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Boston Know Your Market (/Pricing-Insights/Know-Your-Market/Boston)

## Farm to School provides distribution opportunity

By Jim Offner (/users/jimoffner) May 14, 2015 | 10:00 am EDT



### Massachusetts' Farm to School Project offers opportunities for local growers and distributors to get involved in supplying produce to schools.

Photo by courtesy of Massachusetts Farm to School Project

Massachusetts' Farm to School Project is entering its second decade as a sales outlet for the present and an investment in the business' future, according to produce dealers in the Boston area.

The program, which is funded by the Massachusetts Department of Agriculture Resources, jumped from a handful of participating school districts to 231 public school districts and 89 independent K-12 schools and colleges. Farm participation has morphed as well, from 20 in 2005-06 to 114 in 2011-12.

The chief motivation behind the program was to heighten awareness of locally grown goods, organizers say.

It has worked, produce suppliers say.

"It's really hard to keep up with demand. Everybody wants everything local," said Henry Wainer, president of Sid Wainer & Son, a New Bedford, Mass.-based distributor.

Wainer said his company does what it can to inform students about the locally grown produce available to them.

"We have a huge social media program, and we're constantly creating information for students," he said.

The company also brings product to colleges for samplings, Wainer said.

"Everybody wants to know now, and there's so much information out there now, and it's our job to get them what they need," he said.

Farm to School's Harvest of the Month program features one item each month. Pears, kale, carrots, apples, butternut squash, potatoes, strawberries, cucumbers and peaches each got their chance for extra attention during the 2014-15 academic year. Organizers of the program provide materials for K-12 schools, preschools, colleges, and summer foodservice sites across the state.

"Harvest of the Month is a great opportunity to celebrate local abundance, experiment with new foods and recipes, and get some positive recognition for your school," according to the project's website, [www.massfarmtoschool.org](http://www.massfarmtoschool.org) (<http://www.massfarmtoschool.org>).

The program provides opportunities for school food and nutrition staff, teachers, administrators, family members and students to learn about products grown in the state.

It benefits produce distributors, but they also have to know how to represent their value in this "triangular relationship," said Manny Costa, owner of Costa Fruit & Produce Co. in Boston.

"The distributor plays a vital role as a cost-effective aggregator and distribution channel to public schools," Costa said.

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There also are a number of other facets for both the schools, farmers and distributors to consider, he said.

"Among them, distributor guidance on food safety practices, faster payment practices, proper delivery standards including DOT (Department of Transportation)-regulated delivery personnel, quality standards, as well as being a fair arbiter of price," he said.

That's a lot to consider, he said, but it doesn't stop his company.

"Costa is the largest purveyor to the K-12 segment in New England, servicing over 1,100 school locations," Costa said.

The distributor plays a vital role in the program, he said.

"I believe our customers view us as a vital link between them and the local farming community," he said.

Some distributors are involved directly, others indirectly.

Coosemans Boston Inc. is in indirect player, said Maurice Crafts, salesman.

"We have multiple customers that call us for something funky for the kids," said Crafts, whose company carries a range of specialty produce items.

Crafts said he's seeing interest in the Farm to School program growing.

"We get more and more of that every year," he said. "A customer from Rhode Island asks for kumquats or starfruit, or something funky like that. It won't be a huge amount with specialty items but they go to schools and hand it out to kids."

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**About the Author:**

**Jim Offner**

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