

# LOCAL FOOD FOR LITTLE EATERS

*A Purchasing Toolbox for  
the Child & Adult Care Food Program*



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the Child & Adult Care  
Food Program

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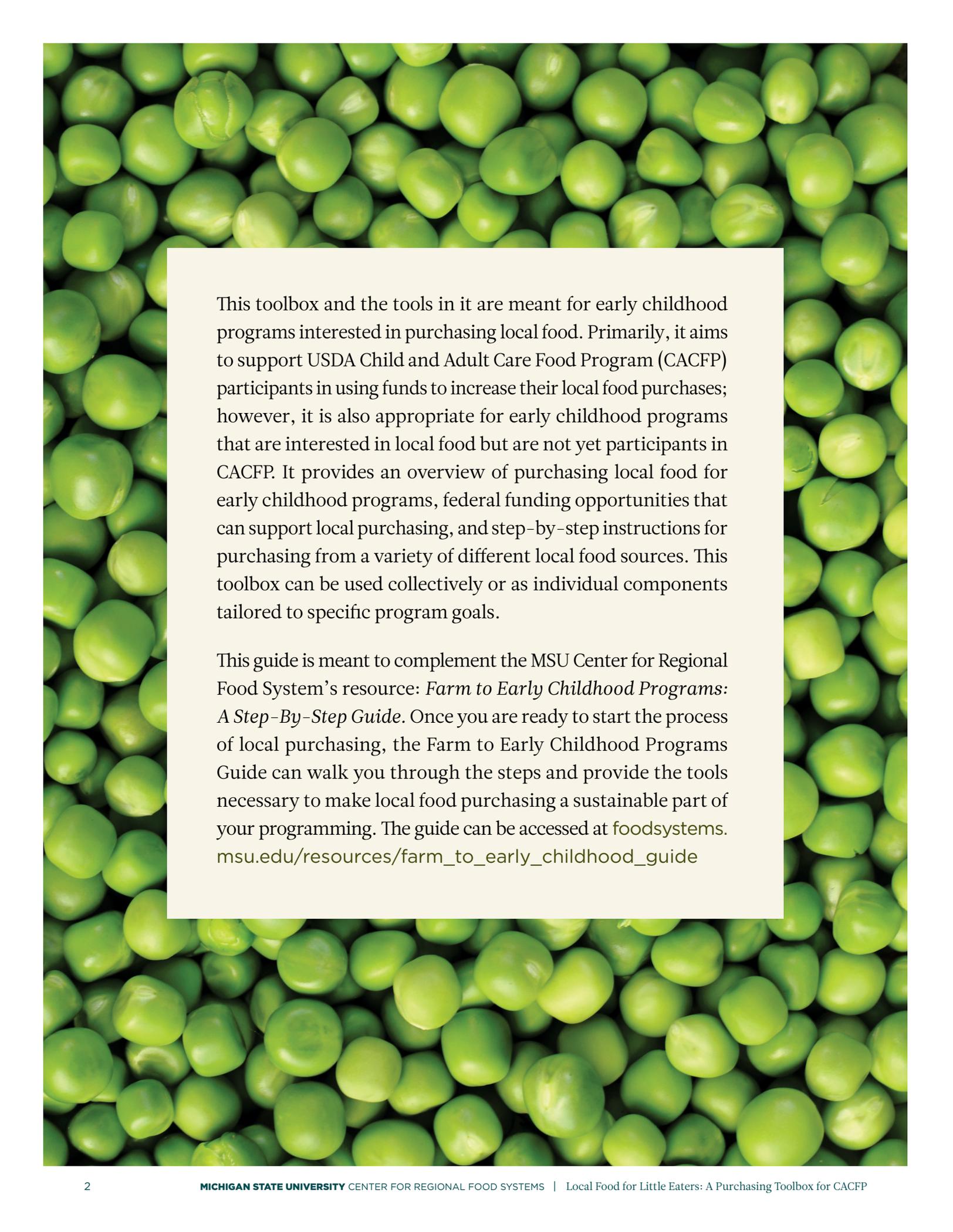
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This toolbox and the tools in it are meant for early childhood programs interested in purchasing local food. Primarily, it aims to support USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) participants in using funds to increase their local food purchases; however, it is also appropriate for early childhood programs that are interested in local food but are not yet participants in CACFP. It provides an overview of purchasing local food for early childhood programs, federal funding opportunities that can support local purchasing, and step-by-step instructions for purchasing from a variety of different local food sources. This toolbox can be used collectively or as individual components tailored to specific program goals.

This guide is meant to complement the MSU Center for Regional Food System's resource: *Farm to Early Childhood Programs: A Step-By-Step Guide*. Once you are ready to start the process of local purchasing, the Farm to Early Childhood Programs Guide can walk you through the steps and provide the tools necessary to make local food purchasing a sustainable part of your programming. The guide can be accessed at [foodsystems.msu.edu/resources/farm\\_to\\_early\\_childhood\\_guide](https://foodsystems.msu.edu/resources/farm_to_early_childhood_guide)

# Overview of Farm to Early Care and Education

Local food purchasing is one component of farm to early care and education (ECE), which also includes on-site gardens and food, nutrition, and agriculture education. In addition to supporting the development of children's healthy eating habits, local food purchasing keeps dollars local, supports local farmers, and strengthens connections between early childhood programs and communities. Access to local, healthy food coupled with education can help children build healthy eating habits and form the foundation for a healthy life.

Farm to ECE can also be a starting point for increasing families' access to local foods. Engaging families in farm to ECE efforts can educate parents and families about local food sources and connect them with farmers and other local vendors.

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## BENEFITS OF FARM TO ECE<sup>1</sup>

- Improve early childhood eating behaviors
- Increase knowledge and awareness about gardening, agriculture, healthy eating, local foods, and seasonality
- Increase children's willingness to try new foods and healthier options
- Increase revenue for local farmers
- Build positive community relationships
- Influence family interest in local food and healthy eating

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## WHAT DOES LOCAL FOOD MEAN?

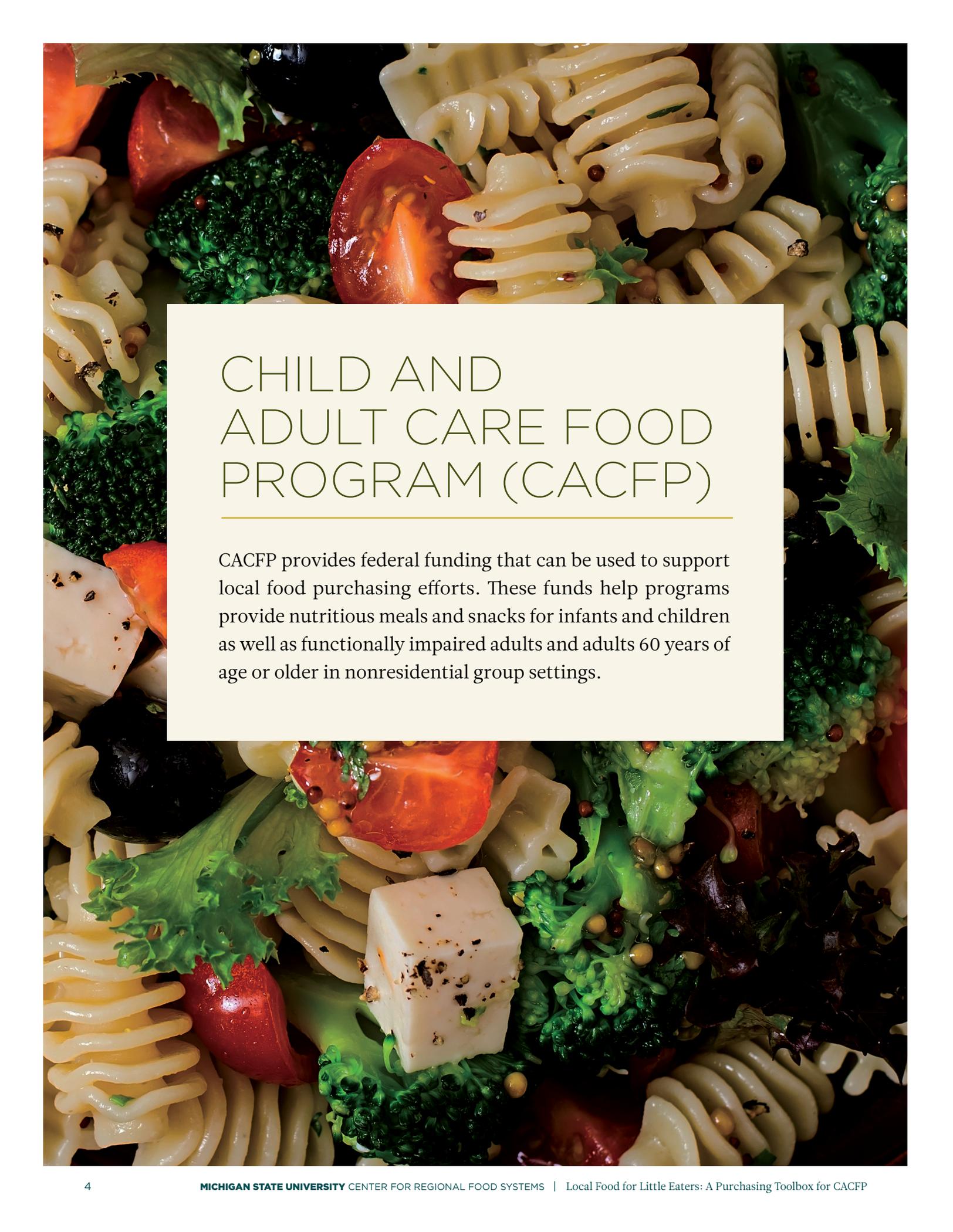
There is no universal definition of local food. Local could apply to a city or town, a county, a state, or a larger region. When thinking about purchasing local food, make sure you have defined for yourself what local food is. Make sure you communicate your definition and goals to any food vendors you work with so the vendors can help you achieve those goals.

Local purchasing from a variety of sources is allowable under federal procurement guidelines. Potential local food sources include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Broadline and specialty distributors
- Food hubs
- Direct from farmers or farmer cooperatives
- Farmers markets or farm stands
- Grocery stores
- On-site gardens

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<sup>1</sup> National Farm to School Network. (2017). Benefits of Farm to School. [farmtoschool.org/Resources/BenefitsFactSheet.pdf](http://farmtoschool.org/Resources/BenefitsFactSheet.pdf)



## CHILD AND ADULT CARE FOOD PROGRAM (CACFP)

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CACFP provides federal funding that can be used to support local food purchasing efforts. These funds help programs provide nutritious meals and snacks for infants and children as well as functionally impaired adults and adults 60 years of age or older in nonresidential group settings.

# Capitalizing on the CACFP to Support Local Food Purchasing



Incorporating local foods into CACFP meals and snacks is seen as an effective strategy for improving the health and nutrition of program participants. Providers can be reimbursed for up to three eating experiences for each enrolled child or adult—either two meals and one snack or one meal and two snacks.

Studies have shown that children receiving CACFP meals are in better health and are more likely to have a healthy weight and height than those who do not receive CACFP meals.<sup>2</sup> Participation in CACFP has also been shown to increase consumption of milk and vegetables.<sup>3</sup> CACFP funds can be a tool to support local food purchasing efforts, and participating in CACFP provides access to training opportunities for providers through state CACFP offices.

CACFP reimburses childcare program providers based on paid, reduced-price, and free meal program eligibility. These designations are based on income eligibility of families with participating children. A childcare program may receive different reimbursement rates for different children in its program. Head Start and similar programs, however, receive free meal reimbursement for all of the children they serve based on program eligibility.

## Reimbursement Rates for Centers (2016–2017)<sup>4</sup>

	Breakfast	Lunch/Supper	Snacks
Paid	\$0.29	\$0.30	\$0.07
Reduced-price	\$1.41	\$2.76	\$0.43
Free	\$1.71	\$3.16	\$0.86

Day care homes are reimbursed in two tiers. Day care homes qualify for Tier I reimbursement rates if they are located in a geographic area categorized as low income based on local school or census data. A day care home may also qualify based on provider household income. A provider that does not qualify for Tier I qualifies for Tier II.

## Reimbursement Rates for Day Care Homes (2016–2017)<sup>4</sup>

	Breakfast	Lunch/Supper	Snacks
Tier I	\$1.31	\$2.46	\$0.73
Tier II	\$0.48	\$1.49	\$0.20

To learn more and apply for CACFP, visit the USDA directory of CACFP contacts:  
[fns.usda.gov/cacfp/cacfp-contacts](https://fns.usda.gov/cacfp/cacfp-contacts)

2 Binder, C., Berg, J., Adamu, M., Hamm, K. (2015). How the Child and Adult Care Food Program improves early childhood education. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from [cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CACFP-report-6.10.pdf](https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CACFP-report-6.10.pdf)

3 Korenman, S., Abner, K. S., Kaestner, R., & Gordon, R. A. (2014). The Child and Adult Care Food Program and the nutrition of preschoolers. Retrieved from [ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23687405](https://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23687405)

4 United States Department of Agriculture. (2016). Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Reimbursement Rates. [fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/cacfp/cacfp\\_rates2016-17.pdf](https://fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/cacfp/cacfp_rates2016-17.pdf)

# Meeting CACFP Meal Patterns and Best Practices with Local Food Purchasing

Local food purchasing initiatives can be a tool for meeting CACFP meal pattern requirements. The CACFP meal pattern, which was updated in 2016, sets standards for meals served by programs that receive funding. Many of these standards support increased fruit and vegetable consumption, and meeting these standards can be aided by purchasing local food.

The new CACFP meal pattern standards include several best practices related to fruits and vegetables that could be met through local purchasing. Although only one best practice explicitly mentions local food, others can be more easily met by participation in farm to ECE and the increased purchase and use of local foods.

## CACFP Best Practices Related to Local Food Purchasing

<p>Incorporate seasonal and locally produced foods into meals.</p>	<p>The USDA understands that the incorporation of local food into CACFP can play an important role in creating a healthy environment. Because of this, purchasing local foods is a best practice in the CACFP meal patterns; it is seen as a strategy to better meet CACFP standards and improve program quality.</p>
<p>Make at least one of the two required components of snacks a vegetable or fruit.</p>	<p>This best practice emphasizes increasing the number of eating experiences in a day in which children are exposed to fruits and vegetables. Local food purchasing provides access to fresher and more varied fruits and vegetables that can help providers increase the amount of fruits and vegetables they serve.</p>
<p>Serve a variety of fruits and choose whole fruits more often than juice.</p>	<p>Purchasing locally can increase access to a wider variety of fruits. Focusing on whole fruits may allow opportunities to work with more local producers that may not have processing capabilities.</p>
<p>Provide at least one serving each of dark green vegetables, red and orange vegetables, beans and peas, starchy vegetables, and other vegetables once per week.</p>	<p>Purchasing local food can increase access to a wider variety of vegetables of different colors. ECE program staff can work directly with local growers to plant different varieties or colors of common produce, such as purple cauliflower, yellow carrots, or a wider variety of dark leafy greens.</p>

# Supporting Culturally Relevant Programming Through Local Food Purchasing

## Exploring Traditional Foods

**Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties (CAPRW) Head Start Program** in St. Paul, MN, has developed a strong partnership with the Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA) in Minnesota. This program has a large Hmong population as well, and has set a quality standard to provide culturally relevant meals. Working with HAFA has helped CAPRW Head Start meet this standard by sourcing more vegetables and using recipes that are common in Hmong cuisine and building more learning opportunities around these culturally relevant foods.

**Colusa Indian Child Care** in Colusa, CA, is a Native American childcare center that works with local tribal farms to source rice, honey, and nuts. These relationships build deeper connections with the center's Native community.

**Norris Square Community (NSCA) Alliance Head Start** in Philadelphia, PA, places a heavy emphasis on promoting cultural diversity by exposing children to new, culturally relevant foods. The Alliance uses local foods and brings in local college students to teach lessons on foods from different cultures and involve the children in the preparation of small meals with local foods.

Purchasing local food can be a great tool for increasing access to culturally relevant foods in early childhood programs. Working with local food sources can lead to a greater variety of products available to serve in early childhood meal programs. Program staff who work directly with farmers or purchase from farmers markets often have greater access to a wider variety of foods. Program staff can work with vendors to create demand for culturally relevant products to which they may not have had access otherwise.

Other farm to ECE initiatives, such as school gardens and education in the classroom, can also support culturally relevant programming. Gardens can be a space for growing unique vegetables that are traditional foods for children in the early childhood program. Likewise, local foods can provide a platform for education around exploring traditional foods from different communities and cultures.

These resources provide additional information on supporting culturally relevant meals::

- *Serving Up Tradition: A Guide for School Food in Culturally Diverse Communities*

Massachusetts Farm to School

[massfarmtoschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ServingUpTradition.pdf](http://massfarmtoschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ServingUpTradition.pdf)

- *Child Nutrition Programs and Traditional Foods*

USDA Food and Nutrition Service

[fns.usda.gov/child-nutrition-programs-and-traditional-foods](http://fns.usda.gov/child-nutrition-programs-and-traditional-foods)

# CACFP Local Food Purchasing Procedures

Federal **micro-purchase** threshold \$50,000

Federal **simplified acquisition** threshold \$250,000

**FIGURE 1:** Procurement Method Based on Purchase Thresholds

Is your purchase valued **over** the **\$250,000** federal **simplified acquisition** threshold?

**NO**



Is your purchase valued **under** the **\$50,000** federal **micro-purchase** threshold?

**NO**

You must conduct either an **informal** or **formal** purchase

**YES**



You *must* conduct a **formal** purchase

**YES**

You can conduct a **micro-purchase**



Procurement describes the process by which early childhood programs solicit bids for food. Early childhood programs must understand micro- and simplified acquisition thresholds to determine the proper method for local food purchasing: micro-purchase, informal, or formal procurement. Federal micro- and simplified acquisition thresholds are used throughout this resource. Contact your CACFP administrative body to see if you have a more restrictive state or local threshold than the federal threshold.

Figure 1 shows how to decide which procurement method to use. If a single transaction costs less than \$50,000, you are able to use the micro-purchase method. If a single transaction costs more than \$50,000 but less than \$250,000, you can follow the informal procurement method. If a single transaction costs more than \$250,000, you must follow the formal procurement method.

Program staff are not allowed to artificially divide purchases in order to make them fall under a smaller threshold. A single transaction may refer to the following:

- A single purchase order for an item or items
- The total of all purchases from a single vendor



## Utilizing Micro-Purchases

**The Michigan Apple Crunch** is a one-day event celebrating a signature Michigan food. Program staff can use the micro-purchase method for local apples if the total cost is less than \$50,000 because the Apple Crunch is a one-time event not typically included in the program's planned food purchases.

**A to Z Building Blocks** in American Fork, UT, purchases occasional small quantities of cantaloupe, watermelon, and other fruits from local farm stands based on seasonal availability. Because the centers' purchases are under \$50,000, they are able to use the micro-purchase method.

## Utilizing Informal Procurement

**Baxter Child Development Center (CDC)** in Grand Rapids, MI used the informal procurement method to order local fruits and vegetables from a regional food hub in 2017 (when the federal micro-purchase threshold was lower than \$10,000). The center documented prices for five frequently purchased products and provided prices from the three vendors of its choice, including the food hub. The center also considered the following:

- The vendor's distance from the center and availability to deliver
- The ability to source all of its needed produce
- A stated priority to support small and minority-owned businesses whenever possible

## MICRO-PURCHASING

The micro-purchase threshold makes it easy and straightforward to purchase small quantities of local food under \$50,000. Your program can simply find a vendor and purchase its product without getting competitive price quotes. You should still keep receipts and/or document these micro-purchases.

Micro-purchasing was designed to make it easy to take advantage of discounted products or purchase foods for events that do not fall into a food purchasing plan. For example, a program can use the micro-purchase method to purchase seasonal produce from a farmers market or support a special event. If an early childhood program plans to regularly purchase local food from the same vendor, it should use the informal purchase method.

## INFORMAL PROCUREMENT

For single transactions that fall under the \$250,000 simplified acquisition threshold, early childhood programs must use simple, informal methods to ensure that their vendors' prices are competitive. To use the informal purchasing method, follow these steps:

1. Write specifications for all items. Local is not allowed to be used as a specification; however, programs can include other specifications that are characteristics of local food, such as the following:
  - a. Vendor is able to deliver products.
  - b. Vendor is able to provide location of origin for all products.
  - c. Vendor is available for farm tours.
  - d. Freshness requirements for product.
2. Record the date, vendors, and quotes received for a minimum of three vendors. Quotes can be obtained verbally but need to be documented in writing.
3. Prepare a documentation sheet that indicates the awarded vendor. A sample documentation sheet is provided in Appendix B.

With this method, program staff can choose the vendors from which they get prices. Program staff can compare from only local vendors if they choose and then purchase from the vendor that is cheapest.



### Leveraging Buying Power

**CAPRW Head Start** uses a caterer to provide its meals. When renewing the catering contract, the staff sends out a request for bids that includes information about its farm to Head Start program. The program also states in its request, “Priority will be given to vendors who agree to work with our farm to Head Start initiative.”

**Salt Lake Community Action Program** in Salt Lake City, UT, includes in its procurement policy that the program gives a specific preference to local and fresh products.

## FORMAL PROCUREMENT

Single transactions over the simplified acquisition threshold of \$250,000 must be made following formal procurement. Formal procurement often occurs when programs are seeking broadline distributors or food service management companies that manage larger purchases. Formal procurement requires purchasers to create a public bidding process and choose a vendor based on the lowest cost that meets their needs.

Similar to informal procurement methods, programs cannot use local as a specification when requesting vendors. They can, however, ask that vendors provide information on local products when submitting their bids. Buyers can also include specifications such as delivery, freshness, a wide variety of different products, or availability for education, which are all characteristics of local food.

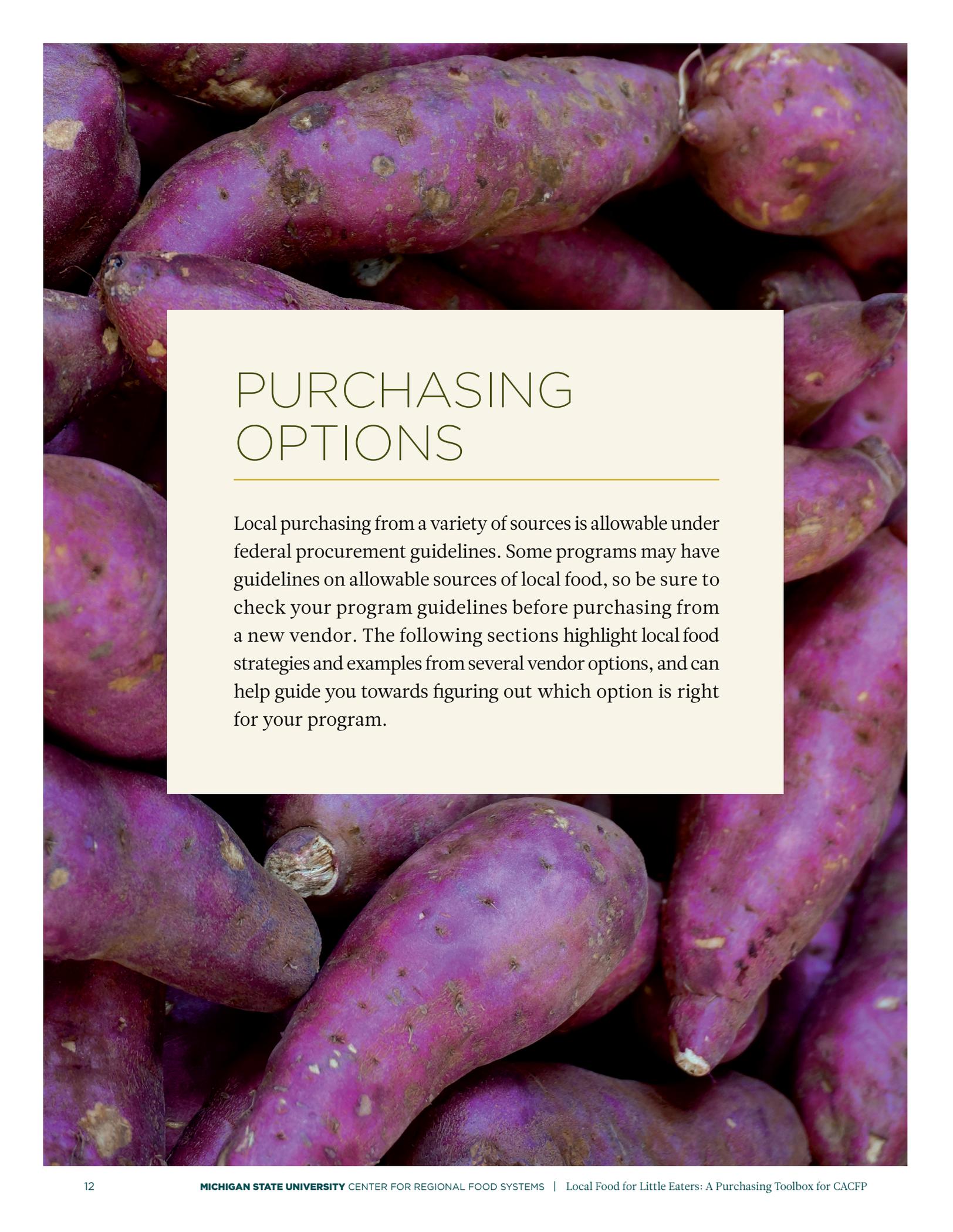
In addition, buyers can give slight preference to vendors that are able to meet their definition of local for unprocessed, locally grown or raised agricultural products. This practice is known as applying geographic preference. Geographic preference can help make local vendors more price competitive: Purchasers assign a small price deduction to the vendors that meet their definition of local, then award the bid to the lowest-cost vendor evaluated based on those new values.

For additional support for applying geographic preference and other local criteria to formal procurement, refer to examples included in the USDA farm to school procurement guide: [fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/f2s/F2S\\_Procuring\\_Local\\_Foods\\_Child\\_Nutrition\\_Prog\\_Guide.pdf](https://fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/f2s/F2S_Procuring_Local_Foods_Child_Nutrition_Prog_Guide.pdf)

A sample Informal Procurement Documentation Sheets<sup>5</sup>

Product	Quantity	Vendor 1 Name		Vendor 2 Name		Vendor 3 Name	
		Unit Price	Total Price	Unit Price	Total Price	Unit Price	Total Price
Product 1							
Product 2							
Product 3							
<i>Total/</i>							
<i>Vendor Selected</i>							
Date and Method of Contact							
Additional Notes							

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from the Michigan Department of Education [michigan.gov/mde](http://michigan.gov/mde)



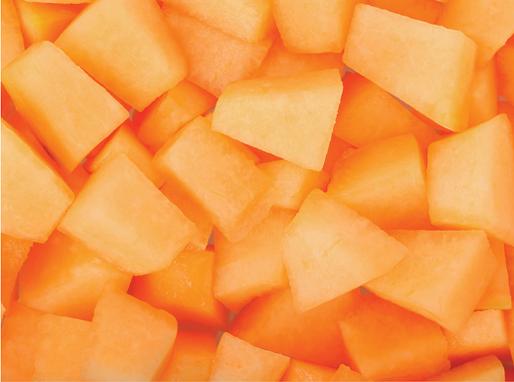
# PURCHASING OPTIONS

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Local purchasing from a variety of sources is allowable under federal procurement guidelines. Some programs may have guidelines on allowable sources of local food, so be sure to check your program guidelines before purchasing from a new vendor. The following sections highlight local food strategies and examples from several vendor options, and can help guide you towards figuring out which option is right for your program.



# Purchasing Local Food From Broadline Distributors



## Broadline Distributor Options

**A to Z Building Blocks** staff selected their broadline distributor using the formal procurement process. The center staff approached their representative to state an interest in purchasing locally grown fruits and vegetables. The distributor now provides a list of local products available, and the center works closely with their representative to find more products available locally.

**Gordon Food Service** in Michigan has a Michigan-grown product line, allowing early childhood providers to see directly what Michigan products are available by season.

Broadline distributors carry a wide range of products, and some early childhood programs work exclusively with broadline distributors to purchase food products. Many broadline distributors are sourcing more local foods and letting customers know about them. Some broadline distributors have local product lines and provide regular updates about new farmers who supply to them.

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## BENEFITS OF PURCHASING LOCAL FOOD FROM A BROADLINE DISTRIBUTOR

- Streamlined process that could fall in line with current purchasing practices
- Consistent and dependable quantities
- Large quantities
- Often, some level of stored products year-round
- Administrative burden limited by working with one vendor

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## STEP 1 FIND A BROADLINE DISTRIBUTOR

If you have already procured your broadline distributor through the formal procurement method, schedule a meeting with your sales representative. Ask them for a description of the company's local purchasing efforts.

If you are looking to establish a relationship with a broadline distributor that has a local food focus, the USDA's guide "Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Programs" ([fns.usda.gov/cfs/procuring-local-foods-child-nutrition-programs](https://fns.usda.gov/cfs/procuring-local-foods-child-nutrition-programs)) has specific information on how to apply geographic preference and local specifications to your broadline distributor procurement.



## Setting Up Systems

**A to Z Building Blocks** staff have a great relationship with their distributor representative, who is aware of the centers' local food purchasing priorities. He makes them aware of new local products as they are available and purchases local when it is available. They meet every six months to go over new lists of local vendors.

**Salt Lake Community Action Program** works with its broadline distributor as one way to access local food. Its sales representative knows the program's interest in local foods and set up an agreement that whenever local versions of a product are available, the distributor provides those products to the early childhood program.

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## STEP 2 LEARN ABOUT PRACTICES

Request a list of available products that are grown locally. If your distributor does not have a list of local food products, express your interest in prioritizing local purchases. If distributors know your priorities and know that your business is dependent on them, they might try to find new local sources to meet your request.

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## STEP 3 COMPARE COSTS

Because broadline distributors are typically competitively selected through informal or formal procurement, you can purchase their products without doing additional cost comparisons. Local products may cost more or less than nonlocal products, so double-check to make sure that each local product fits in your budget.

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## STEP 4 SET UP A SYSTEM

Using the product list available, identify some starting points for local food purchasing. Choose a couple of products that you could easily incorporate into your menu that are regularly available locally. Looking at products you already purchase that have a local alternative is a good place to start!

Set up a regular communication schedule with your representative. Ask him or her:

- How often will you make information available about local products?
- Will you be adding to your list of local products or local vendors?
- How can we ensure that we are using all of the local product options you have available?

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## STEP 5 PURCHASE!

Because broadline distributors are competitively contracted, you do not need to do any additional work to make sure you are following CACFP guidelines. Once you have an agreement set up, you can easily tailor your purchases toward local foods.



# Purchasing Local Food From Food Hubs



## Food Hub Benefits

**Baxter CDC** chose to work with a food hub because the hub had a wide variety of local foods available and was able to deliver directly.

**Archway Academy** in Sumter, SC, tried to work with farmers one-on-one but could not find any who accepted the program's methods and timeline for payments. Working with a food hub made the process as simple as possible to start.

## Finding a Food Hub

The chef at **Baxter CDC** asked vendors at the local farmers market where they sell their farm products. She found out that many sold their products to West Michigan Farmlink, a regional food hub.

**Archway Academy** learned about Grow Food Charleston, a Charleston-based food hub, through the early childhood coordinator at the Department of Agriculture.

**NSCA Head Start** found out about Common Market, a local food hub, through one of its community partners.

Food hubs are businesses that combine products from multiple farms within a geographic range and distribute that product to food purchasers within a specific range. Food hubs are typically local or regional in scope.

## BENEFITS OF PURCHASING FROM A FOOD HUB

- Larger quantities available than through farm-direct procurement
- Diverse availability of products
- Only local products sourced
- Information on farm source can be provided
- Often, some level of stored products is maintained year-round
- Minimally processed or frozen local foods available year-round
- Administrative burden limited by working with one vendor

## STEP 1 FIND A FOOD HUB

Food hubs are regional, so if one is not located near you, there may still be a food hub that delivers to your area.

- Visit a local farmers market and ask farmers where they sell their products.
- Ask community partners who are working in local food which food hubs may sell to you.
- Ask a Cooperative Extension agent which food hubs are available near you.
- Ask your state Department of Agriculture about the food hubs operating in your state.
- Visit the United States Department of Agriculture Food Hub Directory: [ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/foodhubs](https://ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/foodhubs)



A FOOD HUB DELIVERY RECEIVED BY BAXTER CDC IN EARLY JUNE FROM WEST MICHIGAN FARMLINK

### Learning About Your Products

**Sprout Food Hub** in Battle Creek, MI, provides a product list that includes the farm of origin, food safety practices, and other production practices. Programs that purchase through Sprout can know exactly where each product came from and how it was grown.

### Comparing Costs

**Baxter CDC** purchases regularly from the same food hub. The chef compares costs for five different products with other vendors and specifies that the vendors must provide product source information and product delivery, which the food hub does.

### Exploring Solutions

**Common Market** in Philadelphia, PA, requires a minimum order for delivery, which can be a challenge for some smaller centers. The food hub works with new customers to figure out if there are storage solutions or central facilities that allow centers to aggregate purchases.

## STEP 2 LEARN ABOUT PRACTICES

Contact a sales representative at the food hub to better understand the options for purchasing food for your program. You can ask:

- How frequently do you provide updated product lists?
- Which farmers do you purchase from, and do you provide product information on the farm source?
- Do you deliver to my area? Is there a standard day for delivery?
- Do you have a minimum order requirement for delivery?
- How frequently can I place an order?

## STEP 3 COMPARE COSTS

If you are making a one-time purchase from a food hub under \$50,000, you can use the micro-purchasing method and simply purchase from the food hub. If you know you are going to purchase regularly from a food hub, you will need to follow informal or formal procurement methods. For purchases under the simplified acquisition threshold of \$250,000, get quotes from at least three vendors and provide reasons for purchasing from the food hub. You can choose to compare only local vendors.

## STEP 4 SET UP A SYSTEM

Work with the food hub to set up a schedule for communication, ordering, and product delivery. See if the food hub can accommodate your typical delivery schedule. Working with a food hub may require some flexibility to meet their schedule as well, so be sure to outline any agreements ahead of time.

## STEP 5 PURCHASE!

Once you have a routine set, work with your food hub to get information for future years, if they are able to provide it. If there are certain products you are interested in, food hubs may have the option of working with farmers to source new products in larger quantities.

Keep track of your purchases from the food hub. Make sure you receive and file invoices from the food hub for all of your purchases.



# Purchasing Local Food From Farmers and Farmer Cooperatives



## Connecting Kids to Food

**Salt Lake Community Action Program** was interested in working with farmers to build stronger communities and use produce as a start for educational opportunities. Working directly with farmers helps the program educate children about the sources of their food, the environment, and the importance of conserving land.

## In Search of Farmers

**Adventures Learning Centers** in Portage, MI, wrote a letter explaining their program and interest in local purchasing and sent it to farmers found on Local Harvest. They received a response from Arcadia Farms and set up an agreement for purchasing local foods.

The director at **MEGA Child Development Center** in Gilbert, SC, knew of a roadside stand just miles from the center. She approached the farmer, asked what they had available for purchase in larger volume, and began the center's local purchasing efforts there.

Early childhood programs are able to purchase local food directly from farmers. Although some programs purchase from farmers without any formal agreement, others develop long-term relationships and plan ahead for the products they need.

## BENEFITS OF PURCHASING DIRECTLY FROM FARMERS

- Get freshest products and greatest potential variety
- Build community connections
- Observe on-farm practices directly
- Keep dollars in your community
- Access opportunities for education, field trips, and deeper engagement with farmers

## STEP 1 FIND FARMERS

- Visit a local farmers market and talk to vendors directly.
- Ask your local Cooperative Extension office or state Department of Agriculture for connections to farmers in your area.
- Use online sources such as Local Harvest ([localharvest.org](http://localharvest.org)) to find farmers in your area.
- Visit a produce auction and talk to the farmers selling products there.
- Talk to members of your community to learn about where they purchase local foods.



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## STEP 2 LEARN ABOUT PRACTICES

You can create a questionnaire to ask farmers more about their operation. Consider including questions that matter most to you, such as the following:

- What are your production practices?
- Do you have a food safety plan?
- Are you willing to host educational opportunities on the farm or in the classroom?
- Are you willing to sell seconds (produce that does not look perfect) or bulk products at a lower price?
- Do you use season extension production techniques or have products available year-round?
- Do you specialize in certain crops?
- Are you open to growing new products according to our needs?
- Do you provide delivery?

There are no federal requirements for food safety certification/assurance or insurance that a farmer must meet to work with early childhood programs. Contact your CACFP administrative body to find out if your state or program has different rules and requirements.

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## STEP 3 COMPARE COSTS

Bring a list of products you are interested in and get price quotes from farmers. If you are using CACFP funds and purchasing more than once from the same farmer or spending more than \$50,000 at one time, you need to follow the informal procurement process, including obtaining and documenting prices from three vendors. You then must choose the vendor that provides the lowest cost that meets your requirements. You may choose to approach three local farmers to compare costs.



### Finding Custom Solutions

**CAPRW Head Start** works with HAFA, a local farmers organization. HAFA aggregates many small farmers' products so that they can provide larger quantities to CAPRW's caterer.

**Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County, CA**, purchases from local farmers for its Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs. The farmers do not deliver, so the partnership has to schedule staff to pick up products from farmers.

### Documenting Purchases

**MEGA Child Development Center** wanted to work with a farmer that didn't provide receipts. The center created its own simple form that the farmer signs off on at each pickup and uses this form to document purchases for CACFP.

## STEP 4 SET UP AGREEMENTS

Here are some important questions to answer in your agreement:

- How frequently will you communicate, and how—through email, texts, or phone calls?
- Does the farmer offer delivery, and is there a minimum order amount for delivery?
- Is there a particular day of the week when you can pick up or they can drop off?
- What will they do if a product is unavailable or does not meet quality standards? Will they provide a substitute or a refund?
- How do they prefer to be paid, and how frequently? Some farmers may be willing to adapt if they know you will be a reliable long-term customer.

## STEP 5 PURCHASE!

Set up regular schedules for communication. Make sure you and your farmer(s) know the best means of communication and days and times so that you are able to get in touch with each other.

Remember, receipts or invoices are required for your purchases. Some farmers may not provide receipts unless you ask for them. Many states accept handwritten receipts or other forms of purchasing documents, but certain information is required for reimbursement, including:

- Date of purchase
- Name of vendor/farmer
- Cost of the item
- Amount purchased
- Total cost



### Pre-Planning

**CAPRW Head Start** meets with its partnering farmer group in February to plan for the following fall. They decide on menus, products of interest, and timeline, and works with the program's caterers to plan accordingly. This allows the food program to have a more sustainable source in its local purchasing efforts.

### Supporting CSAs

**Southwest Colorado Farm to Preschool** partners are working with providers to set up CSA shares with local farmers. They discussed logistics ahead of time, including the general contents and sizes of the baskets and delivery/pickup. They also facilitated subscriptions, which was helpful for centers in getting started. You can read more about their work at [HCFS.org](https://www.hcfs.org)

## NEXT STEPS PLAN AHEAD!

Once you have an established relationship with a farmer, you can start planning earlier. Long-term planning with farmers can be a great way to reduce prices, get more guaranteed product quantity, and build stronger community connections.

Before the season, plan with your local farm partner what crops you are interested in. This way, the farmer can plan to have the quantity you need and you can have confidence in a reliable supply. Some farmers may offer a discount for agreements set up ahead of time.

Some programs have CSA (community-supported agriculture) relationships set up with farmers. In this arrangement, customers purchase a “farm share” at the beginning of the season and then receive regular boxes of seasonal products as they are available. The farmer chooses what goes in each box, so customers get a variety of seasonal produce.

CSAs can be a good option for smaller programs to sample new foods and bring in educational opportunities. They also allow programs to learn about seasonal availability of farm products. CSAs can provide a framework for exposing children to a diversity of foods for educational activities. Farmers get income up front, which allows them to plan for their season. CSAs do not guarantee a certain amount of food, but it is usually much fresher and higher quality than normal retail produce and often cheaper and more convenient than farmers market produce.



# Purchasing Local Food From Farmers Markets



Farmers markets typically have many different vendors in one location and operate on a weekly basis. Some are open only during peak harvest months; others are open year-round. Farmers markets are a great resource for finding local food products, but some have vendors who do not grow all of the food they sell or source it locally. It is important to ask farmers market vendors where their products come from to make sure you are purchasing locally.

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## BENEFITS OF PURCHASING FROM FARMERS MARKETS

- Access to many different farmers and vendors in one place
- Products available seasonally, which can be useful for learning about seasonality
- Great for small quantities and for farm to ECE taste tests
- Opportunity to meet different farmers, try them out, and explore long-term partnerships before committing to working with one

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## STEP 1 FIND A FARMERS MARKET

- Online search engines such as Local Harvest ([localharvest.org](http://localharvest.org)) provide options for searching farmers markets in your area.
- Some nonprofits or other community organizations map out farmers markets in their state.
- Ask your local Cooperative Extension office.
- Visit the USDA Farmers Market Directory: [ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/farmersmarkets](http://ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/farmersmarkets)
- Some farms will also have roadside stands. Like farmers markets, these offer the flexibility to choose what you purchase on a weekly basis.



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## STEP 2 LEARN ABOUT PRACTICES

Farmers markets often have many vendors, but not all are local or sell only their own locally grown products. Ask questions, such as:

- Do you grow all of the product you sell, or do you source from other farmers?
- Where do your products come from? Are they local?
- What are your production practices?
- Do you have a food safety plan?
- Are you open to educational opportunities on the farm or field trips?
- Are you willing to sell seconds or bulk products at a lower price?
- Do you specialize in certain crops?

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## STEP 3 COMPARE COSTS

Programs are allowed to shop at farmers markets on a weekly basis and still follow proper procurement rules. For informal procurement (less than \$250,000), you will need to document and compare prices from a minimum of three vendors. Bring a log with you to the farmers market to document products and prices from at least three farmers.

Micro-purchases (less than \$50,000 from a single vendor) can also be used at farmers markets to take advantage of discounts on bulk food products or surplus products during their peak season. Micro-purchasing is meant to allow providers to take advantage of these discounts.

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## STEP 4 PURCHASE!

Purchasing from a farmers market allows you to make regular, easy cost comparisons and follow the informal purchasing method.

Make sure to get receipts for your purchases. Some farmers may not provide receipts unless you ask for them. Many states accept handwritten receipts or other forms of purchasing documents for reimbursement, but certain information is required. Check with your state CACFP office to ask about any requirements.

Receipts must include the following:

- Date of purchase
- Name of vendor/farmer
- Cost of the item
- Amount purchased
- Total cost

# Tips for Local Food Purchasing Success



Programs throughout the country are trying innovative approaches to creating successful and sustainable local food purchasing initiatives. No two farm to ECE programs look identical, and no two programs will use the exact same strategy for purchasing local food. The following are some examples of creative ways programs are integrating local food into the backbone of their programming.

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## USE LOCAL FOODS AS AN EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

Building in educational opportunities throughout the day can help increase children’s willingness to try new foods. Many programs integrate educational activities to support the introduction of new foods through farm to ECE.

- New **Head Start Program** standards require programs to use more of the day for education. Serving local foods provides an opportunity to build conversations about local food, where food comes from, and seasonal eating into mealtime. [eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/docs/pdf/hs-prog-pstandards-final-rule-factsheet\\_0.pdf](https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/docs/pdf/hs-prog-pstandards-final-rule-factsheet_0.pdf)
- **Archway Academy** offers weekly farm to ECE lessons to support its local purchasing efforts. The program also developed a farm to ECE library full of books about farms and healthy eating.
- Many states have **Harvest of the Month** programs, which provide educational materials featuring a different seasonal product each month. This can be a great tool for accessing education materials to support your local procurement efforts.

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## FIND COST SAVINGS STRATEGIES

Sometimes, though not always, local food costs more. Many programs have adopted strategies to cut costs to be able to buy more local food.

- **Baxter CDC** has switched to mostly scratch cooking. This allows them to manage portion control and the amount of waste, which saves money for more local purchasing.
- **Adventures Learning Centers** switched from disposable to reusable plates and utensils. Although the centers initially had an increase in cost to purchase dishwashers, this switch increased their food budget and allowed them to spend more for local food over the long term.
- **CAPRW Head Start** worked with its caterer to have two local food days per week. The program balances local products with slightly higher costs with lower cost vegetables on other days.
- **Salt Lake City Community Action Program** accepts seconds—imperfect-looking fruits and vegetables—from farmers at a lower cost.
- **NSCA Head Start** works with Common Market, a food hub in Philadelphia. Through Common Market’s Food Access Fund they are able to provide a 25% discount on food purchases to organizations that expand food access for low-income community members. This program enables the relationship to contribute to the in-kind donation requirement for NSCA’s Head Start budget.

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## COLLABORATE WITH OTHER PARTNERS

Explore beyond your center to find innovative and supportive partnerships.

- **NSCA Head Start** programs face some logistical barriers to on-site storage space and volumes. While some centers may be too small to order the minimum volume for delivery, they work with their food hub to find innovative solutions. Sometimes centers are able to aggregate purchases to meet the minimum requirement, or they are able to round out orders with other shelf-stable products that are used for other programs. They also found a partner in a local college. They work with college interns to do nutrition education and taste tests with their children.
- **CAPRW Head Start** works with its caterer, farmer group partner, and a local distributor to source local food. By connecting the farmer group with a distributor, the caterer can use more fresh, minimally processed, local food in a ready-to-use form without adding labor costs for the caterer.
- **Salt Lake Community Action Program** started out small the first year, but plans took off after developing a task force. The program now collaborates with partners all over the city for grants and projects, and its farm to ECE program is growing because of these partnerships.

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## INVEST IN STAFF

Long-term local purchasing initiatives need solid program infrastructure to support them. By adding staff positions and training requirements, local procurement strategies can continue in a program even after their original champions have moved on.

- **Baxter CDC** includes “familiarity with local food availability and preparation” as a requirement in the job description for its chef. If the center’s current chef leaves, local food knowledge is required of anyone new who would be hired.
- **Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County** is developing a farm to ECE position to increase local food purchasing for its Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs. This position will coordinate local purchasing initiatives and education for all of the centers.
- **Norris Square Community Alliance Head Start** has regular professional development opportunities for staff. Once a month, they use these meetings to host a local chef to introduce different cooking techniques and herbs to help prepare local foods. They also offer trainings on seasonal menu development.



## **Local Food for Little Eaters**

A Purchasing Toolbox for the  
Child & Adult Care Food Program

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