

Clarifying food safety rules for school purchasing and processing local produce

Some of us are planning summer processing at schools as a way to preserve the summer goodness to use during the school year. Posted is a powerpoint on the Homegrown Lunch website summarizing one example of how this can work: Viroqua's Ratatouille cooking/freezing project last August:

<http://www.reapfoodgroup.org/farmtoschool/foodservice.shtml>

Some questions from food service directors have come up as to what's allowed and not. Kathy Bass, (Kathleen.Bass@dpi.wi.gov), food safety specialist with DPI, answered these questions for clarity and has agreed to collaborate on a guidance document for school food service regarding local foods that Dept of Ag, Dept of Health Services, and DPI could put their stamps of approval on - likely a summer project for 2009. Look for the results on our website as soon as they are published.

As far as **using whole produce** is concerned, schools need to treat all whole produce the same, whether it comes from their distributor, the school garden, or a local farmer. These foods need to be cleaned and prepared the same no matter where they come from. FYI: On the foodservice page on the Homegrown Lunch website is posted a good checklist related to using reasonable care when purchasing local produce on our website:

<http://www.reapfoodgroup.org/farmtoschool/food%20service/IA%20State%20Checklist%20for%20Purchasing%20Local%20Produce.pdf>

Regarding *processing* that produce:

- Canning -- Canned goods are *only* allowed if purchased from a **licensed processing facility**. Schools are not licensed for this. Home canning is definitely out.
- Pickling would be considered a canning process.
- Freezing -- freezing berries, cooking and freezing sauces, ratatouille, pesto, shredded zucchini, and other items IS allowed
- Frozen products from a *licensed facility* is allowed, just as canned products would be.

Regarding *who* is allowed to work in a school kitchen:

- This can be up to the food service director. There may be union rules in place in some districts that restrict who can and cannot work in a school kitchen.

Barring union or other district-imposed restrictions, as long as the director has okayed it and will provide some oversight, then anyone can help with a processing project, or other preparation. This could include AmeriCorps members helping in the kitchen, students who have harvested food from the garden or picked berries somewhere to be frozen, parent volunteers, etc....

- *As AmeriCorps members I strongly recommend you find out what basic expectations your food service director has for anyone working in the kitchen and then educating any volunteers as to what those expectations are (i.e. no shorts or open toed shoes in the kitchen, hand washing procedures, when gloves are required, what equipment is allowed to be used, etc....).

Also, some food service directors have reported that their Health Inspectors have told them purchasing local produce is not allowed. Kathy Bass at DPI is happy to talk to any Food Service Directors who have been confused by this mixed messaging. She's ultimately responsible for their food safety plans.

This document has been prepared with information from Doug Wubben, Program Coordinator, 608/310-7833.