

Groundbreakers



Northeast Buying Co-op *Northeast AR*

FROM 4 NUTRITION DIRECTORS TO 28 SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Ten years ago, four Child Nutrition Directors came together to create the Northeast Buying Cooperative. Today, the tightly-knit, four-district cooperative in northeastern Arkansas has grown to include 28 school districts feeding 34,000 children. Their story is one of starting small, and growing steadily over time.

Those initial four Child Nutrition Directors (CNDs) reached out to other CNDs they knew in neighboring districts. The intent was to grow the cooperative, and see if joining forces would give surrounding districts more purchasing power. Despite some early hesitancy, the cooperative grew as CNDs saw what it could accomplish for their students, and in some cases, their bottom line.

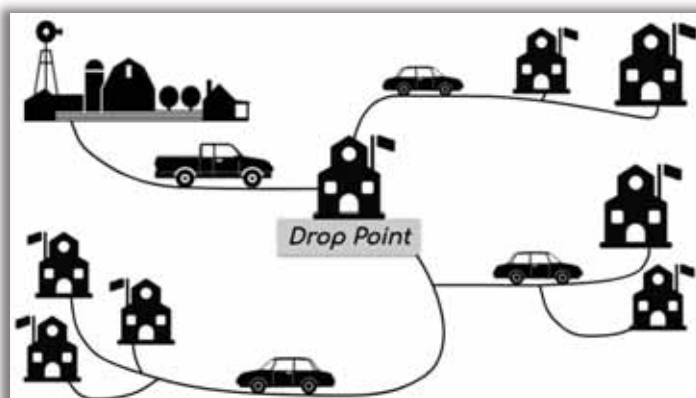
“We decided we were going to pool our resources together to purchase higher quality products at a better price for our kids.”

As the cooperative grew, so did interest in buying locally. This journey began with a farm tour at Berries by Bill in Newport, AR,

where the four CNDs met farmer Bill Landreth, who grows strawberries, sweet corn, watermelon, and cantaloupe. Bill walked them through the fields, and his harvesting process. Inspired, the group discussed Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) food safety certification, pricing,

and how each party's needs might be accommodated. Dolores Sutterfield, a founding member of the cooperative and CND for Harrisburg School District says of those early days, “we decided we were going to pool our resources together to purchase higher quality products at a better price for our kids.”

One key component of the buying cooperative's success is the central drop point. Each district orders directly from the farm, but delivery is made to one central location. From there, individual districts are responsible for getting the produce to their schools. Sometimes, this is a coordinated effort, with districts taking turns picking up and distributing within their region. Using drop points increases efficiency for the farmer and allows the schools to pool their purchases of locally-grown products. In turn, this results in an affordable cost for all. >>



▲ *One key component of the buying cooperative's success is the central drop point, which increases efficiency for both farmers and schools.*

CONTINUING THE COOPERATIVE

>> One might think local produce straight from the field is more work than what comes from major distributors, but the kitchen managers emphasize that once they figured out a technique—in the case of the lettuce, a salad spinner—any extra time it took was well worth the quality of the produce. Additionally, they make efforts to tell their students where the food came from, and because the produce is of a higher quality, the young learners eat more of it. ✂ What good is commercial produce if it stays on the plate? As Sutterfield put it, “if anyone tries any of the local produce, I don’t think they’ll go back.”

✂ When dealing with local produce, the weather has a stronger effect. Ongoing communication is essential, and as Sutterfield says, “for something that local, you have to be able to give and take.” She finds it easy to supplement with their

mainstream distributor, but gives preference to local food first in order to fulfill United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) produce requirements. The purchasing group says they could always use more farmers!

Currently, the cooperative meets about every two to three months, and is looking into local protein options. The CNDs highlight that their relationship is not just about purchasing, rather, its highest function is the camaraderie they experience from sharing new ideas, problem-solving together, and networking. Sutterfield proclaims, “our group is remarkable: how we network and help each other.” ✂



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▲ *The purchase of a salad spinner made it easier for kitchen managers to wash fresh mixed leaf lettuce.*

Key Steps to Start a Cooperative

- **Network:** Contact CNDs/farmers in your area and see if a buying cooperative could work in your community. Reach out at markets; call the district.
- **Start Small:** Begin with one farmer, school, and item.
- **Know the Details:** Know the number and quantity of product desired and available. Keep in mind quantities are different than with a mainline distributor.
- **Attend Trainings:** Farm to school conferences provide information and build relationships! Locate events and other resources by visiting the Arkansas Farm to School webpage at www.arkansasfarmtoschool.org.

Many thanks go to: **Sheila Gresham**, elementary school kitchen manager for Harrisburg School District; **Bill Landreth**, owner and operator of Berries by Bill in Newport; **Dawn Ragsdale**, food services department director for Nettleton School District, chair of Northeast Buying Cooperative; **Susan Smith**, high school kitchen manager for Harrisburg School District; and **Dolores Sutterfield**, Child Nutrition Director for Harrisburg School District.

