

Farm-to-School Opportunities in Michigan: What do Food Service Directors Say?

Executive Summary

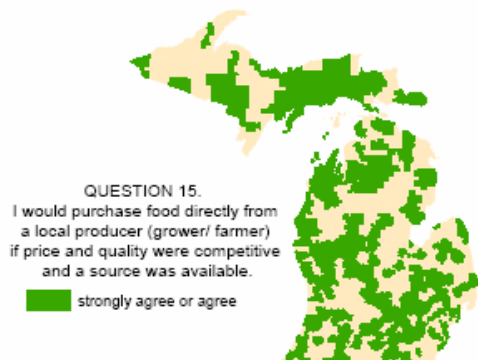
In the spring of 2004 we conducted a survey of Michigan K-12 School Food Service Directors (FSDs). Our goal was to identify interest, opportunities and barriers to FSDs incorporating Michigan-grown foods into their school lunch programs. This builds on activities across the country, especially in the last ten years to connect schools with local and regional agriculture. While each program is unique, all involve mutually beneficial relationships between farms and schools.

In Michigan and across the country, farmers are a declining population and farmland is steadily being removed from production. Farm-to-school programs offer access to additional markets, giving farmers a new and reliable group of customers. With statewide total school food expenditures of over \$200 million per year this is potentially a huge market for Michigan farmers. These can be done through incorporation in the school lunch program, special events, school fund raisers, catering activities and more.

Food service directors play a critical role in the nutrition of our youth and work tirelessly to insure a healthy diet for our children. Through Michigan sourcing they are able to provide high quality fruits and vegetables as well as possibly, meats, eggs and dairy products. These can be purchased directly from farmers, through farmer cooperatives and alliances, and potentially through existing distributors. It is not possible to consider adding Michigan foods to every school meal program throughout the year.

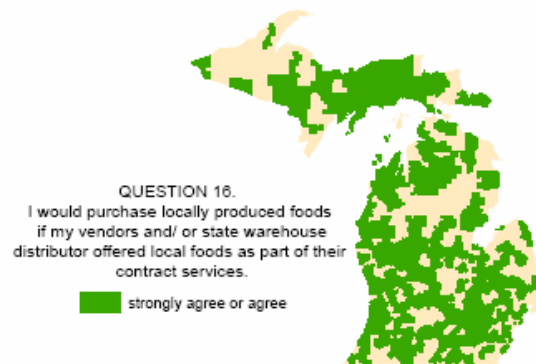
Advocates for food security, health and agriculture across the country have recognized farm-to-school programs as an important opportunity to help farmers remain economically viable while at the same time, addressing national concerns about such things as childhood obesity.

This survey consisted of twenty-four items which assessed (1) purchasing practices, (2) local sourcing, (3) interest in local sourcing, as well as (4) motivation, concerns and barriers to local sourcing. Surveys were mailed to 664 food service directors across Michigan with 383 responding (58% response rate).



Across the state FSDs reported a high degree of interest in sourcing from a local producer (figure 1) with 73% of those responding being positively disposed. If local foods were available from their vendors the percent responding positively increased to 85% of respondents (figure 2). In fact, 10% of FSDs responding indicated that they had purchased something from local farmers already.

While FSDs reported a broad range of interest items for purchases including fruits, vegetables and animal products only a small percentage felt that they would be willing to pay a premium for these products. 11% felt they could pay more with 40% neutral and 46% feeling they could not pay more.



The K-12 food service directors in Michigan appear ready and willing to make linkages to Michigan agriculture. They report a broad range of motivations for their interest, chief among them being: support for the local economy and local community, access to fresher food, higher quality food, good public relations, ability to purchase small quantities and higher consumption of fruits and vegetables. While there is interest and passion broadly distributed across the state there are also identified concerns expressed. Those expressed by more than 40% of FSDs are:

- Cost
- Reliable supply
- Seasonality of fruits and vegetables
- Food safety
- Delivery considerations
- Quality
- Ordering and payment
- Volume

There were also a number of barriers, which could be both perceived and real, expressed by food service directors in purchasing Michigan agricultural products.

The exact manner in which farm to school initiatives could be implemented in any school or school district are probably not uniform. One school with a number of farms, producing and maybe processing appropriate foods, close by might be able to partner directly with a school or district to supply some foods for special events or monthly "Michigan Foods Lunch Day." Another may find this is not cost effective at this point and needs to purchase through their distributor(s). Another may want to predominantly source through a distributor but have developed relationships with farmers in their communities as they cater special events within the community as a way to highlight the communities' food and agriculture. Whatever the strategy or group of strategies utilized by an individual food service director, it is clear that there is a wealth of interest and desire across the state in this type of program.

The reports authors and others throughout Michigan are working to develop a statewide farm to school initiative that aids local food service directors in implementing a program that meets their needs. For further information please see the contacts below. The full text of this report will be available (at <http://www.carrs.msu.edu/Main/>) in .pdf by Nov. 15.

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