



THE COMMON MARKET'S FARM-FRESH BOX PROGRAM

Helping public schools combat food access challenges during COVID-19

THE COMMON MARKET

The Common Market is a nonprofit regional food distributor with a mission to connect communities with good food from sustainable family farms. The food hub serves anchor institutions throughout the Mid-Atlantic, Southeast and Texas regions by providing access to local, source-identified products from small to mid-scale family farms.

The Common Market has helped more than **420 school partners** meet local purchasing, environmental, and social justice goals since 2008.

WHY OUR MODEL WORKS

- Access to a network of sustainable, family farms
- Safe, short supply chain
- Convenient, family-sized boxes
- Routine delivery
- Seasonal, source-identified, culturally appropriate foods

ADAPTING TOGETHER

Despite disruption to food service models caused by COVID-19, schools across our regions continue to play a critical role as anchors in their communities, meeting food insecurity needs with flexibility and care.

The Common Market adapted alongside partners, including **five New Jersey school districts and Austin Independent School District** (Austin, TX), to deploy innovative approaches to food service that prioritized nutritious, fresh produce and supported local agricultural communities in the process.

These two regional school partnerships demonstrated positive economic, public health, and environmental impact, as well as replicable models of mutually beneficial collaboration.





NEW JERSEY | Restoring Normalcy Through a Safe Food Access Approach

The Problem

As **New Jersey public schools** shifted to at-home learning models in response to COVID-19, many were left to quickly address heightened food insecurity among their student body and families. Despite best efforts, many schools reported low participation rates in their initial emergency food programming.

The **Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP)** is a federal grant offered to elementary schools with 50% or more students eligible for free or reduced-price meals to help expose school children to new, healthy foods. The funding was left underutilized for many schools due to the program's traditional in-person structure.

The Approach

Newark Public Schools, West New York Public Schools, Bridgeton Public Schools, Penns Grove School District, and Camden Promise Charter Schools used untapped FFVP funds to partner with The Common Market to facilitate a new response to COVID-19, prioritizing access to fresh, healthy fruits and vegetables. The creative approach translated to consistent distributions of The Common Market's **Farm-Fresh Boxes**, each containing 7-8 fresh produce items, an equivalent to a week's worth of meals, all sourced from a network of sustainable, family farms.



The Farm-Fresh Box Program

The Common Market's Farm-Fresh Box Program was conceived in partnership with local farmer networks as a safe food access response to COVID-19.

- Boxes contain 5-8 seasonal, fresh produce items
- Conveniently delivered to school sites in a family-sized box.
- Provides raw ingredients suitable for at-home cooking.

“The boxes give families a sense of control. We give a box full of ingredients that they in turn can cook and create meals out of—there’s power in the normalcy of that.”

—Sal Valenza, Food Service Director, West New York Schools, NJ





The Problem

COVID-19 impacted school meal access and in many cases exacerbated food insecurity for the 80,000+ students and their families that make up the Austin Independent School District. Food service was forced to adapt alongside a continually changing set of circumstances fueled by the pandemic, while maintaining the district's commitment to utilizing fresh, nutritious ingredients.

The Approach

Austin ISD provided The Common Market Texas's Farm-Fresh boxes featuring Texas-grown foods to families of the district. The boxes, which included locally grown produce like peppers, melons, squash, carrots, and other seasonal staples, complemented a curbside meal program already in place. The boxes were made available at no cost to families with children under the age of 19.

The fresh-food initiative was funded by The Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, a foundation dedicated to transforming the lives of children through improving their education, health and family economic stability.

Just over 9,000 boxes of Texas-grown produce were delivered on a weekly basis to various school sites throughout the Austin ISD network over a 5-month period.



“The Farm-Fresh Boxes were not only beneficial in getting more healthy food to our families, but they also increased participation at our curbside feeding sites, meaning more students received the food that they needed to learn, grow, and develop.”

-Ryan Cengel, Dietitian, Austin ISD



BY THE NUMBERS



23,000+

Students/families reached

255,200+

Pounds of local food purchased

\$344,800+

Invested in the local economy

New Jersey public schools, May 2020-January 2021



9,060

Students/families reached

101,772

Pounds of local food purchased

\$136,000

Invested in the local economy

Austin Independent School District, July-December 2020



32,260+

farm-fresh boxes distributed

The Results & Key Learnings

The district noted **increased participation** on days where Farm-Fresh boxes were delivered.

Food access initiatives can **drive revenue** for school food programs.

Families had access to **culturally relevant, high-quality, nutritious ingredients** to transform into meals at home with their children.

Schools have the ability to impact **positive health outcomes** for their community.

The contracts created much-needed **revenue for small to mid-scale family farms** in the Mid-Atlantic and Texas regions.

Food access programs can have a meaningful **impact on the local economy**.

Food box distributions provided **stability for families** during times of crisis.

With investment, schools can serve as **community anchors**, going beyond feeding students to meet community needs at large.

“On the days the boxes are distributed, we see an increase in participation by approximately 900-1,000 individuals.”

— Dr. Tonya McGill, Executive Director, Office of Food & Nutrition at Newark Board of Education

“Our families love and appreciate the boxes because it gives them access to fresh produce that they normally did not have access to or could not afford.”

— Warren DeShields, Director of Food Services, Bridgeton Public Schools

Recommendations

Create Space for Innovation

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the potential for catalytic partnerships that prioritize equity, access, and community across child nutrition programs. Through innovation, school districts tapped into public and private resources to transform their food distribution efforts.

TO CONSIDER:

- **Are you a Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP)-eligible school district?** Reach out to your state coordinator, and inquire about opportunities to adapt the program constraints during COVID-19 and beyond!
- **Partner** with local food hubs, community organizations, and nonprofits to unlock funding opportunities that supplement food service efforts.

Invest in Equitable and Regional Food Systems

Purchasing across values-based, regional food systems keeps dollars in the local economy, supporting fair jobs and driving positive impact within communities. Strong procurement contract language paired with state and federal policy give school districts the opportunity to shift their purchasing power to deepen investment in local agriculture.

TO CONSIDER:

- **Incorporate Geographic Preference** into future bid language.
- **Utilize FFVP grant funding** to ignite relationships with local farmers and food hubs.
- **Research and learn** from other school districts who have made meaningful strides in their local purchasing practices.



Find Out More

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