



A School District Innovation: The Riverside Unified School District Food Hub

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What is a Food Hub?

- “A business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand.”¹
- Food distribution hubs help small and medium-sized farms sell their products at fair prices to markets they might otherwise not be able to access.
- Aggregating from multiple farms facilitates consumer access to local food, supporting regional economies and food systems.
- US food hubs reported \$31.8 M in purchases from approximately 2,861 farms and ranches in 2018.²
- There are an estimated 16 food distribution hubs in California.³ California food hubs reported average sales of over \$1.2 M and purchased from an average of 38 suppliers in 2017.⁴

The RUSD Food Hub

- Building on a successful farm-to-school program, the Riverside Unified School District (RUSD) established the first school-based food distribution hub in 2017.
- Primary goal: to increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables for...
 - The 70% of RUSD students who are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals⁵ and who have high rates of food insecurity and obesity and overweight.
 - Local small school districts, child care centers, a hospital and restaurants.
- The hub provides market access for small, local and minority-owned farms.

RUSD Food Hub Evaluation

UC Nutrition Policy Institute performed an evaluation of the RUSD Food Hub and collected the quotes in this brief.⁶

The RUSD hub improves access to local food

“We... met with a couple of farmers. It seemed like it was going to be a lot of footwork ... This [the food hub] is so much easier. So much easier. This is wonderful.” (*School Nutrition Services staff*)

“The product is excellent, with good excellent customer service, but it's mainly getting the local food. We live in this beautiful Coachella Valley that's full of growers and beautiful food grown and I can't access it. [The other farmers] ship everything out ... It was, 'We ship it to L.A., where it's distributed.' Which is insane.” (*Child care provider*)

“I want to give my customers what they want and what they're asking for. They want to be healthier ... [and] more fresh food. They want to eat local ... but ... I don't know how to find a farmer. The great thing about the program is that you have someone who has relationships with everybody for you.” (*Hospital food services director*)



The RUSD hub improves food freshness & quality

“We're in the business of making food that tastes good.... The quality of food from local farms is so much higher ... As a customer, if the food's good you're more likely to come back. This was a no-brainer in that regard.” (*Restaurateur*)

“We've had customers say these are the best tomatoes we've had ... They'll say, 'Where did you get these?'" (*Restaurateur*)



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The RUSD hub improves access to a greater variety of produce

“A lot of these kids never knew what any of that was [e.g., yams, persimmons, Persian cucumbers]. Even some of my staff didn't know what it was.... Our kids love persimmons. They go, ‘I want some more of those little pumpkins.’” (*School cafeteria manager*)

“We wanted to try new and different things, especially for our kids to try and to have that kind of knowledge of nutrition and things like that, especially at an early age. When Riverside Unified came in, I mean, that was really eye-opening for us.” (*Child care provider*)

“They never had any of that [before], and they are starting to eat a lot more.... A couple of parents have said, ‘They’ve tried this. They’ve never had that before. They really like it. Now I’m going to get it for them.’” (*Child care provider*)



The RUSD hub supports expanded market opportunities and fair prices for local growers

“The hub has provided a market for small growers and has really supported local. Because when [the hub] gets an order from a childcare center or a hospital, the first thing they do is call local growers to see if they can fill it, and if not, then they fill it through some other method.” (*Grower*)

“Consistency and price are two big factors. [Working with the hub] is like Christmas. They take care of you. A lot of [buyers] say ‘I need this’ but sometimes they won’t show up and leave you holding the bag. Or they do show up and they try to beat you up on price. It’s like ‘take it or leave it.’ The hub is very professional. We just appreciate [the hub’s] approach versus the kind of thing we deal with all the time.” (*Grower*)

Additional benefits of the RUSD Food Hub

- The hub takes advantage of available RUSD Nutrition Services Department resources – storage, refrigeration, transportation, preparation spaces and tools, expertise, and established relations with local growers.
 - The innovative “joint use” of school facilities has significantly reduced costs for the hub, contributing to its financial viability and allowing it to scale up without the need for high overhead costs or capital expenditures.
- The hub has purchased over \$700,000 of produce from 16 local growers, and an additional \$300,000 from a local distributor procuring California-grown produce, with nearly \$900,000 in sales to 15 local institutions, as of April 2021.
- The hub pivoted during COVID, purchasing over \$500,000 of local produce to distribute to local residents through USDA farm boxes, while providing RUSD with much needed revenue.
- The hub reduces environmental impacts from produce transport by purchasing and distributing produce locally.

References

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- ³ Personal communication, Gwenael Engelskirchen, California Food Hub Network, April 9, 2018.
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- ⁶ Strohlich R, Hecht K, Feenstra G, Ritchie LD. Evaluation Findings: Riverside Unified School District Food Distribution Hub. Nutrition Policy Institute. University of California, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program. Riverside Unified School District. Riverside University Health System. Riverside Food Hub. October 2019. <https://ucanr.edu/sites/NewNutritionPolicyInstitute/files/311995.pdf>

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