



Farm to School in Michigan: Growing Interest & Greater Participation

Executive Summary

May 2010

The term “Farm to School” applies to a variety of initiatives but centers around offering local foods in school meals programs. Over the past five years, school food service professionals, farmers, and distributors have been working together in numerous locations around the state to overcome challenges and improve the distribution of local food products and the availability of seasonal produce for schools and their meals programs. State government agencies, community organizations, agricultural commodity groups, and universities are supporting their efforts. As the number of schools purchasing local foods in Michigan increases, Farm to School programs are contributing to the development of vibrant local and regional food systems that make healthy, local foods more accessible to school children and support Michigan farmers, businesses, and local economies.

In the fall of 2009, the C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at Michigan State University conducted a follow-up survey to the 2004 Survey of K-12 School Food Service Providers in Michigan. The 2004 survey showed that Michigan K-12 School Food Service Directors (FSDs) were “ready and willing to make linkages to Michigan agriculture.” The 2009 survey, based on responses from 270 people (nearly one-third of all FSDs in Michigan), shows that many FSDs have since acted on this interest and are making Farm to School a reality.

2004 Top 3 Factors Motivating Local Purchasing			2009		
Supporting local economy	1		Helping MI farms and/or MI businesses		
Access to fresher food	2		Supporting local economy		
Higher quality food	3		Higher quality food		
2004 Top 3 Concerns about Local Purchasing			2009		
Cost	1		Cost		
Seasonality	2		Quality		
Food Safety	3		Reliable Supply		
2004 Top 3 Barriers to Local Purchasing			2009		
Federal & State procurement regulations	1		Federal & State procurement regulations		
Lack of product available at certain times	2		Budget		
Internal purchasing policies	3		Food safety		

The increased emphasis on helping Michigan farms and businesses that FSDs reported in the 2009 survey indicates that many people were well aware of the economic conditions faced by the farming communities in

their area. Even though budget constraints were ranked as a more significant barrier than in 2004, **the number of FSDs participating in Farm to School nearly tripled between 2004 and 2009**, indicating that FSDs are making local purchasing work. In 2004, 11% of FSDs reported purchasing foods from a local farmer or producer in the past year, and in 2009, 41% reported having done so.

The growing interest and participation in Farm to School is seen in how FSDs responded to questions about steps their school or school district had taken to link students with local farms and agriculture in the last three years, including such things as serving meals featuring Michigan products, holding a harvest festival, planting a school garden or visiting the Michigan Farm to School website. Approximately 1/3 of FSDs who responded reported having taken students to visit a farm or a farmers market, providing education about Michigan food and agriculture and serving meals featuring Michigan products. **Thirty-four percent of FSDs had taken at least three of these steps to link students with local farms and agriculture, and nearly 50% had taken at least two.**

To continue to expand Farm to School in Michigan, it will be important to be attentive to the factors FSDs consider when choosing vendors, to the products they are interested in and the kitchen equipment they need to properly handle and prepare local foods. Food quality, dependability, price and ability to meet specifications were ranked as the highest factors influencing selection of food vendors on the survey. When asked about the specific produce items and the specific forms (fresh vs. processed or frozen) they would be interested in, FSDs gave the following as their top responses:

Vegetables

- Tomatoes – fresh & whole
- Cucumbers – fresh & whole
- Peppers – fresh & whole
- Potatoes – fresh & whole
- Onions – fresh & whole

Fruits

- Apples – fresh & whole
- Grapes – fresh & whole
- Strawberries – fresh & whole
- Pears – fresh & whole
- Watermelon – fresh & whole

The top five equipment items that FSDs reporting needing were: fruit/vegetable wedgers; floor or countertop vegetable choppers; steamers; industrial food processors; and knives.

With growing interest and participation in Farm to School in Michigan, and the emergence of several local Michigan distributors in recent years, we can expect to see a greater number of models and strategies for connecting Michigan farms and farm products to Michigan schools. If we can connect FSDs to the products they are most interested in and the equipment they most need, we can continue to support our farm communities and provide fresh and healthy food to our school children.



MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

For more information, please contact Colleen Matts, Farm to Institution Specialist, C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food System at Michigan State University at matts@msu.edu or (517) 432-0310.

Executive Summary prepared by Kathryn Colasanti, Colleen Matts, Michael W. Hamm and Susan B. Smalley, C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at Michigan State University.