

10 CENTS A MEAL PILOT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF 2018-2019 EVALUATION SURVEY RESULTS

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The response to the coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated how important schools have become as places for children to access good food. Under typical operations, school food service directors (FSDs) know best their students' tastes, preferences, and willingness to try new foods, including Michigan-grown products.

As managers of extremely tight budgets and navigators of layers of requirements for operating child nutrition programs, they cannot afford to continue to serve foods that students will not take or eat. It follows, then, that FSDs participating in the 10 Cents a Meal for School Kids and Farms Pilot (10 Cents) offer the best insights into how the program impacts children, especially in lieu of significant financial and staff capacity needed to conduct research studies of the children served by it.



Responses and feedback FSDs provided to monthly evaluation surveys help tell the story of this innovative and important program and paint a vivid picture of "the ability to which students can access a variety of healthy Michigan-grown foods through schools," one of the legislative reporting requirements.

For the 2018-2019 pilot year, \$493,500 was provided to 57 school/district grantees in five Prosperity Regions, up from \$210,000 for 16 grantees in two Prosperity Regions in the first year of the pilot in 2016-2017. The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) administered the grant program that supports FSDs in purchasing and serving fresh and minimally processed (including frozen) Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables, and legumes.



A core team comprised of the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities, and the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) provided additional support. As the evaluation partner, CRFS administered monthly electronic surveys of participating FSDs to better understand how 10 Cents impacted school meals and children served.

Survey design

Electronic surveys were designed by CRFS in Qualtrics and survey links were disseminated by MDE staff

through email along with regular reminders to FSDs to respond, which led to high response rates across all surveys. Each monthly survey asked participating FSDs to report Michigan-grown foods served for the first time; promotional and educational activities implemented to support 10 Cents; adult community members engaged in these activities; and open responses for positive and negative impacts of participating.

Special surveys conducted at the start of the year, mid-year, and year-end also included some additional questions. The September baseline survey asked about food service budgets and spending for the previous school year and motivators, barriers, and logistical challenges for sourcing Michigan-grown fruits, vegetable, and legumes. The December mid-year and May year-end surveys included questions about food service budgets and spending for the current school year, impacts and outcomes of participating, and open-ended questions and spaces for feedback about the program and its stakeholders. Responses to the questions about budgets were limited in some cases and unreliable in others, so they are not summarized here or in the full report.

Survey results

10 Cents grant funding available through the state legislature reached fewer than 10% (about 135,000) of the over 1.5 million K-12 school children counted in Michigan in 2018-2019. The percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals in participating schools/districts was five percentage points lower than that of overall students in the state the same year (45.7% compared to 50.74%).

The top three motivators for purchasing and serving local foods selected by participating FSDs were supporting the local economy, increasing student consumption of fruits and vegetables, and helping Michigan farms and businesses. The lack of products available at certain times of year, related to seasonal availability of Michigan agricultural products, has been the most frequently selected barrier and budget constraints the second most frequently selected over all three years of the 10 Cents pilot.

Nearly all FSDs (53 of 55) responded affirmatively that 10 Cents allowed them to try new Michigan-grown foods in school meals they otherwise would not have tried. After many duplicate responses were removed, there were 544 reported instances of FSDs trying a Michigan-grown fruit, vegetable, or legume for the first time throughout the school year.

On average, FSDs reported trying 10 new Michigan-grown foods. The top three Michigan-grown vegetables tried for the first time were salad greens/mix (24), winter squash (23), and asparagus (22), and the top three fruits were apples (28), blueberries (26), and plums (22). FSDs reported trying new Michigan-grown legumes 40 times across all monthly surveys throughout the school year. In future years, questions about new foods could be less frequently asked and/or simplified and compared to invoice tracking of local food purchasing to improve reliability and limit duplicate responses.

Together, FSDs reported a total of 682 instances of conducting promotional activities to support 10 Cents. The months in which FSDs reported these activities seem to have a seasonal pattern similar to that of Michigan agriculture. **Tasting activities were by far the most common type of activity conducted to support 10 Cents, and FSDs consider them to be the most successful.**

They also reported a total of 166 instances of tasting/taste testing activities for educational purposes, but we cannot know if these responses were duplicates of tasting activities for promotional purposes. In total, FSDs reported conducting fewer educational activities (461) than promotional activities (682) throughout the year.

For the third year in a row, FSDs most frequently selected “The variety of produce served in school meals has increased” as an outcome of participating in 10 Cents. FSDs agreed most strongly with the impact statements that they offered both more local fruits and more local vegetables in their school meals due to 10 Cents in the 2018-2019 year.

FSDs provided generally positive feedback about the influence of 10 Cents on farms and food suppliers, but reactions from school food service staff were more mixed to purchasing and serving local foods through 10 Cents, primarily due to the extra work they seem to require.

Additional open-ended feedback indicated enthusiasm for the program and the variety and quality of Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables, and legumes served through it; perceived positive impacts on students and farmers, and a desire for 10 Cents to continue and be expanded.

FSDs also commented on challenges associated with and ways to improve the program in general, and more specifically about the monthly evaluation surveys, claims, and tracking of purchases that are required to participate.

Future directions

In future years, a number of the evaluation questions could be asked less frequently and still provide reliable results with less duplication. **Survey design could be improved for a few sections in particular: food budgets, promotional and educational activities, and Michigan fruits, vegetables, and legumes purchased and served for the first time.**

Program design recommendations include additional funding to help grantees conduct promotional and education activities, simplifying tracking of local food purchases made through the program, helping FSDs share and connect with each other around local food vendors and suppliers, and intentionally applying a racial and health equity lens to the application and selection process at the start of each program year.

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For more information about 10 Cents a Meal, visit tencentsmichigan.org. For more information about farm to institution in Michigan, visit foodsystems.msu.edu or contact Colleen Matts, Farm to Institution Specialist, at matts@msu.edu.

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