

10 CENTS A MEAL PILOT: 2018–2019 EVALUATION RESULTS



Reflections and Recommendations: Survey Design and Dissemination

First, it must be acknowledged that the high response rate to these monthly evaluation surveys conducted by MSU Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) was only possible thanks to the diligent work of staff members at the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) who regularly reminded school food service directors (FSDs) to complete surveys with follow up emails. Given its role in administering 10 Cents, MDE was in the most effective position to take on the task of encouraging FSDs complete these required surveys. This level of support from MDE would also be required in future years to maintain such a high response rate, but that effort will be more time consuming if the program grows to include more schools/districts.

In reviewing survey responses received across all months of the survey, a number of the evaluation questions could be asked less frequently and still provide solid results but with less duplication. Survey design could be improved for a few sections in particular: school food budgets, promotional and educational activities, and Michigan fruits, vegetables, and legumes purchased and served for the first time.

Food service budgets

As mentioned above, responses to the budget questions asked in the September baseline, the December mid-year, and the May year-end surveys were limited in some cases and unreliable in others, so we could not report them here. They were intended to set a baseline for grantees' school food budgets, including percentages of local food expenditures of their total food budgets, that would allow us to gauge how much 10 Cents helped to increase spending on local foods including and beyond the grant and matching requirement. Participating FSDs indicated that these questions require significant information-gathering and time to complete, as the answers are not needed for other

purposes. We recommend removing or simplifying these questions from future surveys given the undue reporting burden they impose on already busy FSDs.

Promotional and educational activities

We have tracked promotional and educational activities on a monthly basis, but we cannot know if there were duplicate responses of tasting activities among reports of both types of activities. In future years, we recommend revising the design and reducing the frequency of these questions about supporting activities to minimize the tendency for duplicate responses within a single month or over multiple months.

Given that cafeterias fall under the purview of FSDs, it is not surprising that they reported more nutrition education activities in cafeterias than in classrooms, which would likely require a partnership with teachers. As mentioned above, one additional limitation of the question about educational activities is that FSDs may have limited knowledge of these types of activities outside of the cafeteria that support 10 Cents. Therefore, summaries of survey results for questions related to educational activities describe those that FSDs were involved in and/or knew about and should not be considered exhaustive of what happened in the whole school environment.

Michigan-grown foods purchased and served for the first time

The new foods questions asked in each monthly survey pose challenges for long-term tracking. While the question can be reworded in an attempt to be clearer, some level of ambiguity is built into responses as FSDs may have differing degrees of understanding about Michigan agricultural product types versus varieties. Also, natural variation exists in Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables,

and legumes available to FSDs based on their geographical locations, the diversity and scope of agricultural production in their communities, and their current vendors and contract requirements.

The majority of participating FSDs reported that yes, funding through 10 Cents allowed them to try new products that they would not have otherwise tried. Of the 57 FSDs participating in the program, 56 responded to the May survey and 51 responded affirmatively to this question. Only five FSDs responded “No” to this question. As some pointed out in open-ended feedback, some FSDs have more mature farm to school programs, in which they are already purchasing and serving a wide-variety of Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables, and dry beans as they are available to them, when they enter the pilot program. As a result, they did not have many new foods to report throughout the school year. Therefore, it is possible that FSDs experienced in farm to school may have accounted for some of the “No” responses, but we did not look across responses at those patterns.

The number of foods FSDs purchased and served for the first time cannot necessarily be viewed as marker of the pilot’s success, since many FSDs come into 10 Cents with farm to school experience. As the 10 Cents program continues, and if it expands geographically and in the number of grantees over time, the number of new foods could actually go down instead of up as more FSDs gain more experience purchasing and

serving local foods. So, these questions have limited applicability to gauging progress. They would be more useful if evaluated alongside an FSD’s years of experience in farm to school prior to joining the program. As mentioned earlier in this report, data about new foods could be more accurately gathered through comparison of responses to one simpler question, either in the application or in the September baseline survey, about local foods used in previous years with purchasing data input separately from invoice information for that specific year of the program. Although time consuming, this analysis would supply more accurate information for this set of questions. On the other hand, since the value of this question would decline over time, the effort involved in this analysis may not be justified.

