

# 2015–2016 MI FARM TO SCHOOL GRANT PROGRAM REPORT

The 2015–2016 school year was the fifth operating year of the MI Farm to School Grant Program. Since 2011, this program has provided more than 100 grants to K-12 schools and early childhood programs of up to \$2,000 to plan for or implement farm to school programs focused on local food purchasing. Findings from the first three years, including an overview of grantee activities and expenditures, were summarized in an extensive report<sup>1</sup> released in 2016. In the 2015-2016 grant year, \$37,000 was awarded to 19 grantees—10 early childhood programs and nine K-12 schools/districts, including one Residential Child Care Institute (RCCI or juvenile center). This report serves as an overview of the grant year, including grantees' expenditures and challenges in the 2015–2016 grant year.

## Training and Technical Assistance

In addition to grant funds, grantees received training and technical assistance from program staff to overcome challenges to local food purchasing. Training and technical assistance included:

- **Regional training opportunities**  
Held at the start of the grant year (which coincides with the school year), these regional events provide foundational support to help grantees develop their plans and programs and network with other farm to school practitioners.
- **One-on-one assistance**  
One-on-one assistance included in-person site visits and personal phone meetings, support in locating local farmers, and team and strategy development.
- **Webinar series<sup>2</sup>**  
Four webinars were provided to address the needs of grantees, including: Local Food Procurement Rules and Regulations, Garden to Cafeteria, Forward Contracting (strategies for planning in advance with farmers to purchase local food directly), and Farm to Summer Food Service Programs.

## Grantees' Expenditures

Figure 1 displays how grantees spent grant dollars, with local food purchasing as the highest category of expenditure across grantees. Many grantees spent money from their operating funds to purchase local foods, beyond grant dollars. One grantee noted in its year-end evaluation, "The grant money we have received has allowed us the ability to bring in more fresh, quality food products than we could have with just our budget alone."<sup>3</sup> Together, grantees self-reported about \$445,000 spent on local foods in the 2015–2016 school year, including grant funds (\$15,588) and general food service funds. Table 1 highlights example activities included in the three highest categories of spending.

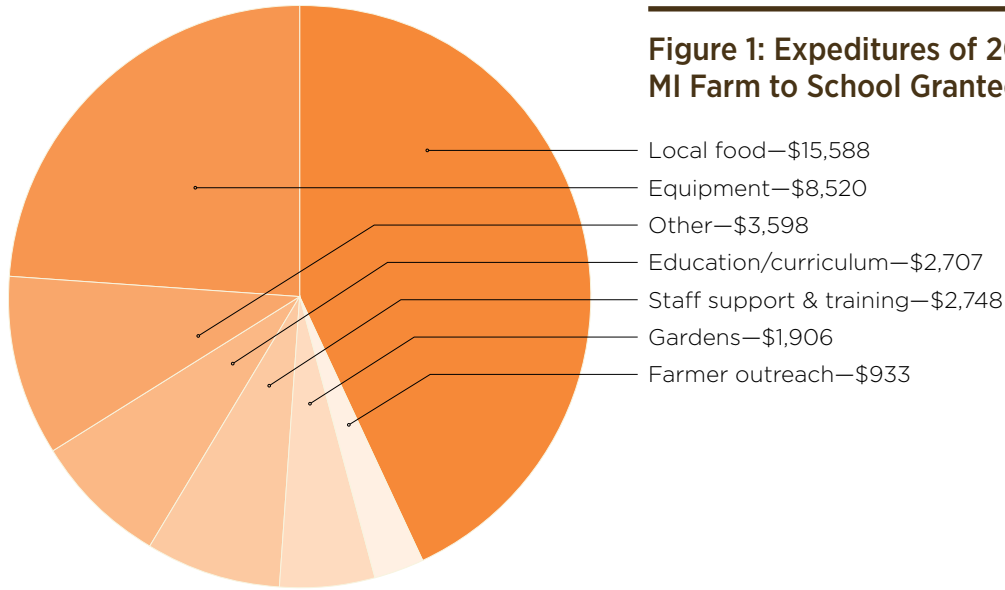
Table 2 shows the local foods most commonly purchased by grantees. Grantees also reported on the variety of products purchased; the number of distinct local food products purchased by individual grantees ranged from four to 49. This large range is likely a result of many factors, including location relative to a thriving agricultural area, program size, and staff capacity to process fresh produce.

<sup>1</sup> Matts, C., Harper, A., & Smalley, S. B. (2016) The MI Farm to School Grant Program: The first three years. Retrieved from [foodsystems.msu.edu/resources/report/MI\\_FarmToSchool\\_Grant\\_Program\\_First\\_Three\\_Years.pdf](https://foodsystems.msu.edu/resources/report/MI_FarmToSchool_Grant_Program_First_Three_Years.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Webinar recordings can be viewed at [mifarmtoschool.msu.edu](https://mifarmtoschool.msu.edu)

<sup>3</sup> Grantee response to question via an end-of-year evaluation





**Table 1: Top Three Highest Categories of Expenditure**

| EXPENDITURE                         | EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES INCLUDE   |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Local food</b>                   | Local food purchases for food service, taste tests, special events, and planning meetings                                      |
| <b>Equipment</b>                    | Blenders, knives, cutting boards, food dehydrators, vacuum sealing machines, and standalone freezers                           |
| <b>Staff support &amp; training</b> | Fees associated with farm to school and local food trainings, stipends for farm to school team members, and travel to training |

**Table 2: Most Commonly Purchased Local Food Products**

| RANK     | LOCAL FOOD PRODUCT  |
|----------|---|
| <b>1</b> | Carrots, apples   |
| <b>2</b> | Lettuce   |
| <b>3</b> | Broccoli, herbs   |
| <b>4</b> | Asparagus, bell peppers, potatoes, tomatoes, strawberries |
| <b>5</b> | Cucumbers, mixed greens, fluid milk                       |

**Figure 2: Local Food Sources**

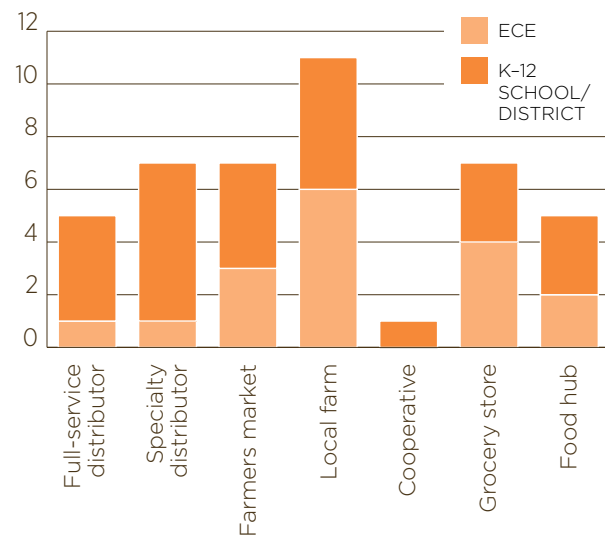


Figure 2 illustrates the types of vendors grantees used to purchase local foods. (This data represents the number of grantees using each vendor type; it does not represent the quantity of food moving through each of these vendors.) Farmers markets and grocery stores were typically used for smaller-volume purchases, such as taste tests, parent nights, or planning meetings, whereas food hubs, broadline distributors, and specialty distributors were used for larger quantities. Several grantees noted that scaling up from working with local farmers to adding larger distributors increased their capacity to source more local foods, with one grantee noting, "Working with Cherry Capital Foods (a food hub) has also made this all easier. We are able to reach farther into the region for fresh foods with one phone call and delivery instead of many."

## Common Challenges

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Grantees are diverse in their program structure and objectives, however several common challenges arose from grantee experiences. The top three challenges noted by grantees were: staff capacity and training; working with a contracted food service provider; and difficulties related to program size. Other less-reported challenges included difficulties in communication while coordinating logistics with farmers and finding additional farm to school team members.

### **Staff capacity and training**

Many food service programs are used to receiving foods pre-processed and in easy-to-use forms. Fresh, local produce may require additional preparation for which some food service staff are not trained. Grantees noted that this limitation posed a challenge to integrating more local food into their food service programs. One grantee noted in its end-of-year evaluation, "We believe the development of a standardized training curriculum focused on fabrication will allow much easier recovery if [staff] turnover were to occur."

### **Working with a contract food service provider**

Over time, grantees working with a food service provider or vended meal service and early childhood programs based within larger school districts have regularly experienced more hurdles to purchasing local foods. This grant year was

no exception. Grantees developed innovative solutions to fit in local foods where possible, even within strict program operations. Several grantees provided local foods in snacks and breakfasts and, in one case, an after-school program. Others chose to focus on classroom activities and taste tests. One grantee invited a representative from the food service provider in their farm to school planning team to strategically plan for integrating more local foods, which resulted in increased communication about their farm to school efforts.

### **Program size**

Program size posed a challenge both for grantees with food service programs serving very large and very small populations. The participating district with the largest food service program, serving more than 14,000 children, noted that because their size made it difficult to implement the program across all district buildings, they started out focusing on two school buildings. Meanwhile, some grantees with small food service programs found it difficult to meet the minimum order requirements for delivery from some farmers or food hubs. One program overcame this challenge by purchasing equipment for food storage that allowed them to purchase in bulk and store for later use.

## Conclusion

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In the 2015–2016 grant year, the MI Farm to School Grant Program enhanced the capacity of participating schools and early childhood programs to purchase local food for their meal programs. While the more than \$15,000 spent on local food is a direct investment in local food producers and vendors, money invested in equipment, relationship building, and staff training helps ensure sustainable farm to school programs that create local impact even after the grant year. This grant year also demonstrated the evolving challenges that emerge as programs grow and mature. A continued investment in programs like the MI Farm to School Grant Program coupled with innovative technical assistance that addresses new and emerging challenges can help ensure Michigan children have access to fresh, local foods in schools and early childhood programs, and market opportunities for Michigan farmers continue to expand.



*CRFS envisions a thriving economy, equity, and sustainability for Michigan, the country, and the planet through food systems rooted in local regions and centered on Good Food: food that is healthy, green, fair, and affordable. Its mission is to engage the people of Michigan, the United States, and the world in applied research, education, and outreach to develop regionally integrated, sustainable food systems. CRFS joins in Michigan State University's pioneering legacy of applied research, education, and outreach by catalyzing collaboration and fostering innovation among the diverse range of people, processes, and places involved in regional food systems. Working in local, state, national, and global spheres, CRFS' projects span from farm to fork, including production, processing, distribution, policy, and access.*

### For General Inquiries

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