

# TRACKING SHOWS INCREASE IN LOCAL FOOD PURCHASING AT MICHIGAN SCHOOLS

MAY 2018

**The Michigan Good Food Charter, developed in 2010 with broad input from people across the state, established six goals for Michigan's food systems.<sup>1</sup>**

**One goal is for institutions—such as K-12 schools, hospitals, and colleges—to source 20% of their food products from Michigan growers, producers, and processors by the year 2020.**

Over time, various systems have been used to track this institutional purchasing of local foods. In 2004<sup>2</sup> and 2009,<sup>3</sup> the Michigan State University (MSU) Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) (known previously as the C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems) distributed surveys to Michigan school food service directors (FSDs) using contact information provided by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE).

These surveys were intended to track perspectives about, interest in, and use of local foods in K-12 school food programs over time. The 2004 paper survey had a response rate of 58%, and the response rate for the 2009 electronic survey was 28%. Responses to the 2004 and 2009 surveys indicated that approximately 70% of school FSDs reported interest in purchasing local foods. In 2004, nearly 11% of FSDs said they had purchased food from a local farmer during the previous year; in 2009, that number increased to 42% of responding FSDs.

## MEGS+ online application

As an outgrowth of the CRFS tracking effort and in an effort to improve response rates, MDE has included an optional two-part question in the annual School Nutrition Program (SNP) application within their Michigan Electronic Grants System Plus (MEGS+) online application system since 2014. The SNP application is required of all Michigan schools/districts participating in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

The questions on the MEGS+ applications only focus on local food purchasing by K-12 schools and do not capture dollar amounts spent on local foods. Results from 2017, and how they compare to 2014 results, will be described in further detail below.

## Cultivate Michigan

Cultivate Michigan, launched in 2014, is the local purchasing campaign of the Michigan Farm to Institution Network (MFIN), through which institutions can sign up to track their spending on Michigan foods using an online dashboard and gain access to resources for sourcing and serving local products.

**As of January 2018, 65 institutions across the state, including 42 K-12 schools and districts, had completed a profile and were participating in**

1 Colasanti, K. et al. (2010). *Michigan Good Food Charter*. Michigan State University C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems, Food Bank Council of Michigan, Michigan Food Policy Council. Retrieved from: [www.michiganfood.org](http://www.michiganfood.org).

2 Izumi, B.T., Rostant, O.S., Moss, M.J., & Hamm, M.W. (2006) Results from the 2004 Michigan Farm-to-School survey. *Journal of School Health*, 76(5), pp. 169-174.

3 Colasanti, K., Matts, C., & Hamm, M.W. (2012) Results from the Michigan Farm-to-School survey: Participation grows from 2004. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 44(4), 343-349.



**the campaign. Cultivate Michigan recorded \$4 million in spending on Michigan-grown foods since 2014.** This total reflects data reported by just 14 institutions, the majority of which submitted only partial reports of their spending since the start of the campaign, and is therefore likely just a small fraction of the overall institutional spending on Michigan foods that has happened during this period.

## USDA Farm to School Census

Meanwhile at the national level, the USDA initiated its first Farm to School Census in 2013, followed by another in 2015. For the 2015 census, the USDA defined farm to school as a “suite of activities centered on connecting local farmers and food producers to schools, teaching children where food comes from, and expanding market opportunities for agricultural producers of all kinds.”<sup>4</sup>

This definition clearly includes more than the activity of local food purchasing, but “serving locally produced foods in the cafeteria” was the most common farm to school activity nationally, at 77%, with promotional efforts at 37%, taste testing/demos of locally produced foods at 33%, field trips to farms or orchards at 31%, and using Smarter Lunchroom strategies to encourage consumption of local foods at 31%.

**Of Michigan school districts surveyed by the USDA, 43% (or 257 districts) indicated that they participate in at least one of the above farm to school activities. Michigan FSDs reported investing over \$19 million in local food, with the average district spending about 20% of their budgets on local food products—primarily fruits, vegetables, and milk. Half (50%) of FSDs surveyed indicated that they plan to increase local food purchases in the future.**

## RESULTS FROM THE 2017 MEGS+ APPLICATION

Back at the state level, the 2017-2018 school year was the fourth year in which local food purchasing questions were included by MDE in the MEGS+ application. FSDs that participate in the NSLP were

asked whether they currently purchase local foods for their school meals, with local foods defined as “foods that are grown, raised, or processed in Michigan.”

## Sources used to purchase local foods

In the second question, FSDs who indicated that they purchased local foods are asked to choose from a list which sources they used for purchasing local foods.

The list of these food sources includes:

- Department of Defense (DoD) and/or USDA Foods Program and/or Unprocessed Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Program (UFV Pilot) utilizing USDA entitlement dollars
- Broadline distributor (full-service distributors including Gordon Food Service, Sysco, Van Eerden Foodservice, and US Foods in Michigan)
- Local grocery store
- Farmers market
- Farmer cooperative
- Food hub
- Farm direct

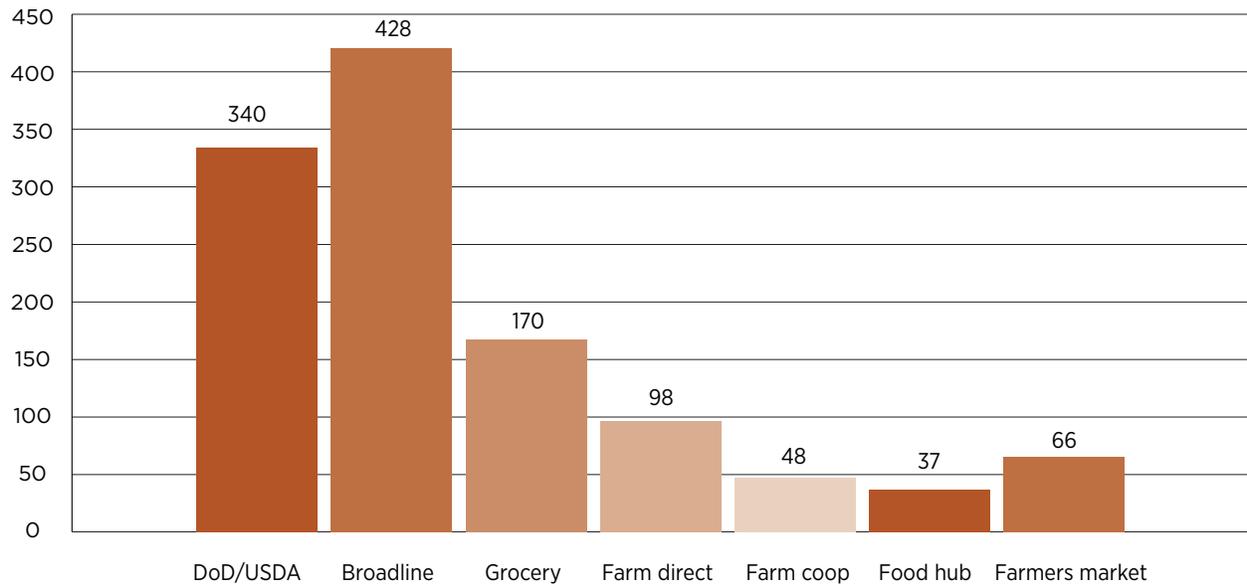
While all Michigan FSDs participating in the NSLP are required to complete a MEGS+ application, this local food purchasing question that is found within the USDA Foods section of the application is optional. Additionally, the total number of respondents fluctuates from year to year as districts may consolidate services, private schools may opt out of participating, and charter schools may open or close.

**In 2017, 888 Michigan FSDs completed the SNP application, and 537 (60%) of them answered “Yes” to the first optional question, “Do you currently purchase local foods for your school meals?”** Broadline distributors were the most common source of local foods, used by 80% of food service directors who purchased local foods. DoD/USDA programs were the second most common, used by 63%. A chart showing the full distribution of reported local food sources is below.

<sup>4</sup> 2015 USDA Farm to School Census. Retrieved from <https://farmtoschoolcensus.fns.usda.gov/overview-farm-school-census-2015>



**Chart 1:  
Sources of Local Purchases**



**Total number of respondents purchasing local foods = 537**

**Comparing results from 2014 to 2017**

Accurately determining the number of FSDs purchasing local foods is complicated by the fact that some respondents chose one or more sources of local foods from the list in the second question without marking “Yes” for the first question (“Do you currently purchase local foods?”). In the data set, responses of “No” and blank responses were both recorded as null, and so were indistinguishable. For this reason, local purchasing sources marked by these respondents who did not actively mark “Yes” to the first question were not counted.

Since 2014, the number of these uncountable responses declined from 97 to only 19, a decrease of 9%. This trend is positive in terms of the quality of the survey results, but it could also mean that the number of FSDs buying local foods has not actually changed since 2014, just that responses are becoming more accurate and fewer responses are being excluded from the count.

Overall, 2017 results show that all other sources for local foods, except broadline distributors, are

being used by a slightly higher percentage of buyers than in 2014, as the chart below shows.

The number of buyers sourcing local foods from Department of Defense and USDA programs has increased, as has the number saying they purchase local foods from smaller or more local suppliers such as farmer cooperatives, food hubs, or directly from farmers. The percentage of FSDs who reported sourcing local foods from broadline distributors remained the same in 2014 and 2017. The percentage of FSDs who indicated they purchased local foods from a grocery store decreased slightly in 2017 from previous years. However, this shift is likely because the options for “local grocery store” and “farmers market” were listed separately for the first time in 2017; in previous years, they were combined as one response.

Responses to the questions as they appeared on the 2015 and 2016 MEGS+ surveys are consistent with the 2017 results, showing a small increase in local food purchasing, a small decrease in the number of invalid responses, and a small increase across the board in the use of each source of local foods.



**Table 1:**  
**Comparison of Results from MEGS+ Questions in 2014 and 2017**

	2014		2017		CHANGE FROM 2014 TO 2017	
Number of respondents	878		888			
Yes, buy local	470	54%	537	60%	67	6%
No answer, but marked source	97	11%	19	2%	-78	-9%
DoD/USDA/UFV Pilot	272	58%	340	63%	68	5%
Broadline distributor	378	80%	428	80%	50	0%
Local grocery store*	161	34%	170	32%	9	-2%
Farm direct	67	14%	98	18%	31	4%
Farmer cooperative	24	5%	48	9%	24	4%
Food hub	13	3%	37	7%	24	4%
Farmers market*	-	-	66	12%	-	-

\*The survey answer options for grocery and farmers market were split in 2017; for 2014 the total listed with "local grocery store" is for the combined option of "local grocery store or farmers market."

Overall, results of survey questions through MEGS+ over the past four years have remained fairly steady. The percentage of FSDs who indicated that they purchase local foods for school meals has gone up slightly over time, from 54% of respondents in 2014 to 60% in 2017.

This compares favorably with the findings in the 2015 USDA census, in which 42% of Michigan respondents participated in some farm to school activities, and 77% of those were serving locally produced foods in the cafeteria. The percentage of MEGS+ respondents currently purchasing local foods in 2017 further closes the gap toward initial results from the CRFS surveys in 2004 and 2009, in which 70% of respondents expressed an interest in local food purchasing.

### Looking forward: Ten Cents a Meal

A key structural support for farm to school efforts in Michigan going forward is the Ten Cents a Meal for School Kids and Farms pilot project, which grew out of a Michigan Good Food Charter priority of providing an additional 10 cents per school meal

for local food. This pilot provides up to 10 cents per meal in match funding from the State of Michigan for participating schools to purchase and serve Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables, and legumes to students.

In the 2016–2017 school year, school districts in Michigan Prosperity Regions 2 and 4 (which cover Northwest and West Michigan, respectively) were eligible to participate, and 16 districts were awarded funds. For the 2017–2018 school year, the Michigan legislature approved an expansion of the program to a third six-county region (Prosperity Region 9, in Southeast Michigan), and the number of participating districts increased to 32.

Funding provided through this program supports school districts' local purchasing efforts, puts money back into the state's economy through the match component of the funding, and helps build toward the broader charter goal for institutional purchasing of 20% Michigan foods by 2020. Responses to the questions included on the MEGS+ applications indicate that interest among school food service directors in purchasing Michigan foods is high but also has room to grow.

For more information, visit [www.foodsystems.org](http://www.foodsystems.org) or contact Colleen Matts, Farm to Institution Specialist, at [matts@msu.edu](mailto:matts@msu.edu).



*The Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) unites the expertise of diverse food systems stakeholders with that of MSU faculty and staff to advance regionally-rooted local food systems through applied research, education, and outreach. Our work fosters a thriving economy, equity, and sustainability for Michigan, the nation, and the planet by increasing understanding of and engagement with systems that produce food that is healthy, green, fair, and affordable. Learn more at <http://foodsystems.msu.edu>.*

### For General Inquiries:

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