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February 28, 2024

### **IFPA Meetings Connect K-12 School Menu Planners with Growers, Processors**

*Newark, De and Washington, DC* – Last week, the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA) coordinated a series of “speed dating” meetings to connect produce companies with menu planners and procurement officials from several major-city U.S. school districts. With 11 school districts participating, and just as many produce companies, IFPA helped to facilitate more than 120 meetings as part of the two-day event.

The program, also referred to as a School Foodservice Partner X-Change, connects buyers and sellers for 15-minute “speed dating” meetings, all coordinated virtually over Zoom. School administrators get to ask questions and share information about a range of topics including menu planning, procurement, packaging needs, and their interest in nutrition education and other materials that provide greater insight into where and how certain produce is grown. Produce suppliers share their knowledge of the industry, while also highlighting their company’s capabilities and products, including bulk produce, fresh cut items, ordering processes and more.

“This program brings together audiences that often do not speak with each other, bridging the gap to better understand school foodservice needs and interests,” said Andrew Marshall, IFPA’s staff liaison for wholesaler-distributor members, and lead staffer on engagement opportunities with the K-12 school nutrition community. “Increasing the variety of fresh produce that students are exposed to at school is a shared priority, and this ‘speed dating’ program is helping to jump-start these types of conversations, new ideas and new partnerships.”

In addition to traditional grower-shippers and fresh-cut processors, this year’s program included companies that provide schools with small-scale kitchen equipment for peeling and processing fruits and vegetables in-house, as well as a company that’s working with schools to provide vertical hydroponic growing towers with an accompanying nutrition education curriculum.

“We appreciated that many of the produce companies we spoke with were familiar with school meal pattern requirements and either had products that were individually packaged according to these specifications or could speak with knowledge about ½ cup and other required portion sizes,” said **Leiling Hwang, RD, Director of Child Nutrition for the Long Beach Unified School District** in southern California, and one of the

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largest school districts in state. "Having these brief meetings was much more informative, and inspirational, than just reading a flyer about available products, and we look forward to following up for additional conversations."

To build upon this mid-year virtual program, IFPA is once again planning to coordinate a [K-12 School Forum](#) programming track at the [Foodservice Conference](#), July 25-26 in Monterey, CA. This summer program is focused on supporting school menu planners to source, serve, and promote fresh fruits and vegetables to children at school. School foodservice leaders from across the country will participate in IFPA's conference sessions, explore new products at the expo, tour nearby growing fields, and connect with existing and new suppliers.

For additional information about the K-12 School Foodservice Partner X-Change, and other programs and resources for school foodservice operators, contact [Andrew Marshall](#), Wholesaler-Distributor Relations and External Partnerships at (202) 303-3407.

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**Other statements of support:**

"As a company that services a range of foodservice customers, we value these meetings as an opportunity for interaction with school menu planners, many of whom are looking for new, on-trend slaws and veggie blends that mimic what their students see at local quick-serve and other restaurant formats," said **Crystal Chavez, marketing manager for Gold Coast Packing**. "Sharing about our produce, where it's grown, the importance of packaging technology to achieve maximum freshness, and then learning about how the schools plan their menus and prepare meals, we know we can be a solution for them."

"Kids are next generation consumers, but they're also today's consumer. And with schools serving such a large number of students on a consistent basis, we want to ensure they know about our great tasting mandarins, and then also tell their parents to look for Halos the next time they're at the supermarket," said **Nancy Johnston, Senior Director of Foodservice Sales at Wonderful Citrus**. "Working with the K-12 sector isn't always easy, but it's a market we can't afford to ignore."

"The produce speed dating event was a 'garden' of inspiration! I was able to meet with many different vendors to explore new ideas for our Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, as well as for our school breakfast and lunch programs," said **Kristen Homer, Assistant Supervisor of School Nutrition at the West Ada**

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**School District** in Idaho. "I left with new items that our district would like to try as well as many new contacts and resources. Thank you for providing such a 'fruitful' experience!"

**Background:**

Every day, 31 million children participate in the National School Lunch Program. Schools are required to offer a fruit and a vegetable, and students must exit their lunch line with at least one serving of produce on their plate. In addition to lunch, many schools also offer breakfast and an after-school supper program, both of which must adhere to nutrition standards that require offering fruits and vegetables. Additionally, more than 7,000 elementary schools across the country offer in-class fresh fruit and vegetable snacks, as part of the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP).

**Participating Schools and Produce Suppliers:**

**School District Participants**

1. Baltimore City Public Schools (MD)
2. Boston Public Schools (MA)
3. Clark County Public Schools (NV)
4. Cleveland Metro Schools (OH)
5. East Baton Rouge Parish Schools (LA)
6. Fairfax County Public Schools (VA)
7. Florida POWER Buying Group (FL)
8. Jackson Public Schools (MS)
9. Long Beach Unified School District (CA)
10. St. Louis Public Schools (MO)
11. West Ada School District (ID)

**Produce Company Participants**

1. DNO Produce
2. Dark Side Equipment
3. Fork Farms
4. Gold Coast Packing
5. Grimmway Farms
6. HMC Farms
7. Nature's Reward
8. North Carolina Sweetpotato Commission

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9. Okanagan Specialty Fruits / Arctic Apples
10. Produce Alliance – Cool School Fresh
11. Taylor Farms
12. Wonderful Citrus

**About the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA)**

*The International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA) is the largest and most diverse international association serving the entire fresh produce and floral supply chain and the only to seamlessly integrate world-facing advocacy and industry-facing support. We exist to bring the industry together to create a vibrant future for all. We grow our member's prosperity by conducting advocacy; connecting people and ideas; and offering guidance that allows us all to take action with purpose and confidence.*