



# FARM TO SCHOOL IN EARLY CHILDCARE IN MICHIGAN: EXPLORING OPPORTUNITY FOR LOCAL FOOD ACCESS AND AWARENESS

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In February 2012, researchers from the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems surveyed staff of Michigan early childcare and education programs to explore increasing good food access and awareness through Farm to School initiatives. An electronic survey was emailed to 233 individuals through the Michigan Office of Great Start listserv. The survey was also promoted in other venues such as relevant listservs and conferences, but we cannot quantify the intended sample population among their subscribers and participants. The response rate by question varied considerably.

A total of 76 administrators (55%), teachers (25%), food program staff (9%) and other program staff (11%) responded to the survey, though it is possible that some respondents represented the same programs. The majority of respondents represented programs with a traditional nine-month school year (77%), located in rural areas (64%) and/or serving children three to five years of age (64%). Fewer programs were year-round (21%), were located in urban areas (31%) and/or served children from birth through five years of age (36%). (Some programs may represent a number of sites across a city, suburb or rural area.)

Fourteen programs represented by respondents previously had gardens and seven had currently operating school gardens. Of those previously or currently operating a school garden, the individuals most frequently involved in garden maintenance were teachers (81%), volunteers (62%), and students (48%). School gardens were most frequently used for science curriculum (40% of these respondents), for produce for students to take home (40%) and to supplement program meals (30%). The top reasons cited for discontinuation of gardens (n=14) and the top challenges identified in starting a school garden program (n=38), were insufficient funding (43% and 63%, respectively), little to no maintenance during breaks and vacations (43%, 58%), and excessive garden maintenance duties (36%, 42%).

Fifty-three percent of respondents indicated that their program never had a school garden but they would be interested in starting one (n=74). To make school gardening a part of early childcare programs, respondents considered examples of other programs using school gardens (79%), access to tools/resources/curriculum (71%), information on getting started (66%), and school garden policies and procedures (66%) the most necessary information (n=56).

Respondents were also asked about their meals programs. Fifty-four percent of respondents indicated that food service preparation was semi-prepared, followed by heat-and-serve (17%) and scratch cooking (16%) (n=61). About half (49%) of the programs contracted with a school district for their food service but nearly as many (45%) were self-operated (n=65). Of those programs contracting with a school district, the majority (65%) had no responsibility in meal program planning, and in most cases (83%) the school district provided meal preparation support (i.e., food service staff, pre-packaged portions, etc.). Only 6% used a contracted food service management company. The top factors that influenced their selection of food vendors were price (79%), meeting specifications (38%) and food quality (36%).

Nearly all early childcare and education programs served fresh fruits and vegetables (92%), and respondents were most interested in purchasing produce fresh and whole – particularly cucumbers, celery, carrots, strawberries, watermelon, pears and grapes – rather than any processed or frozen vegetables and fruits.



(Apples were inadvertently excluded from the list of possible fruits to purchase.) Half of respondents indicated they had not purchased local foods (those from Michigan) directly from a farmer or producer in the past year, while one quarter each indicated that they had purchased local foods or that they did not know (n=56). When asked if they had purchased local foods through a distributor (n=55), 22% indicated that they had, 44% had not, and 35% did not know.

The majority (68%) of respondents indicated that their program was not involved in Farm to School in the 2010-2011 school year (n=60), but 29 of 42 respondents (69%) were interested in connecting their pre-K program with a local farmer. Supporting the local economy and community (81%), accessing fresher food (73%), and facilitating student knowledge of food origins and food systems (38%) were the top three reasons for serving locally-grown or -processed food in early childcare programs (n=48). The top challenges for engaging in or maintaining a Farm to School program (n= 59) were insufficient funding (36%), lack of coordination (22%) and lack of support from governing organizations like school districts and Community Action Agencies (14%). The top four concerns, barriers and motivators of Farm to School in early childcare and education programs are shown in the table below.

### TOP RESPONSES REGARDING LOCAL FOOD PURCHASING (n=38)

Top Concerns	Value*	Top Barriers	Value	Top Motivators	Value
Cost	1.41	Budget	1.18	Interest from parents, students and/or community members	1.30
Food safety	1.45	Convenience	1.39	Assurances of food safety	1.32
Quality	1.56	Lack of facilities for handling	1.47	Financial incentives	1.42
Storage	1.61	Food safety	1.56	Classroom teaching about local food/agriculture	1.42

\*Values are the mean of responses on a 3-point Likert-type scale (1 as the greatest, 2 as some and 3 as least)

Although this data represents a fairly small sample of respondents, it is the first survey of early childcare staff in Michigan and indicates great opportunity for expansion of Farm to School in early childcare and education programs, both in food service sourcing and program-based gardens. Early childcare and education environments may also have greater ability to facilitate student knowledge about food origins/systems through Farm to School programs, as their food programs maybe more intertwined with the greater educational environment than in K-12 schools. Outreach and education efforts tailored to address the concerns and opportunities expressed here can serve as the base for additional exploration and growth in this arena, further contributing to the development of local and regional food systems and young children’s healthy eating habits and awareness of local, healthy foods.

For more information, visit [www.foodsystems.msu.edu](http://www.foodsystems.msu.edu) or contact Colleen Matts, Farm to Institution Specialist, at [matts@msu.edu](mailto:matts@msu.edu) or 517-432-0310. This survey was conducted by Jekeia Murphy.

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