOUNT

Start with your state, not with a buyer.....

Before cold calling a single school, find out what already exists where you operate. This work is intensely state by state. Some states have well funded programs and active networks you can plug into. Others have very little.

What to look for: whether your state incentivizes local purchasing and at what rate, which nonprofits work in the space (they know which districts are active and where the money is), and whether farms and hubs near you already coordinate on institutional accounts.

Useful starting points:

- [National Farm to School Network](#) and their [Bringing the Farm to School producers' toolkit](#), plus the [Partner Network Map](#) of 500+ organizations, the fastest way to find who works near you
- [Selling Local Food to Schools](#), USDA's seller-facing fact sheet
- [USDA Farm to School Census state pages](#), to look up local purchasing by state and find nearby school food authorities
- [Farm to Institution New England](#) in the Northeast, with 500+ categorized resources across K-12, campus, healthcare, and corrections
- [Food Systems Leadership Network](#) for courses on food safety, value chain coordination, and hub operations
- [Farm to Hospital Toolkit](#) from IATP and SARE, still one of the few dedicated healthcare resources

No national organization matches the farm to school infrastructure on the healthcare side. The closest is Health Care Without Harm's [Healthy Food in Health Care](#) and its membership arm, Practice Greenhealth. Healthcare is less organized, which means more legwork and less competition.

SALES!?!?



Find out who actually decides.....

Before investing serious time, map the account:

- **Who runs food service?** The institution, or an FSMC like Sodexo, Compass, or Aramark? This determines everything downstream.
- **Who is the champion?** Usually a chef, dining director, or nutrition director. They want this to work and will advocate internally.
- **Who approves vendors?** Procurement, risk management, finance. Different people, different criteria, often invisible until late.
- **Who handles receiving?** They control your delivery window and will tell you things about logistics no one else will.

Get to the approvers early. Ask your champion directly: "Who else needs to sign off, and what will they need from me?" A good champion will happily tell you and often make the introduction.

Start where the school has a plan

The most effective way into a K-12 account is fitting what the district already does rather than asking them to change.

Many states run a Harvest of the Month program featuring a different seasonal item each month. Green Mountain Farm Direct in Vermont uses it as a primary door opener: schools sign up in advance and say how much they want for each month. The planning is already done, it matches seasonal availability, and it gives you a recurring reason to be in contact.

Those recurring deliveries also become sales conversations. Bring a short product list of suggestions chosen for that buyer's pricing and pack size, and ask what else they would use if you offered it.



.....

"Harvest of The Month is a great way for school customers to start introducing local products, and we make it as easy as possible for them. Schools sign up ahead of time and all they need to do is tell us how much they want for each month of the year."

— Becca Perrin, Green Mountain Farm Direct

.....

TIP:

Harvest of the Month is only one way to fit an existing plan. School lunch menus are often published online. Read them, find the ingredients the district already uses, and offer those first. Switching an existing line item to local is a far easier ask than adding something new.

This is sales, not marketing

Selling direct to consumers runs on marketing: social posts, email lists, and a storefront shoppers find their way to. Institutional accounts are won differently, through direct, personal, outbound sales: researching a specific buyer, reaching out by name, calling, visiting, and following up on a schedule. Kitchen Sync Strategies, who broker these sales full time, start by studying what an institution says publicly about its own dining program, then open the first call with it. Keep a simple list, in a spreadsheet or CRM, of who you have contacted and when to follow up.

.....

"If you don't put your own time and energy into creating sales, don't expect them to come to you."

— Elliott Smith, [Kitchen Sync Strategies](#)

.....

Expect a long courtship.....

Institutional sales are relationship sales, and they are slow. Plan for multiple in person meetings before an order, stretches of silence driven by their budget cycle or staffing rather than your product, and a timeline set by a fiscal year or bid cycle that will not move for you.

What actually works:

- **Be in the room.** Conferences, food policy council meetings, farm to school gatherings. A meaningful share of institutional business originates where buyers, nonprofits, and producers are already talking. That presence costs staff time, which is why it is a real investment and not a free tactic.
- **Lead with their problem.** Not "we grow great tomatoes" but "we can help you hit your local purchasing target and prove it."
- **Bring samples, but bring specs too.** Chefs respond to product. Procurement responds to case sizes, pack specs, lead times, and a certificate of insurance. As Dan Stowers of Food Hub ATL puts it in our [guide to increasing average order size](#), "Sampling customers and being in their kitchen tends to take price out of the equation."
- **Be honest about what you cannot do.** Buyers have been burned by suppliers who overpromised. "We cannot do pre cut, but here is a partner who can" builds more trust than a vague yes.
- **Work the org chart.** If the food service director's voicemail is a dead end, call the procurement office instead. Reaching anyone at the institution can restart the conversation with everyone.

We created a Buyer Discovery Question Sheet to bring to your first conversation.

DOWNLOAD





Diligence Checklist

- ✔ Who operates your food service, and who approves new vendors?
- ✔ What are your insurance requirements, including limits and additional insured status?
- ✔ What food safety certification do you accept, specifically?
- ✔ What are your receiving hours and locations? How many delivery points?
- ✔ What kitchen capability do you have? Can you handle whole product?
- ✔ What are your payment terms?
- ✔ Do you have local purchasing goals or funding, and how is local defined?
- ✔ What is your menu planning horizon, and when do you need commitments?
- ✔ What reporting do you need from suppliers?
- ✔ What does your bid or solicitation cycle look like, and when does the window open?

We created a Buyer Discovery Question Sheet to bring to your first conversation.

[DOWNLOAD](#)





8 OPERATIONS, DELIVERY, GETTING PAID

Winning the account is the beginning. Institutional accounts are operationally demanding in ways that quietly erode the margin you negotiated.

Delivery is more constrained than you are used to

- **Schools** often will not accept deliveries during the school day. Your window may be early morning, and may vary by site.
- **Hospitals** have designated receiving hours, specific docks, and security procedures. Arriving outside the window can mean not being received at all.
- **Universities** vary by campus, often with multiple dining locations and different requirements.

Then there is the multiplication problem: a district that preps at each school may need ten stops for the volume a central kitchen takes in one.

Plan routes around institutional constraints first, since they are least flexible, then fit other customers around them. And price the route, not just the product. Ten stops is a fundamentally different cost structure than one.

How LFM helps:

Route optimization through the Routific integration builds delivery runs around fixed receiving windows, and sales reports by route show whether an account's stops are actually paying for the miles.



Make ordering easy, or lose to the broadline default

Institutional buyers work inside purchasing systems already connected to their broadline distributor. Adding a local vendor means stepping outside that flow and doing something manual, and the harder you are to order from, the easier it is for a busy buyer to stay with their current distributor.

What reduces friction:

- **Custom product lists and buyer specific pricing.** A buyer should see their catalog and their prices, not your entire inventory. It makes ordering faster and reduces errors. Working with a school that only buys from GAP certified producers? Give them a list showing only those products, while every other customer still shops the full catalog.
- **A shopping experience built for their workflow,** including standing orders and repeat ordering, so a weekly order takes two minutes instead of twenty.
- **Clean order confirmations and documentation** that fit into their systems without retyping.
- **Integration where it is available.** If you can accept order data from their purchasing system and push invoice or product data back, you remove the biggest structural advantage the broadline distributors have.

The goal is simple: make buying from you no harder than buying from the distributor they already use.

How LFM helps:

Customizable storefronts by sales channel let you run a dedicated buying portal for institutional customers alongside your retail store, with volume ordering, tailored invoicing, and the ability for buyers to edit confirmed orders up to the ordering deadline.

Custom product lists and price lists show each institution only what fits their program, with attributes like Certified Organic or GAP certified filterable at a glance. Traceability and lot tracking preserve farm-to-plate source identity on every order, so the purchase records funders require are a few clicks away, for you or directly through the buyer dashboard. And data and integration APIs connect to buyers' purchasing systems.



Reporting is part of the product

Institutions buying local have to prove it. Grant reporting, state incentive documentation, sustainability metrics, and marketing claims all depend on knowing what was purchased, from whom, and in what quantity.

If that reporting is a monthly scramble, it will be inconsistent and eventually you will stop doing it well. If your system captures producer level attribution at the order line and generates a report on demand, you are delivering something a broadline distributor cannot.

.....
"I just got an email from a food service director who manages six schools that we work with. He said, 'Hey, can you run a report for me that includes the following data points: date, invoice number, item vendor, and total cost?' So then I just go into my orders page in LFM, set the time period, and run a report that I can send over to him."

— Becca Perrin, Green Mountain Farm Direct
.....

That request is routine, and being able to answer it in minutes rather than days is a genuine competitive advantage.

USDA AMS and the National Farm to Institution Metrics Collaborative also published [Farm to Institution Metrics](#), working toward common definitions that reduce the tracking burden on farms and hubs. Useful if your buyers each want different data in different formats.

Ask each buyer what they report and on what cadence, then build the process once. This is one of the most durable reasons an institution keeps buying from you.

Getting paid

Institutions rarely pay at delivery. They pay on invoice terms: "net 30" means full payment is due 30 days after the invoice date, and net 45 or net 60 terms, meaning 45 or 60 days, are not unusual. The accounts payable department, the office inside the institution that processes and pays invoices, handles a high volume and is not known for urgency.

- **Know the terms before you deliver**, and factor the cash flow gap in, especially if you pay your producers faster than the institution pays you.
- **Invoice exactly the way they require.** Missing purchase order numbers and wrong formats are the most common reason invoices sit unpaid.
- **Make following up on unpaid invoices someone's actual job.** Decide who checks aging invoices and contacts accounts payable when payment is late. Unpaid invoices only get followed up on when it is clearly part of someone's role.
- **Understand the account's cash flow shape**, particularly with schools, where your biggest delivery months may land when you are least liquid.

The operations payoff.....

None of this is the exciting part of selling local food, but it is where institutional relationships are won. The supplier who hits the delivery window, keeps ordering simple, and sends clean invoices and reports becomes the supplier buyers trust. And trusted suppliers get the reorder, the renewal, and the introduction to the next food service director. Handle the details well, and the relationship tends to follow.

9 MARKETING THE PARTNERSHIP

Local food purchasing has to justify itself internally, and marketing is how it does that. Helping your buyer market the relationship is one of the highest leverage things you can do to protect the account.

Why they need the story.....

Buying local usually costs more per plate than the broadline alternative. Someone inside the building advocated for that decision, and they have to keep justifying it. The story is the justification: where the food came from, who grew it, what it means locally, why it is fresher. That narrative turns a line item into a program with support behind it.

The more visible the program is, the more likely it survives the next budget cycle. That makes your marketing support a direct contributor to account retention.

What each sector needs.....

Universities and hospitals have the most marketing appetite. Competing for students, patients, and staff, they want farmer photos, farm stories, and local spend data for sustainability reports, dining hall displays, admissions materials, and social media.

K-12 schools market to students and families, and the emphasis is educational: Harvest of the Month, taste tests, classroom materials, cafeteria posters connecting a farm to the tray. Volume may be small, but the community goodwill is real.

What to actually provide.....

You do not need a marketing department. You need a small, reusable kit:

- **Farm and producer profiles.** A few paragraphs each on the farms behind your product, updated annually.
- **Photography.** Real photos of real farms and the people who work them. This is the single most requested and most useful asset. A day with a decent camera each season will serve you for years.
- **Purchasing data.** Local spend totals, producer counts, and miles traveled if you track it. This is your reporting capability doing double duty.
- **Ready made pieces.** Some buyers want a finished poster or table card. Others just want raw material to run with. Offer both if you can, and ask which they prefer. The Northwest Food Hub Network prints Story Sheets about individual producers, pulled from their online producer profiles, for display in dining halls where that farm's products are featured.



If your region has an existing farm to school program with prebuilt materials, such as a Harvest of the Month packet, point buyers to it. Someone else has already done the design work.

Market it on your side too.....

Institutional accounts are worth more than their revenue alone. This work is compelling to funders, to your community, and, if you run a hub, to producers considering joining it. It plays well in grant applications and local press. Most people respond to the idea of kids and patients eating good food.

Just keep the internal accounting honest. Feature the story proudly, and separately keep tracking what the channel earns. Confusing the two is how an operation ends up talking about farm to school far more than it makes money from it.



10 BEYOND THE CAFETERIA

Once you have a relationship with an institution, there are opportunities that sit outside the traditional food service contract. These are usually higher margin, less price constrained, and often less competitive.

Employee wellness programs

Universities and hospitals employ large numbers of people and often run wellness benefits.

A model that works: sell CSA shares to employees, with the employer covering part of the cost as a wellness benefit. Delivery goes to the workplace, so staff collect shares at the end of a shift.

Why it works: the employer subsidy removes the price objection because it is a benefit expense rather than a food service expense, delivery is efficient with many shares to one location, CSA revenue carries better margin than wholesale, and it builds relationships inside the institution beyond the kitchen.

Start with HR or the wellness coordinator, not food service.

Food is medicine

Hospitals increasingly run programs providing food as part of patient care, including produce prescriptions and boxes for patients after discharge.

Be clear eyed: hospitals do not automatically buy better food because research supports it. Budget still governs. But where such a program exists or is launching, there is a real opening to supply custom boxes.

They are complex to stand up, typically requiring an internal champion, partners to manage enrollment and distribution, and grant funding with its own reporting requirements. There is no single playbook, since each is shaped by local partners, but the model is well established enough to learn from: our [Food as Medicine Programs guide](#) profiles working programs and breaks down the partnership roles, funding sources, and timelines involved. If you hear a health system is exploring one, have that conversation early.



Catering and events.....

Universities and hospitals both run catering operations for conferences, donor events, and board meetings. Those budgets are more generous than daily food service, and local sourcing is often actively wanted because the event is meant to impress. Catering is also a lower stakes way into an institution not ready to change its daily supply chain.



Case Studies



"There's no blueprint for farm-to-school sales. In reality, it takes years to build good relationships, buy-in, and trust."

"There's no substitute for strong relationships."

— Jacob Weiss, Spork Food Hub

Spork Food Hub, Davis, California.....

Founded 2021 by the owners of Fiery Ginger Farm, in response to school supply chain disruption.

Focus: K-12.

The takeaway: small farms often assume wholesale is closed to them. A hub's job is to prove otherwise, and that takes patience more than it takes scale.

Spork's route in was creating a market small farms could not reach alone. General manager Jacob Weiss describes aggregation as the core of the job: combining three cases of tomatoes from one farm with ten from another and twenty from a third, so a real school order gets filled while every grower gets a sale that matters to them. They also expand what schools think is available, pushing past the narrow range broadline catalogs carry. The model works: within three years of its 2021 founding, Spork had procured more than **\$2 million in produce from over 50 partner farms**, serving more than 25 farm to school programs, universities, and other institutions.



Case Studies

"Why should food hubs do farm-to-school work? Because producers need support."

You need background knowledge and tools to understand the school landscape, as well as USDA rules and requirements. Local farmers often just don't have the time to navigate those relationships, but we do and we are happy to do it."

— Becca Perrin, Green Mountain Farm Direct

Green Mountain Farm Direct, Newport, Vermont

Structure: the wholesale program of a nonprofit, working with over 50 producers in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom.

Focus: K-12, primarily local school districts.

The takeaway: find the program your state already funds and build your offer around it.

GMFD began as a delivery service for schools and grew into a regional food hub. Their entry tactic is Harvest of the Month, letting schools commit a year at a time with almost no planning burden. Their retention tactic is service: answering the phone, running the reports, knowing a school kitchen wastes less with fresher product. Vermont's Local Purchasing Incentive, worth up to \$0.25 per meal at 25 percent local purchasing, materially changed what their customers could buy.



Case Studies

"The bar we have to clear for making hub to hub inventory trading financially viable is high. We can't just do small experimental orders with these institutional buyers. We have to be ready to play the game in full right away."

— Charlie Michel, Mission West Community Development Partners

"Once the contract was awarded, the challenge was delivering large orders to several sites across Washington. Despite the hurdles, we were able to come up with collaborative solutions, and it was well worth it because the order was substantial."

— Dave Prather, formerly Western Montana Growers Cooperative

Northwest Food Hub Network

Structure: three cooperative hubs (Puget Sound Food Hub, LINC Foods, Western Montana Growers Cooperative) with a nonprofit network manager and a dedicated sales broker.

Focus: K-12, higher education, healthcare, corporate dining.

The takeaway: collaboration unlocks contracts that individual operations cannot reach, but only for operations already running well, and only at volumes that justify the coordination.

The collaboration model in practice. In two years the network helped more than 200 farmers increase sales by nearly \$3 million, completed over 100 hub to hub trades, and won a Washington state procurement bid worth more than \$600,000 that no single hub could have filled.

Montana Marinara is the clearest illustration of the model: a red sauce combining USDA canned tomatoes with onions, carrots, butternut squash, and safflower oil sourced through the network, served across Montana school districts.



Case Studies

Kitchen Sync Strategies: the broker's view.....

Structure: a small brokerage founded in 2019, selling to institutions on behalf of farms and food hubs around the country, including as the dedicated broker for the Northwest Food Hub Network.

Focus: K-12, higher education, healthcare, corporate dining.

The takeaway: there is no single formula for winning an institutional account. What works, case by case, is the patient and personal relationship building described in Chapter 7.

"It's never as simple as a purchase.

It's a relationship, and people should think of it that way."

— Elliott Smith, Kitchen Sync Strategies

Kitchen Sync is talking with hundreds of buyers at any given time, and they will be the first to tell you that no two accounts come together the same way. Some begin with a conversation at a school nutrition conference, others through years of patient follow up. The common thread is a simple one: you reach out, you talk, and over time a relationship forms. The details look different every time.

Reed College in Oregon is one example. The team researched what the college advertised about its own dining program, called to say how glad they were to see Oregon grown food featured, and asked for a visit. A sit down about the college's goals came next, then availability lists and sample marketing materials, and a couple of months later the first small orders arrived, growing into a sustained account.

Another account might start and unfold completely differently, but the habits carry over: research the buyer, reach out personally, show up, and stay politely persistent, sometimes for years.





Where to go from here

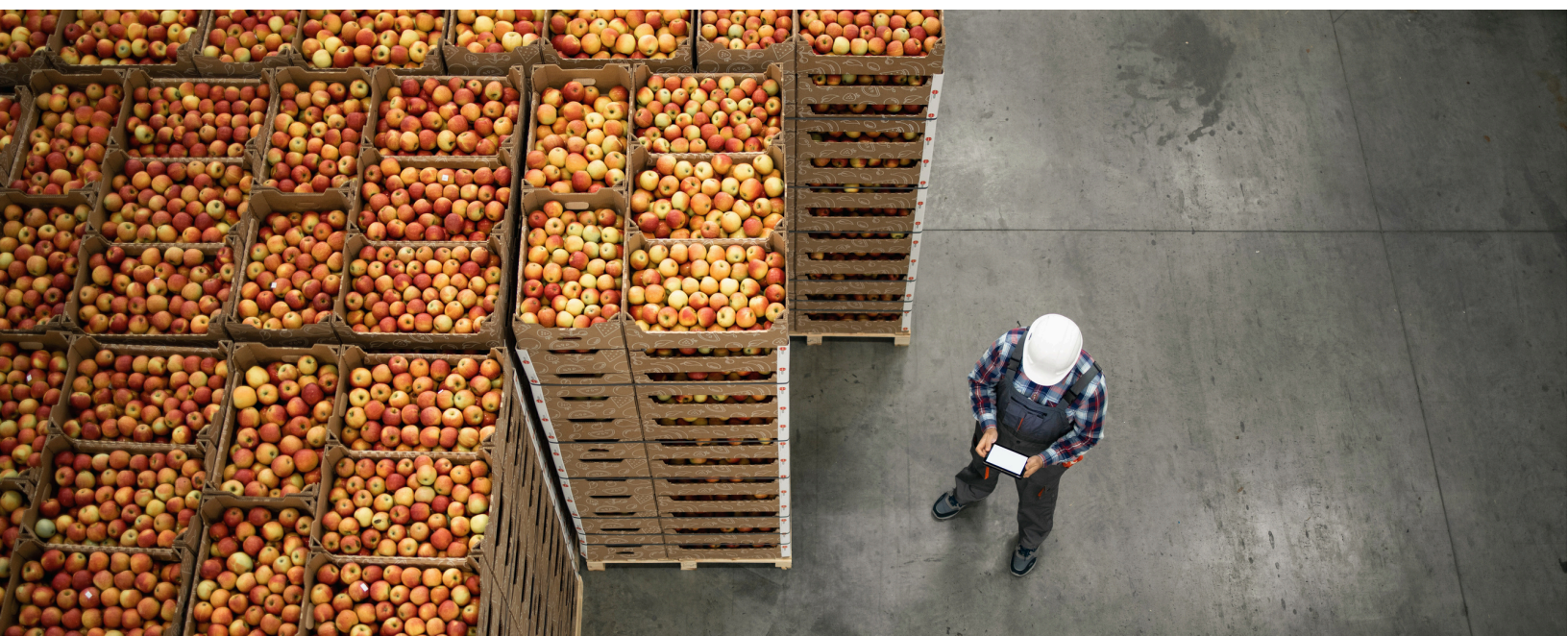
One thing to take away: success in institutional sales comes from strong operations more than enthusiasm.

The farms and hubs that succeed here are not the ones most passionate about feeding kids and patients, though most of them are. They are the ones who know their margins by channel, forecast honestly, understand vendor requirements before committing, deliver what they promised, and can prove exactly what they sold and who grew it.

If that describes you, these markets can be a durable part of your business. If not yet, that is the work worth doing first, and it will strengthen every other channel too.

Your next steps.....

- **Calculate your margin by channel.** If you cannot do this today, start here.
- **Research your state.** Find the funding, programs, and nonprofits working near you.
- **Pick one sector.** For most operations starting out, that is a university.
- **Run one full vendor diligence process** using the question list in Chapter 7.
- **Build forecasting and reporting habits** before a buyer asks, not after.





How LFM can help

- ✔ **Custom storefronts and price lists**, so each institution shops a catalog tailored to its program and pricing
- ✔ **Storefront Pre-Orders**, so buyers can order weeks or months ahead against menus and program schedules
- ✔ **Traceability and lot tracking**, preserving farm-to-plate source identity from producer to lunch tray
- ✔ **Producer level reporting and buyer dashboards**, for the local purchase documentation grants and incentive programs require
- ✔ **Sales reports by channel, customer, and product**, so you can watch institutional margins the way this guide recommends
- ✔ **Product attributes**, so buyers can filter for certifications
- ✔ **Delivery routing and packing tools**, for the multi stop delivery patterns institutional accounts create
- ✔ **Data and integration APIs**, to connect with institutional purchasing systems
- ✔ **One platform for every channel**, so institutional sales run alongside your CSA, retail, restaurant, and wholesale business

See how it all works together in a walkthrough built around your goals.

BOOK YOUR DEMO





SOURCES.....

All links verified as of August 2026. Federal programs and fee schedules change; confirm current status before relying on any figure.

Market data

- [USDA Farm to School Census, SY 2022-2023](#), source of the \$1.8 billion local food spend, 16 percent of total food spending, 74.1 percent SFA participation, and 49.7 percent of programs under three years old

Procurement rules

- [Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Programs Guide](#), USDA, June 2022. Geographic preference chapter is out of date
- [Geographic Preference Expansion memo SP 22-2024](#), effective July 1, 2024, and the [Q&A memo](#)
- [Using Federal Funds to Purchase Local Foods, SP 11-2025](#)
- [Incorporating Local Beef into Child Nutrition Program Meals, SP 03-2026](#)

Food safety and certification

- [USDA GAP and GHP Audits and GroupGAP](#), plus the [GroupGAP User's Guide](#)
- [AMS Service Fees](#), rates effective October 1, 2025
- [Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crops cost share](#)
- [NASDA GAP Certification Programs hub](#)
- [USDA Farm to School fact sheets](#) on GAPs, FSMA, and HACCP

Producer and hub resources

- [Selling Local Food to Schools: A Resource for Producers](#), USDA
- [Bringing the Farm to School: Agricultural Producers' Toolkit](#), NCAT, NFSN, and USDA
- [Many Hats: A Food Hub Operator's Toolkit](#), USDA AMS, August 2025
- [Food Systems Leadership Network](#), Wallace Center
- [Farm to Institution Metrics](#), USDA AMS

Networks, states, and healthcare

- [National Farm to School Network](#), the [Partner Network Map](#), and [Local Food Purchasing Incentives](#)
- [Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program](#)
- [Farm to Institution New England resource database](#)
- [Healthy Food in Health Care](#), Health Care Without Harm
- [Farm to Hospital Toolkit](#), IATP and SARE





SOURCES.....

LFM case studies drawn on throughout

- Northwest Food Hub Network: Leveraging Technology to Build Resilient Local Food Systems, LFM, August 2024
- Farm to School Success: Green Mountain Farm Direct, LFM
- Farm to School Success: Spork Food Hub, LFM

Program changes to note

- USDA terminated the Regional Food Business Centers program on July 15, 2025
- USDA's Food and Nutrition Service became the Food and Nutrition Administration on June 1, 2026; older fns.usda.gov links redirect to fna.usda.gov





Local Food
MARKETPLACE

Thank you!

