

THE MI FARM TO SCHOOL GRANT PROGRAM: THE FIRST THREE YEARS

MAY 2016





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Visit www.mifarmtoschool.msu.edu for more information about Michigan Farm to School resources and activities, including the MI Farm to School Grant Program.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Dr. Michael Hamm, Dr. Diane Golzynski, Megan Thompson, and Kaitlin Wojciak for their thorough reviews of this report and their valuable feedback. Most importantly, we would like to express our sincere thanks to all of the grantees and their partners who invested their time and energy in furthering farm to school in Michigan. It is from them that we continue to be inspired and learn about building sustainable, lasting farm to school programs.

The MI Farm to School Grant Program, and this report about its first three years, was funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

THE MI FARM TO SCHOOL GRANT PROGRAM: THE FIRST THREE YEARS

► INTRODUCTION

Farm to school is considered a win-win-win for kids, farmers and communities. Centering on efforts to serve local foods in school and early childhood food programs, farm to school can increase children's access to healthy, local foods, provide market opportunities for farmers, and strengthen local economies. Even as farm to school has matured thanks to a movement across the country and through individual programs in Michigan, challenges persist in getting more local food on kids' trays and plates. The MI Farm to School Grant Program is an effort to help food program providers overcome these challenges and stimulate or sustain local food purchasing programs at K-12 schools and in early childhood programs in Michigan. The information that follows includes:

- a rationale for implementing this grant program;
- a summary of the first three years of the MI Farm to School Grant Program (2011 to 2014), including its operations and impacts;
- a reflection on the sustainability of grantees' farm to school activities;
- findings from administering the program over time; and,
- suggestions for adapting it as a model for other communities, states or regions.

Centering on efforts to serve local foods in school and early childhood food programs, farm to school can increase children's access to healthy, local foods, provide market opportunities for farmers, and strengthen local economies.

► HOW IT CAME TO BE: RATIONALE

The MI Farm to School Grant Program is administered by the Michigan State University (MSU) Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation that supports broader Michigan Farm to School efforts. CRFS (then known as the C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems) has been engaged in farm to school work since 2004. At that time, they conducted a survey of Michigan school food service directors, which showed significant interest in local food purchasing. Of the Michigan food service directors who responded (383), 73 percent indicated interest in sourcing food from local producers, with interest increasing to 83 percent if these local foods were available through their current vendors. Cost was the top concern regarding purchasing local foods among survey respondents in 2004ⁱ and again in 2009 when a similar survey was conducted. Budget was the second most frequently selected barrier to purchasing local food, behind federal and state procurement regulations, in the 2009 survey results.ⁱⁱ

In response to these survey results, CRFS staff members continued to provide farm to school research, outreach, and technical assistance in Michigan. In 2011, CRFS launched the MI Farm to

School Grant Program to provide financial assistance to help convert interest in farm to school into activity, work through barriers to adoption, and ease other concerns expressed by school food service directors. CRFS staff members have also coordinated a Michigan network to support farm to school at the community, regional and state levels and served as the state lead for the National Farm to School Network (NFSN), as a member of their previous Farm to Preschool Subcommittee, and now as a member of the new NFSN Farm to Early Care and Education Working Group.

Over the first three years of the MI Farm to School Grant Program, CRFS conducted annual statewide census surveys of school food service directors, similar to the 2004 and 2009 surveys, to continue tracking interest, motivators, challenges, and barriers to purchasing local food for school food service programs. All surveys posed similar questions in an electronic survey format. They were sent to all school food service directors in Michigan, as identified by the Michigan Department of Education, which administers school nutrition programs in the state.

Summary of Survey Results from Michigan School Food Service Directors

SELECTED SURVEY ITEM	2012	2013	2014
Response rate	34%	38%	34%
Counties represented	53	67	60
Mean free and reduced rate*	57%	75%	52%
Interest in purchasing local foods	89%	82%	84%
Purchased local food in the past year	54%	68%	67%

* For each survey, respondents were asked to report rates for the previous school year for the schools/districts they represented.

Influences on Local Food Purchasing		RANK		
TOP FACTORS MOTIVATING LOCAL FOOD PURCHASING		2012	2013	2014
Supporting local economy/community		1	2	1
Helping Michigan farms/businesses		2	3	3
Access to fresher food		3	1	2
Higher quality food		4	4	5
Higher student consumption of fruits/vegetables		5	5	4
TOP BARRIERS TO LOCAL FOOD PURCHASING		2012	2013	2014
Limited seasonal availability		1	1	1
Food safety concerns		2	2	2
Budget constraints		3	3	4
Federal and state procurement regulations		4	5	5
Lack of local producers in the area from whom to purchase		5	4	3

Most Frequently Purchased Local Foods

RANK	2012	2013	2014
1	Apples	Apples	Apples
2	Milk	Milk	Milk
3	Cucumbers	Cucumbers	Cucumbers
4	Cherry/grape tomatoes	Cherry/grape tomatoes	Cherry/grape tomatoes
5	Carrots	Broccoli	Pears
6	Broccoli	Slicing tomatoes	Carrots
7	Slicing tomatoes	Carrots	Peppers
8	Bread*	Peppers	Strawberries
9	Potatoes	Lettuce	Lettuce

*Baked goods (i.e. bread) were removed from the survey after 2012 to shorten the survey questionnaire.

As budget was consistently selected by school food service directors as one of the top three barriers to purchasing local food, financial assistance continued to be justified to support these programs. By pairing this financial assistance with technical assistance and training, food service providers would also gain the knowledge, skills and connections needed to find, procure and use local foods, thereby building capacity to sustain farm to school programs long-term. We also expected that programs would

remain more viable if grantees were able to receive grant funds for up to three years, starting with planning grants (as applicable) and moving on to implementation grants once a program was operational. In order to serve vulnerable children in Michigan, we sought to make grants available to K-12 schools with a 50 percent or greater rate of free and reduced-price meal eligibility, or the equivalent for early childhood programs which were eligible to participate starting in the second year

of the program. These considerations were used as the framework for the MI Farm to School Grant Program, for which initial grants were disbursed in the 2011-2012 school year (Sept. to June).

As activity steadily increased in Michigan, the network of support for farm to school continued to evolve and expand throughout the first phase of the grant program. State and regional partners engaged in an informal Michigan Farm to School network included:

- state agency partners from the Michigan Departments of Education, Agriculture and Rural Development, and Community Health (now part of Health and Human Services);
- non-profit organizational partners in different regions of the state, including the Michigan Land Use Institute (now the Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities) in northwest Lower Michigan and Food System Economic Partnership (now disbanded) in southeast Michigan; and
- MSU Extension educators, most of whom are now formally engaged in the Community Food Systems work group.

Additionally, the Michigan Good Food Charter, released in 2010, set a vision and goals for 2020 and provided a stronger framework under which to direct food systems work in Michigan across organizations and sectors.ⁱⁱⁱ By 2014, several networks, including the Michigan Farm to Institution Network, the Michigan Food Hub Network and the Local Food Council Network, were launched to foster collaboration across the state and help reach the goals of the Charter by 2020. The Charter's stated goal for institutions, including schools and early childhood programs, is that they source 20% of their food products from Michigan growers, producers and processors by 2020. Therefore, the primary context for "local food" procurement for the MI Farm to School Grant Program is food that

is Michigan-grown, -produced and -processed, but grantees are able to define "local" according to their respective needs and priorities.

Similarly, the national web of farm to school support and advocacy was steadily strengthened and expanded throughout the first phase of the grant program. By 2014, 39 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.) had passed farm to school legislation^{iv}, including Michigan.¹ Farm to school was also addressed by the federal Farm Bill and Child Nutrition Reauthorization by this time. The Child Nutrition Reauthorization of 2010, named the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, included budget appropriations of \$5 million per year for a Farm to School Grant Program administered by the USDA (Section 243).² This grant program brought with it a Farm to School team of Food and Nutrition Service staff across seven regional USDA offices. The National Farm to School Network, described on its website as "an information, advocacy and networking hub for communities working to bring local food sourcing and food and agriculture education into school systems and preschools," had state leads in every state and the District of Columbia by 2011³ and broadened its scope from K-12 schools to include early childhood programs. These conditions bolstered farm to school viability at every level. The intersection of growing support for and interest in farm to school along with continued budget constraints made the time right for a grant program to spark more activity, innovation and sustainability in farm to school.

¹ A farm to school bill package was enacted in Michigan in 2008. It included the Farm to School Procurement Act (Public Act 315) that established a farm to school program supported by the Michigan Departments of Agriculture and Education (without any funding attached), and Public Acts 343 and 344 that increased the small purchase thresholds for food purchasing to \$100,000 at schools, public school academies, and intermediate school districts.

² See the USDA's "Summary of The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (By Program)" at http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/PL111-296_Summary.pdf for more information. The full act is available from the U.S. Government Printing Office at <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ296/pdf/PLAW-111publ296.pdf>.

³ Anupuma Joshi, personal communication, May 2, 2016.

► HOW IT WORKS

Each year, the MI Farm to School Grant Program provides up to 20 mini-grants of \$2,000 each to K-12 school food service directors and early childhood food program providers. Two categories of grants—planning and implementation—are offered, primarily to guide grantees' expectations and our provision of technical assistance. Local food procurement is the primary focus of this grant program so applications are expected to first and foremost show commitment to these efforts over education and garden activities that can enhance farm to school programs.

Grant Funds

Parameters for spending grant funds are described in the application so applicants can develop appropriate plans and budgets. However, these parameters are somewhat flexible to meet the real and changing needs and priorities of food program directors and providers as they develop or sustain their programs. All grantees are required to attend one regional MI Farm to School training provided by the grant program managers and other experts (food service directors with farm to school experience, staff from local organizations, state agency staff members, farmers, etc.), and build the costs of travel to this training into their grant budgets. Grant funds are disbursed in two installments—once at the beginning of the grant year and once mid-year. This timeline provides an opportunity for the grant program managers to have a mid-year check point on progress and activity of grantees and follow up with any who are experiencing challenges or not staying true to the focus of the grant program.

Grant Types

Planning grants are intended to be used to help plan and prepare for integrating local foods into food programs with the expectation that a “Farm to School Action Plan” for the upcoming year will result as a deliverable at the end of the grant year. Recognizing that developing plans and making connections to implement local food purchasing and usage take time, we do not expect planning grantees to purchase local foods in their first year. Planning grant funds can be spent on, but are not limited to, the following:

- meeting expenses for gathering farm to school program partners or team members, including farmers, food vendors, food service staff members, students, parents, teachers, community members, etc.;

- training (in addition to the required training) or other learning opportunities to support farm to school activities, such as fresh food preparation, knife skills and seasonal menu planning;
- fees associated with attending conferences or meetings related to farm to school, local agriculture, food systems, etc. to support learning, networking and relationship-building;
- costs associated with engaging key stakeholders including students, school wellness committees, parent teacher organizations/associations, etc.; and
- purchase of kitchen or cafeteria supplies or equipment (up to \$500) to help prepare and/or serve local foods.

Implementation grants are intended to help put existing farm to school plans into action and/or expand current activity. Grantees are required to develop a “Farm to School Sustainability Plan” by the end of the year that encourages an eye toward maintaining their local food purchasing programs beyond these grant funds. Implementation applicants can include previous MI Farm to School Grantees or others who have already conducted and can provide evidence of previous farm to school planning. Examples of ways to use implementation grant funding include, but are not limited to, the following:

- purchase of local foods to use in the food program;
- purchase of equipment, resources and/or materials that will help increase the use of local foods in the food service program;
- costs associated with training and learning opportunities, similar to those listed above;
- costs associated with engagement opportunities, similar to those listed above; and
- marketing materials for promoting local foods in cafeterias (posters, line tags, window decals, etc.).

Applications

The application process is competitive, and applications are required for consideration for a grant award. The application deadline is typically early May for the following school year's grant program cycle.⁴ While we understand that school, program and community members may assist in developing applications and planning and executing grant activities, we require that the school food service director or early childhood food program provider serve as both the lead applicant and our primary contact for the grant program. From our experience, it is clear that these are the decision-makers who are required to make change in food programs. For all applications and efforts, we ask grantees to consider utilizing current resources, addressing current obstacles, engaging and sustaining partnerships, aligning with broader values, and establishing goals or commitments for increasing kids' access to healthy, local foods.

The applications are intended to be simple. Though requirements have evolved over time, they have generally included:

- a contact and program information page;
- a one-paragraph program summary;
- a narrative explaining need and readiness, outlining plans for using grant funds to support farm to school activities, and describing how a plan of action will be developed or a plan will be put into action (limited to three pages);
- a budget proposal and description of budget items; and
- appropriate attachments, primarily for implementation grantees to show that previous farm to school planning has already occurred.

⁴ MI Farm to School Grant Program materials, including applications and scoring rubrics, are available by clicking on the MI Farm to School Grant Program tab at www.mifarmtoschool.msu.edu.

Typical Grant Year Timeline

TIMEFRAME	TASK
Early April	Call for applications for the next grant year
Mid-April	Informational webinar offered for prospective applicants
Early May	Deadline for applications for the next grant year
Early June	Grant awards announced
Early September	Grant year begins and first installment of funding disbursed, coinciding with the start of the school year (the day after Labor Day in Michigan)
End of September to early October	Regional trainings offered in three to four cities across the state
October to December	Grantees carry out activities; program managers conduct site visits, offer educational webinars and provide direct technical assistance, as needed
Early January	Mid-year reports due from grantees; second installment of funding disbursed
January to May	Grantees carry out activities; program managers conduct site visits, offer educational webinars and provide direct technical assistance, as needed
Early June	Year-end reports due from grantees; grant year closes

Requirements

Applications are scored according to a rubric for each application type that is included with application materials. Applicants are notified in early June whether or not they have been accepted into the program. This timing is primarily for school food service directors who do not work year-round to be able to get started quickly when they return for the school year in September. Grantees are expected to execute their proposed plans throughout the grant year, but they are welcome to request approval of changes or adjustments to their plans and budgets as needed, as long as they continue to focus primarily on local food procurement. For the purposes of increasing skills and knowledge as well as networking between grantees, grantees are also required to participate in at least one free in-person regional training provided by the grant program managers in early fall and a series of educational webinars offered throughout the year.

Requirements of grantees include:

- attendance at an orientation webinar;
- attendance at one regional MI Farm to School training, which are offered in four locations around the state;
- participation in a series of educational webinars on topics of interest offered throughout the year;
- completion and submission of payment forms as necessary, including invoices for grant funds to be disbursed two times each year and W-9s for payments;
- completion and submission of a mid-year grant report with a budget to date, copies of invoices/receipts to justify grant expenditures, and plans to spend remaining funds;
- completion of evaluation activities as requested, primarily phone interviews with contracted evaluators; and
- submission of a year-end report with an action or sustainability plan, depending on the grant type.

► WHAT IT TAKES: PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

The maximum number of grantees per year is 20. This limit was derived from the funding provided by our grantor along with capacity limits of grant program managers to meet the priorities of providing regular communication and quality technical assistance and education to grantees. In each of the first three years, various factors affected the total number of grants and grant dollars. In the first/pilot year of the grant program, grants were offered only to K-12 schools/districts, and only eight grantees participated. The pool of eligible applicants was expanded the following two years to include early childhood programs. However, requests for smaller grants for some smaller early childhood programs, as well as staff changes or losses that led grantees to leave the program, decreased the number of grants and/or grant dollars.

If all allotted funds are used, the yearly cost of providing these mini-grants is \$40,000. Half the time of a full-time equivalent academic staff member was dedicated to managing the grant program, including the application, selection, disbursement and

reporting processes, as well as providing technical assistance, training and education. Additional support was provided by the project manager, including to deliver regional trainings. In Michigan, the funds for this re-granting and staff time were just one part of a broader farm to school grant and team, which grew to include partners from the Hoophouses for Health program that will be described in greater detail later in this report. The web of farm to school support in Michigan provided additional opportunities to help grantees make connections, increase knowledge and skills, build a team and execute their plans for local food purchasing, and related activities. For those interested in starting a similar program in their area, it is important to note that this program is time-intensive to administer and grant dollars and staff time could certainly both be increased if funds, capacity, and interest allowed. In fact, funds might need to be increased if a similar, robust support system is not in place as it currently is in Michigan. However, we believe this relatively minimal investment resulted in a thriving program that achieved lasting, positive results and impacts.

► THE MI FARM TO SCHOOL GRANT PROGRAM IN ACTION

Throughout the first three years, the MI Farm to School Grant Program awarded more than \$90,000 to support local food procurement in K-12 schools and early childhood programs. Eligibility was consistently based on free and reduced meal reimbursement of 50 percent or greater (or the equivalent for early childhood programs) to ensure that these funds were awarded to schools and programs targeting low income populations. The following tables display aggregated grantee characteristics and total funding disbursed, as well as grant expenditures by activity type.

Outreach efforts consisted primarily of promoting the grant opportunity through statewide email listservs, including the Michigan Farm to School listserv which currently has over 1,100 subscribers, and through partners, such as the Michigan Department of Education and early childhood associations or organizations, to spread the word among their respective networks. Additionally, grant program managers worked to intentionally recruit already active farm to school practitioners. In later years, an informational webinar provided an overview of the application and scoring process while providing a space for prospective applicants to ask questions to better decide if this program was right for them.

The majority of grantees used grant funding for efforts supporting local food purchasing plans, in addition to buying local food. In many cases, this enabled development of platforms supporting and sustaining the incorporation of local foods, while using school or program funds for the actual local food purchasing. Working within current school food budgets for local food purchasing may help ensure that it can continue after the expiration of grant funds.

Grantees spent the majority of their grant funds in a variety of ways, including costs associated with:

- purchasing local food
- equipment
- building connections with local farmers
- staff training
- school gardens
- marketing materials
- curriculum development

Less common categories of grant spending included hiring consultants to do assessments of farm to school programs, funding video documentation projects, and supporting staff time to implement farm to school activities. Though grantees were asked to use part of their budget to fund travel expenses to one of four regional MI Farm to School trainings, not all grantees reported this spending.

Throughout the first three years, the three most frequently reported categories of spending were purchasing local food, buying equipment, and making connections with local farmers. Grantees spent a total about \$30,800 of grant dollars on local foods, though as previously mentioned, many grantees used additional funds outside of the grant program for this purpose. The 32 grantees who reported spending on activities to build connections with local farmers—including costs associated with planning meetings, traveling to farms or having the farmer visit the schools and early childhood programs, and outreach to farmers—spent a total of about \$10,500. Fewer grantees reported equipment expenditures, but those who did purchase equipment spent nearly \$11,000. Just over half of all grantees reported spending approximately \$3,000 travel to MI Farm to School trainings.

Grantee Characteristics: 2011-2014

GRANT YEAR	NUMBER OF GRANTS			GRANT TYPE		TOTAL CHILD POPULATION	FREE AND REDUCED PRICE MEAL REIMBURSEMENT PERCENTAGES		TOTAL GRANT FUNDING DISBURSED***
	Total	Early Childhood	K-12	Planning	Implementation		K-12 Average*	Early Childhood Average**	
2011-2012	8	-	8	4	4	9,525	58%	n/a	\$16,000
2012-2013	24	9	15	19	5	20,289	64%	76%	\$44,500
2013-2014	17	6	11	3	14	10,775	68%	78%	\$30,500
TOTAL	49	15	34	26	23	40,589****	63%	77%	\$91,000

*K-12 free and reduced price meal reimbursement percentages ranged from 51 to 71 percent in the 2011-2012 grant year, 51 to 93 percent in the 2012-2013 year, and 50 to 100 percent in 2013-2014.

**Early childhood programs do not have a typical or consistent way to calculate free and reduced reimbursement rates. These numbers represent a best estimate based on application guidance to determine eligibility, which has been refined over time.

***In some cases, grantees only received part of their awarded funding due to lack of progress or withdrawal from the program.

**** Since some grantees continued in the grant program for up to three years, the total child population includes some duplicate children.

Reported Grant Spending By Activity: Total Dollar Amount* and Number of Grantees Reporting Expenditure Type (in parentheses)

GRANT YEAR	NUMBER OF GRANTS	SPENDING BY ACTIVITY								
		Local Food	Equipment	Building Connections with Farmers**	Staff Training	School Gardens	Other	Marketing Materials	Travel to Trainings	Curriculum Development
2011-2012	8	\$7,200 (5)	\$1,112 (4)	\$1,135 (5)	\$1,625 (2)	\$0 (0)	\$550 (1)	n/a (1)	\$370 (4)	0
2012-2013	24	\$10,667 (16)	\$6,634 (14)	\$6,140 (18)	\$4,916 (14)	\$5,798 (7)	\$2,976 (4)	\$2,459 (11)	\$1,748 (11)	\$598 (3)
2013-2014	17	\$13,003 (14)	\$3,145 (9)	\$3,262 (9)	\$982 (4)	\$1,106 (3)	\$2,535 (6)	\$2,074 (8)	\$1,069 (8)	\$1,203 (4)
TOTAL	49	\$30,870 (35)	\$10,891 (27)	\$10,537 (32)	\$7,523 (20)	\$6,904 (10)	\$6,061 (10)	\$4,533 (19)	\$3,187 (23)	\$1,801 (6)

*Due to inconsistent and/or incomplete reporting by grantees, total grant spending is not represented here and reported expenditures by category are likely lower than actual spending. Category expenditures are not available for two grantees in the 2011-2012 grant year and one grantee in the 2013-2014 grant year.

**Costs include those associated with planning meetings, travel to farms as well as farmer visits to schools and early childhood programs, and outreach to farmers.

Over the years, grantees expressed a variety of challenges related to their farm to school efforts. The majority was able to achieve most of the objectives set out in their applications, but some grantees experienced challenges that required redirecting and adapting activities. Applicants were expected to be specific with their objectives and goals for the duration of the grant period, and grantees had multiple opportunities (through mid-year and year-end reporting, site visits and periodic check-ins) to touch base with grant program managers. The MI Farm to School Grant Program aims to be flexible so grantees can adapt their activities to unexpected challenges and/or opportunities. This flexibility has helped many grantees achieve their goals even when specific activities change. One common factor among

the more successful programs was having strong internal champions to propel the program forward. These champions were typically, though not always, the grant applicant and contact person. However, it is clear that successful farm to school programs depend on a confluence of factors and collaborations that differ greatly based on individual program characteristics and place-specific conditions.

The following is a summary of grantee experiences each year, illustrating the variability of programming, challenges and successes experienced across grant years, and including examples of innovative activities. Findings were gathered from grantees' mid-year and year-end reporting documents.

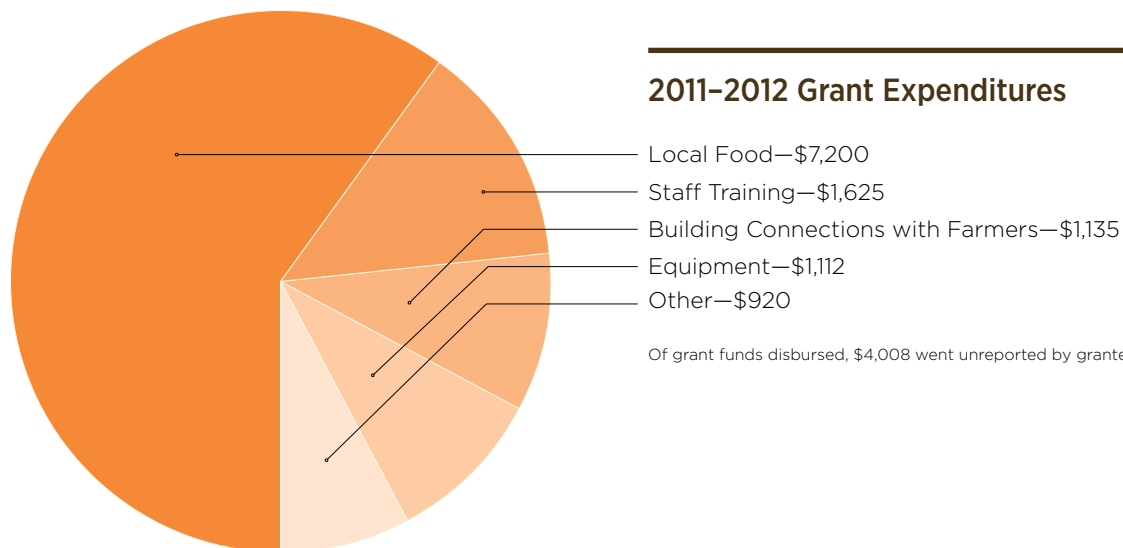
2011 to 2012

In the first grant year, eight K-12 school districts participated in the full grant year, receiving the maximum \$2,000 in funding for a total of \$16,000 disbursed. Four of these grantees received implementation grants, as they had already engaged in some type of farm to school activity, and four received planning grants. As previously noted, this first pilot year the program was available to only K-12 schools/districts so early childhood programs are not represented. These schools/districts served roughly 9,500 students and had an average free and reduced price meal reimbursement rate of 58 percent.

The majority of grantees in the first year used a significant portion of their grant funds to purchase local

foods. In total, five grantees reported spending over \$7,000 to purchase local foods, and two of those used nearly their entire \$2,000 grants for this purpose. One of these grantees noted that the funding helped to develop new connections with local farmers with plans to continue those relationships beyond the grant year.

Four grantees also made small equipment purchases with their funding. Spending on equipment ranged from small purchases, such as knives and cutting boards, to larger purchases, such as food processors and salad bars to increase the amount of processing and serving of fresh, local fruits and vegetables. One grantee noted that equipment purchases helped facilitate the use of local foods and increased storage capacity.



Though less common, some grantees spent significant portions of their funding to develop program materials. One planning grantee focused the majority of grant funding on creating documents to facilitate local food purchasing in future years. This included working with a local firm to compile a farm to school manual with a template invitation to bid for local vendors, on-farm food safety information, commodity pricing, forms for purchasing and receiving farm products, and scale-appropriate recipes using local ingredients. One implementation grantee spent funds on marketing materials, including posters, signage and flyers sent home to families, to use in promoting the farm to school program and the local farmers from whom they purchased food, though total spending was not reported.

The various challenges experienced by grantees in year one point to the wide variability of farm to school programs based on site-specific factors such as location, size of the school/program, kitchen and staff capacity, and partners engaged. Several grantees noted the seasonality of Michigan's agriculture (and that it is out of sync with the typical school year) as a challenge and attempted different strategies for adapting to it. One grantee chose to expand storage capacity in order to buy and then store more local food in the height of the harvest season. Another grantee sought relationships with farmers with extended season production, including hoopouses (passive solar greenhouses), that could increase produce available during the colder months. Still another grantee looked toward on-site agriculture production in a biodome, which led to the additional challenges of understanding and meeting regulatory requirements for using and serving the greens produced in it. Several grantees noted the structural challenge of working with external companies, whether a contracted food service company or a broadline distributor, to support their farm to school efforts as these arrangements dictated the avenues (and sometimes limits) for their local food procurement.

Though only one grantee used funds specifically to establish a farm to school advisory committee, collaborations with community entities had notable influence on grantees' successes. One grantee indicated that working with supportive school board members and administrators, parents and students increased effectiveness: "as we include others from the local community to share their knowledge, it will only make the program stronger." All grantees highlighted the positive impact of building community connections and engaging stakeholders outside of the school or district in their farm to school programming. Staff capacity and time were consistently noted as limiting factors, but additional, external person-power can help to sustain and propel farm to school programs forward.

Drawing on existing expertise from within the community also allowed some grantees to overcome challenges that arose throughout the year. For example, one planning grantee noted that the food service staff lacked knowledge of proper handling and storage procedures for fresh, local food. By collaborating with the local hospital, expertise of the hospital food service staff was leveraged to train the school food service staff members on proper storage, processing, and preparation procedures for fresh, unprocessed fruits and veggies. Grantees also noted that these community connections contributed to wider access to more varied resources, and several grantees built new relationships with farmers through farm to school team members' connections.

Overall, grantees in year one had positive experiences with the grant program and were able to achieve the majority of their objectives. Grantees' emphasis on sustainability and collaborative partnerships indicated their intentions to continue farm to school programming beyond future grant funding.

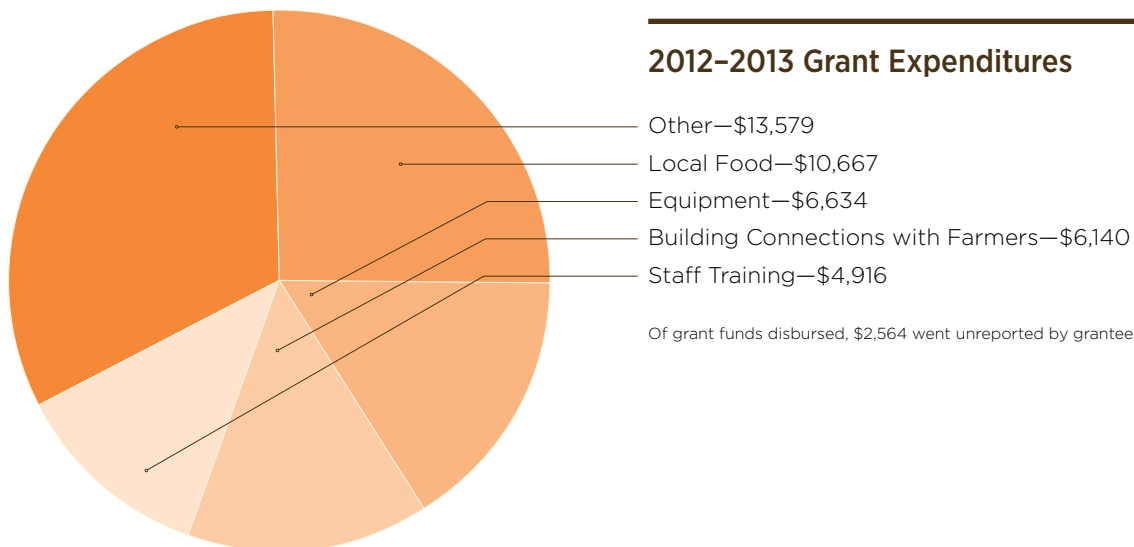
2012 to 2013

During the second year of the grant program, early childhood programs were eligible to apply in addition to K-12 schools. Of the 25 grantees admitted to the program, nine were early childhood programs and 16 were K-12 schools/districts, including one residential juvenile center. While \$49,000 in grants was awarded, only \$44,500 was disbursed among the 24 participating programs. One grantee left the program before funding was disbursed due to a change in food service director, and three awardees received only half of their grant funding due to lack of progress. Only five of these awardees received implementation grants, and the rest received planning grants. Two of the grantees continued from year one. The 24 programs served roughly 20,389 students throughout the state.

With more grants and the addition of early childhood programs, grantees in the second year of the program used their funds in a wider variety of ways. With 19 of 24 grants in the planning category, most grantees were not as focused on purchasing local food in their planning year. On average, they used less of their funding for this purpose: 16 of 24 grantees reported spending a total of over \$10,000 on local food. Several common themes emerged in the application objectives in year two that were not as prominent in year one. The majority of grantees intended to focus on concrete strategies to build connections with local farmers. These strategies included hiring external consultants to develop a portfolio of local farmers

and available products, hosting meet and greets to connect with local farmers, and organizing staff outings to nearby farms. Nearly all grantees included one of these three methods of connecting with farmers in their application objectives (though not all used funds for this purpose), with success dependent on the responsiveness of farmers and collaboration among partners. Grantees that succeeded in connecting with farmers typically had strong partners, including external consultants, MSU Extension educators, and other community organizations with close ties to the local community. In total, these grantees spent approximately \$6,000 on building relationships with local farmers.

Similar to year one, many grantees used grant funds (nearly \$7,000) to purchase equipment for one of two areas: food preparation and processing, and packaging and storing. Several grantees bought equipment for freezing and storing local food, including a continuing grantee who used the majority of grant funding to purchase a vacuum packaging machine. This grantee also worked with a consultant to develop a detailed purchasing calendar that specified volumes to purchase during harvest season in order to ensure consistent, year-round supply, in addition to in-season use. Another grantee who applied for funds to subsidize the cost of a blast freezing system changed plans due to food service director turnover (a common challenge among grantees).



In year two, more grantees included an emphasis on assessing current practices before developing plans for moving forward. Some planning grantees were interested in assessing current food service operations to better understand capacity for utilizing more fresh and local food in their meals, including one grantee who worked with an external consultant to carry out this assessment. Assessments included outputs like a farm to school manual and menu opportunities to incorporate more local food. At the end of the school year, however, the one grantee that had hired an external contractor had yet to receive a farm to school manual that was a stated deliverable in their contract. Other notable expenditures for this grant year include an increase in the number of grantees using funds to create promotional materials for their farm to school program, as well as more grantees focusing on trainings for their staff. One early childhood grantee spent about half of their budget on food safety training for parents who contributed to their food preparation.

Early childhood programs used their grant funds for a variety of activities. These programs often emphasize learning and exposure opportunities for the young children they serve, and many grantees used funding to create curriculum related to food, agriculture and nutrition. Several early childhood grantees purchased agriculture- and food-related books and interactive puzzles, and two purchased play sets of fruit and vegetable stands to allow students to mimic purchasing food at farmers markets.

Early childhood grantees also directed funds to on-site gardens to foster experiential learning. Three grantees used nearly all their grant funding to develop gardens, some of which did contribute directly to their local food procurement strategies by using garden-grown produce in food programs. For most, however, production was not substantial enough to supply meal and snack programs, so gardens were used primarily to increase exposure to new foods to help improve children's acceptance of local foods in food programs. Though a few K-12 school/district grantees also devoted funds to on-site gardens, these were more closely linked with providing food directly to meal programs rather than, or in addition to, the educational aspect of gardening. In total, grantees spent nearly \$6,000 on school gardens.

In the second year of the grant program, nearly all grantees established teams or committees to facilitate or support farm to school planning and/or activities. Though grantees reported varying levels of success in securing commitments from volunteers on these committees, it is evident that those who were able to develop cohesive teams had an easier time maintaining morale and making forward progress. Two grantees spent their funds almost entirely on events, outreach, and eventually planning meetings with these teams. Some also put grant dollars toward creating marketing materials to promote their farm to school programs and develop support among students, teachers, staff and parents.

Grantees continued to highlight the positive impacts of collaborative community partners. Though some experienced frustration with lack of response from farmers and other local organizations with whom they attempted to engage, in several cases having just one motivated partner was enough to see positive effects. One grantee had intended to work with multiple local farmers, but after receiving only one bid from a request for bids, ended up working exclusively with a local university-run farm. Though not the original intention, the farm proved to be a great source for local food, and the grantee succeeded in procuring more locally-grown food than initially planned. Planning meetings conducted with farm staff indicated that the relationship would continue after the grant period. Another grantee cited the benefits of partnering with the local health department, which facilitated the establishment of relationships with local farmers. Staff from the health department also provided free training on properly handling fresh produce to the school food service staff. In some cases, these partnerships leveraged additional resources, such as educational programming, or freed up grant funds to be used for other purposes.

In early 2013, inclement weather, including a hard frost in early spring, negatively impacted Michigan agricultural production and kept several grantees from carrying out their spring purchasing plans. At least three grantees mentioned severe weather and limited agricultural production as a challenge. One expressed difficulty in executing activities to connect with farmers, as the tough growing season left some farmers, especially tree fruit growers, with little capacity to initiate new business relationships at that time. Another

grantee noted difficulty in finding local produce due to weather, but adapted by working through a distributor to procure foods from throughout Michigan rather than a narrow geographic region.

Though many grantees achieved their goals, not all grantees reported positive experiences, largely due to factors outside their control. For some, challenges came through changes in key staff members or an unforeseen lack of staff capacity. For others, existing arrangements with contract companies, whether food service companies or full-service

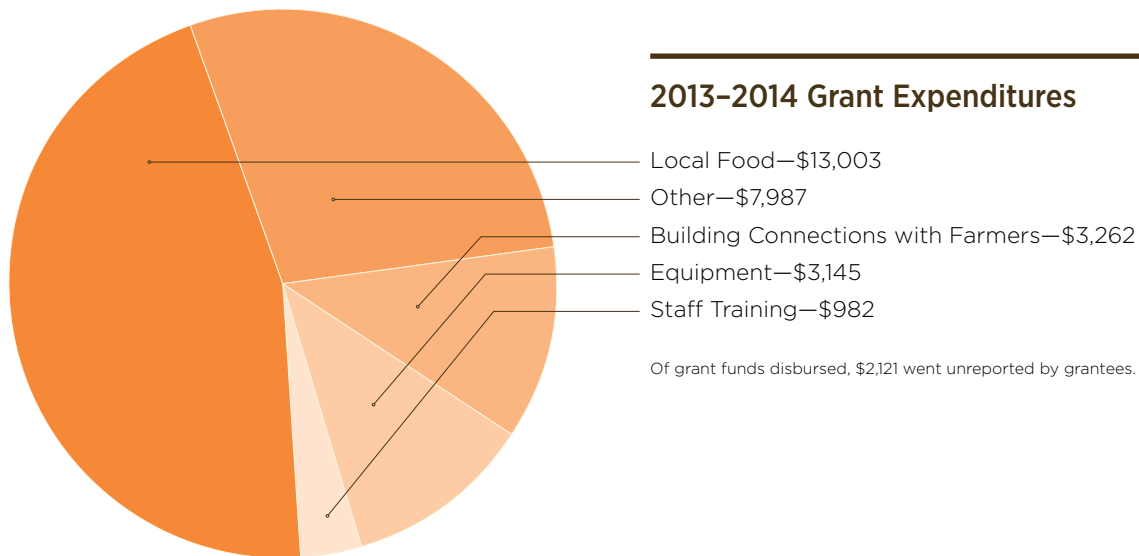
distributors, presented an additional barrier to working with preferred local producers. In the end, unexpected challenges made it difficult for some grantees to adjust their plans and budgets, causing three to receive only a portion of their allotted total funds. One applicant who was awarded a grant left the program before any funds were disbursed. However, the flexibility built into the grant program allowed others to adapt to challenges as they arose and achieve some level of success regardless.

2013 to 2014

The third year of the grant program brought higher retention of previous grantees. In total, nine grantees from the previous year applied and were awarded funding in year three, five of whom transitioned from planning grants to implementation grants and four of whom entered a second year in the implementation category. In year three, \$36,500 was awarded, but only \$30,500 was disbursed to 17 grantees, 11 of whom were from K-12 schools/districts and six of whom were from early childhood programs. Two applicants that were accepted into the program declined to participate before initial funding was disbursed. Unlike previous years, the 2013-2014 school year included more implementation grants (14) than planning (3), indicating a collective pool of more experienced farm to school practitioners. Together the grantees served about 10,775 children.

Once again, the flexibility of the program allowed grantees to effectively utilize their funding, though in most cases their activities did not align exactly with those outlined in initial budgets. Aside from those who declined to participate after being accepted, just two grantees were unable to use the entirety of their funding during the grant year.

Grantees in the third program year used more funds to purchase local food, a total of about \$13,000, than in year two. Out of the 17 grantees, 14 included line items in their budgets for purchasing local produce. Two grantees spent the full \$2,000 grant to buy local food, but the majority that did so also included supporting activities such as training, equipment purchases, or educational activities.



As in previous years, a number of grantees used funding to purchase kitchen equipment. In total, nine grantees spent roughly \$3,000 on equipment, including one grantee who purchased a refrigerator and others that purchased immersion blenders and juicers to expand their food offerings. One grantee used the entirety of grant funding on a vacuum sealer and juicers.

In the third program year, grantees spent over \$3,000 on cultivating relationships with local farmers. Six grantees included plans for bringing farmers to the school or early childhood program to talk to children about farming and their food products, and roughly half of the grantees in year three spent small amounts of funding on marketing materials for their programs. Some materials included information sent home to parents about the program, and others highlighted local farmers who grew food served in cafeterias. Three grantees also used funds for school gardens, though notably less than in year two. Unique to year three, three grantees used a total of \$2,100 to supplement the cost of staff time devoted to developing farm to school programming. Some grantees also directed grant dollars toward special community events and meetings.

One grantee formed an innovative partnership with the local food co-op, using a small amount of grant funding to purchase a multi-year co-op membership. This relationship allowed for purchasing leftover bulk local produce at a discounted price. Though more flexibility was required in the kitchen to adapt to the availability of certain foods with little notice, the grantee was able to purchase more local food due to lower prices. Two other grantees included flexible funding for farm surplus purchases, allowing them to take advantage of excess produce from local farmers at the height of the season.

Early childhood grantees differed from those at K-12 schools/districts by more frequently including in their plans activities focused on nutrition and local food education, building family connections, and community engagement. One notable success came from a grantee who paired local food purchasing efforts with educational and recipe spotlights in a farm to school newsletter. Measuring both beginning and year-end practices, the grantee saw an increase from 26 percent to 65 percent of families reporting they used fresh produce in daily family meals, and an increase from 19 percent to 89 percent of families

reporting that they were aware of and attended the local farmers market. Coupled with shifting menus to incorporate more local produce, this grantee influenced children's eating habits and access to local foods both in the food program and at home.

Again, the success of participating programs depended heavily on collaborative partners. One grantee who had initial plans to collaborate with other nearby schools to solicit farmer bids experienced numerous setbacks due to a lack of responsiveness among partners, which required the grantee to adapt planned activities at the mid-year point. The year two grantee who partnered with the local health department continued to attribute progress to this partnership in year three. Several grantees highlighted MSU Extension educators as important community partners for facilitating connections to local resources and farmers. Sustainable partnerships with farmers not only supported farm to school programming, but also provided increased financial security for farmers. One grantee noted that farmers reported the partnership with the early childhood program as "a key factor in their ability to gain economic stability."

Grantees experienced challenges similar to those cited in previous years, such as the impact of a delayed growing season on the ability to purchase local foods in the spring, slow progress in engaging local partners, and key staff changes. One grantee reported great success in partnering with the local farmers market, but had to shift focus to local food education between December and April when the market was not operating. Grantees noted staff changes as the most critical challenge to meeting their farm to school goals. In one case where the two key farm to school personnel transferred, the grantee was able to spend down grant funding during the grant year but opted not to apply for a third year. In addition to staff changes and limited capacity, excessive sickness and reduced staff time were considered detrimental to making progress with the farm to school program. Capacity and structural issues like these seem to be constant challenges to growing and/or maintaining farm to school programs, which will be addressed again later in this report.

► SUSTAINABILITY OF GRANTEES' FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAMS

In Fall 2014, a contracted evaluator set about interviewing all MI Farm to School grantees from the 2011-2012, 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 grant years. The primary goals of these interviews were twofold: determining the sustainability, or viability over time, of the farm to school programs established or expanded with this grant funding, and identifying aspects of the grant program and supported activities that contributed to continuing a farm to school program. Grantees who were interviewed were from both K-12 schools and early childhood programs. Those who continued receiving grant funding for the 2014-2015 grant year were not included in interviews as they were still part of regular, ongoing project evaluation efforts at that time. The following summary was compiled from a report provided by the contracted evaluator detailing these interviews, which were primarily conducted by phone.

Importance of Funding

All grantees interviewed reported that the grant funds were important to their farm to school efforts, but for different reasons. Grant funds made important contributions to:

- maintaining local food purchasing, despite budget cuts or by helping to extend tight budgets;
- developing relationships with local farmers, food hubs and other food suppliers;
- sending a clear message to farmers that the food program staff were serious about purchasing their local food products;
- purchasing key food service equipment;
- purchasing educational materials; and
- helping to make a dream, such as a garden or a hoophouse, a reality.

Per the focus of the grant program, continuing farm to school initiatives of grantees primarily centered on local food procurement, although early childhood programs tended toward school gardens and education. Grantees that still had active programs by 2014 displayed the flexible nature of farm to school. For some grantees, for example, farm to school meant:

- serving students more fresh fruits and vegetables, and perhaps adding a salad bar to do so;
- finding a supplier that identifies Michigan food products and ordering from that supplier as budgets allowed;
- seeking out local farmers and food processors and purchasing local foods from them; and/or
- developing a school garden and using it to engage students with their food supply and enhancing teaching efforts.

Usefulness of Resources and Activities

Training and education is an important part of the grant program structure, but the usefulness of these resources to grantees varied widely. Grantees generally enjoyed attending the in-person regional trainings required for program participation, but few reported making helpful contacts that they followed up with after the training. Those who received grants over multiple years also considered the training content to be somewhat repetitive. The webinar series, which is intended to cover topics of interest to current grantees, was well received as a way to learn about how other grantees and practitioners go about implementing farm to school. Several grantees made use of printed or emailed resources, primarily those about food safety, seasonality, and how to purchase local foods.

As a deliverable for participating in the grant program, grantees were required to submit an action or sustainability plan based on their grant category (planning or implementation) by the end of the year. Although some grantees had to be reminded of this written deliverable, several grantees indicated that this planning exercise was very helpful to move forward with intention. According to the evaluation report, one food service director mentioned that putting thoughts on paper helped to organize, prioritize and continue the farm to school program. Other grantees indicated that they had accomplished some of the goals they had set for themselves in their plans.

Grantees were permitted to use some funds for the purchase of equipment and materials to support their farm to school programs. In most cases, tangible materials (aside from food) that were bought with grant dollars were still in use at the time of the interview. These purchases included

equipment for food preparation, posters, books, toys, and materials to build gardens. In two cases, however, gardens that had been established with grant support were not in use after the grant ended. This was attributed fundamentally to not having a leader with expertise and time to plan, organize and problem-solve garden maintenance.

Program Viability

The following chart shows the level of farm to school viability for previous grantees based on a qualitative assessment made by the evaluator from interview responses. While 49 grants were provided in the first three years, only one contact person per grant was interviewed and some grantees received multiple grants during the three years. One grantee had grants for two different school districts, but was only interviewed once. In total, 25 interviews were conducted or attempted. As noted above, grantees who continued into the 2014-2015 year were not interviewed as they were still part of ongoing, regular evaluation activities.

Characteristics of Vibrant and Viable Programs

Characteristics of vibrant and viable farm to school programs that lasted beyond grant funding were compiled from interview responses. While any one of these characteristics may not independently result in a vibrant and viable program, they may represent important puzzle pieces for farm to school success. Some grantees indicated the importance of having a location in an agriculturally rich area where the local

culture is inclined to support farm to school. Others in urban or rural, less agriculturally rich locations found strength through stakeholder engagement in the program. They developed or utilized strong support and involvement from school or program administrators and/or strong engagement from the broader school/program community or local area.

Part of the training and technical assistance of the MI Farm to School Grant Program includes an emphasis on building farm to school teams. Though team structure and the number and type of members vary based on individual programs, members can include farmers, parents, teachers, students, administrators, staff members from local organizations, and other community members with an interest in advancing farm to school. Interviewed grantees cited principals, teachers, parents, school board members, local health department staff, tribal staff, farmers market managers and farmers, Master Gardeners, home visitors for early childhood programs, and local food hub staff as part of their community engagement efforts. Teams are intended to provide additional people-power for planning and implementing farm to school programs, taking some of the time and work burden off of the food program manager. Importantly, teams may also increase or at least disperse the knowledge, skills and capacity of maintaining a program beyond the food program director/manager. Among grantees, the turnover of food service directors indicates they can be rather transient. Therefore, it is critical that farm to school expertise rest with more than that one staff member. While farm to school programs may serve as legacies of champion food program directors, they should ultimately belong to the school or early childhood program in order to continue.

Program Viability*

TYPE AND LENGTH OF GRANT(S)	DISCONTINUED	MAINTAINING	GROWING
1 Year Planning	●●●●	●	—
1 Year Implementation	●	●	●
Planning + Implementation (one year each)	●●	●●●●●●	●●●●
2 Years Implementation	—	—	●
3 Years Implementation	—	●	—

K-12 grantee: ● Early childhood grantee: ●

*Three K-12 school/district grantees were unable to interview. One K-12 school is no longer operating.

Findings from Discontinued Programs

Seven grantees who were interviewed had discontinued farm to school programs after their grant funding ended. Reasons reported for discontinuing these programs included:

- staff changes, primarily the food service director position;
- funding limitations;
- lack of staff time;
- inability to find local food sources;
- complicated purchasing requirements; and
- lack of success with on-site gardens.

In the case of two school grantees, the food service director position had changed hands, with one of the school districts transitioning from self-operated to contracted food service management. In those cases, the learning curve was perceived to be steep, local food purchasing was not always a top priority for the new director, and/or documentation and materials related to activities were left with the previous director.

According to the evaluator, unstated but important factors prohibited sustainability. Grant dollars received were a very small contribution to overall food program budgets, and some grantees did not exhibit a strong sense of the value or meaning of farm to school programs. Additionally, the role of the lead writer of the grant application may impact the long-term viability of the program. In two early childhood programs in which farm to school efforts were discontinued, initial grant applications were written by staff members other than the primary food program director. This reinforces the need for the food program's primary decision-maker to be invested in and feel a sense of ownership over the program and its trajectory in order for it to be established and maintained into the future.

Maintaining and Growing Programs

Interviewees were asked what it would take to grow farm to school programs over time. Nearly all grantees stressed that an increase in food budgets is of utmost importance to better support local food purchasing. Additional food program labor, which also impacts the budget, was also mentioned frequently. Several grantees considered space for food storage, especially freezer space, as a factor limiting the growth of farm to school programs. In part, these findings concur with results of census surveys of Michigan school food service directors conducted around this time by CRFS. Budget constraints were listed among the top three barriers to local food purchasing in the 2009^v, 2012^{vi} and 2013^{vii} surveys. For the 2013 survey, top logistical challenges selected most frequently by school food service directors who responded (354 of 922) were lack of labor to prepare local foods (67 percent), storage (49 percent), and a distribution method for getting local food products to food service programs (44 percent). However, interviewed grantees considered additional training of food program staff to be helpful, but not necessarily critical. A few grantees were still seeking local farmers who were willing to sell to them and prepared with the right insurance coverage and food safety practices in place. One grantee expressed an interest in finding local farmers to speak with students at school.

As mentioned above, the transience of food service directors poses challenges to farm to school viability. Of 15 K-12 school/district grantees, eight had changed food service directors between the end of their grant funding and the follow-up interview. In six cases, the new food service directors were either unaware of the prior grant and its related activities or they did not respond to requests for an interview. In one case, the new food service director was formerly a nutrition educator in the school district. While she stepped in ready and excited to continue farm to school activities, she was unable to locate both the farm to school plan and resource materials provided through the grant program. At another smaller school district, a project director for the grant worked to purposefully coach a new superintendent as a farm to school champion who could, in turn, further engage others in the district's efforts.

Shifting from self-operated to contracted food service management is another structural challenge that seems to decrease the chances for farm to school implementation and sustainability. Between initial grant funding and the follow-up interview, three of the 15 participating school districts had transitioned from self-operated to contract-managed food service. Though all shifted to the same provider, this change impacted the districts differently. In one district, the new food service director was able to sustain some school garden work that began during the grant program, in large part because teachers and other school staff had already been engaged in these activities. In another case, the new food service director had previously served as a staff member under the former director who initiated the farm to school program. While this program had extensive community engagement, primarily from the local farming community, direct purchasing from local growers was not allowed under the new provider, so the farm to school work established previously was halted. An interview was not obtained in the third case to determine how the transition impacted the farm to school program, but the district has been out of contact since the grant ended.

Local food purchasing looked different between grantees with self-operated food service and those with contracted food service. Farm direct purchasing seems critical for many self-operated food service programs to develop robust local food procurement. Seven food service directors from self-operated programs agreed to be interviewed, and all have continued farm to school work. Five of them have purchased directly from local farmers, while two others focused on engaging students in producing food on-site for the food program. On the other hand, grantees with contracted food service, which all had the same provider, were not allowed to purchase directly from local growers

and producers per the company's policies. The company does, however, have approved vendors that provide Michigan foods, specifically two specialty food distributors. Three food service directors from contract-managed operations were interviewed and had continued farm to school activities, with two reporting they were sourcing Michigan foods from those approved vendors.

In comparison, early childhood programs tended to be managed in-house and fed a smaller number of children. Some fed only snacks, while others received meals from an affiliated K-12 school food service program. Early childhood program staff more often utilized a farmers market to purchase local food directly from farmers or engaged in community supported agriculture (CSAs, or food boxes) through local producers. These characteristics of farm to early childhood programs seem to present an advantage of more flexibility over programs at K-12 schools, which have more structural challenges and constraints.

► WHAT IS MISSING: IDEAS FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

From this interview process, several ideas for moving forward and strengthening the technical assistance and support offered by the grant program became apparent and are listed below. Some ideas fill gaps while others take advantage of existing resources and capacity within this growing network of grantees or within the now stronger web of food systems support in Michigan.

- Reinforce the importance of the farm to school legacy, emphasizing that action/sustainability plans belong to the school or early childhood program, and a copy should be left with other documentation on local food sources and supporting activities.
- Develop and use a farm to school readiness checklist as part of the grant application process, both to help applicants identify factors that can support farm to school and their true starting point and assist grant managers with application review and selection.
- Develop and disseminate a guide on how to identify and purchase Michigan foods through full-service (broadline) distributors.
- Develop and deliver an in-person, hands-on food preparation training for food program directors and staff to better utilize whole, fresh, and/or seasonal Michigan foods.
- Share best practices on freezing seasonal produce for extended winter use.
- Train grantees on how to use social media to create buzz around their farm to school activities.
- Develop a process, possibly an awards structure, to highlight Michigan Farm to School champions, particularly for those working toward the Michigan Good Food Charter goal of purchasing 20% Michigan foods by the year 2020.

► RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STARTING A SIMILAR PROGRAM

Now in its fifth year at the time of writing this report, the MI Farm to School Grant Program can serve as a model for others wishing to begin a similar program in their state, region or community. In addition to the experiences and feedback of grantees, as mentioned earlier, our experience as managers of this grant program provides insights about how one could better design and implement a robust program with lasting impacts from the start. Our recommendations, including for administration and key partnerships, are listed below.

- The rationale or need for a MI Farm to School Grant Program was validated through survey research conducted with school food service directors. Data collection can help identify the need and readiness for this type of program at the outset and make a case for funding it.
- Instead of providing a maximum, flat amount for early childhood and K-12 school/district programs regardless of size, a tiered funding structure could be developed to provide more suitable grants and better justify impacts.
- Providing a curated list and/or developing location-specific farm to school resources, such as our Step-By-Step Guides⁵, can help practitioners move forward on their own as much as possible.
- The webinar series offers a great opportunity for tailoring educational needs to meet the grantees' specific and changing needs and priorities annually.
- Require all grantees to develop and participate in farm to school teams, or something similar, to increase farm to school viability and help make farm to school a sustainable legacy of grantees who may leave or transfer.
- Standardized, simple, objective requirements make reporting manageable for grantees while providing a way for program managers to identify outliers. Narrative reporting, however, should not be eliminated since it provides opportunities for grantees to tell their stories and uncover challenges or issues following through with grant activities.
- Develop and use a tracking tool to document site visits, which also provides another opportunity to uncover latent needs or pressing questions that have not yet been raised. Prioritize new and/or high need grantees for site visits first.
- There are always grantees who are more independent, resourceful and motivated than others. Lift up the stories and innovative practices of these grantees, possibly having them shared in webinars and/or trainings, and triage your time for technical assistance for grantees that need it the most. If more intensive technical assistance and/or leadership development is a goal of the program, the grant program would likely need to be smaller, with fewer grantees, but with the same amount of time for the program managers.
- We attempted to provide a mentorship component to the grant program that offered additional funding for implementation grantees who were interested and willing to mentor planning grantees. Little interest was expressed in this idea, likely due to time constraints. A mentorship component, or grant requirements for sharing skills and knowledge gained through local education efforts, would likely be beneficial for leadership development and effective peer-to-peer learning.
- While evaluation interviews with grantees are time-intensive and may require an external contractor, they are critical to helping uncover challenges that may otherwise go unnoticed through site visits.
- The MSU Extension Community Food Systems work group has provided a network of strong, ground-level and community-based partners that can provide more specialized, local technical assistance to grantees. A similarly strong partner would be ideal for any new program, and this relationship could be formalized and/or budgeted in initial planning.
- Partnerships with relevant state agencies, such as the Michigan Department of Education and Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, can help demonstrate support for a grant program, as well as legitimize it for funders and practitioners.

⁵ MSU CRFS has developed a suite of farm to school guides, including *Purchasing Michigan Products: A Step-By-Step Guide*, *Farm to Early Childhood Programs: A Step-By-Step Guide*, and *Garden to Cafeteria: A Step-By-Step Guide*, available at www.mifarmtoschool.msu.edu.

► LOOKING FORWARD

The first phase of the MI Farm to School Grant Program was designed to increase the skills and knowledge of food service directors at K-12 schools and early childhood programs to develop and sustain farm to school programs. Farm to early childhood programs are still just in their infancy, but farm to school activity and interest in Michigan continue to grow. Survey results show that challenges and barriers persist, however. Lack of products available during certain times of the year, food safety concerns, and available budget continue to be barriers to serving local foods more frequently, and lack of labor to prepare local foods, storage and distribution methods still present logistical challenges.^{viii} These conditions indicate that need still exists for continued, high-level farm to school financial and technical assistance. However, more tailored technical assistance and training opportunities are required to meet a wider range of farm to school experience so training and education opportunities associated with the grant program continue to be adapted. Though meeting varied levels of experience poses a challenge, this also presents an opportunity to utilize experienced farm to school practitioners to train and/or mentor newer practitioners.

Additionally, the first phase of the MI Farm to School Grant Program and the experiences of participating food service/program directors highlighted the need to build up and connect the dots of the local food supply chain, including farmers, aggregators and distributors, and processors, to help meet the increased demand for local foods in schools and early childhood programs. With that in mind, the next phase of the broader Michigan Farm to School project, subtitled Digging In and Taking Root, includes a goal to increase the capacity of both farmers and good food⁶ infrastructure. This coordinated initiative between the MSU CRFS, the Michigan Farmers Market Association (MIFMA) and the MSU Department of Horticulture responds to opportunities in both food production and school and early childhood markets.

⁶ The Michigan Good Food Charter defines good food as food that is healthy, green, fair and affordable. See www.michiganfood.org for more information.

Hoophouses for Health

Michigan's limited outdoor growing season presents challenges for year-round local food procurement for school and early childhood food programs. Developing the capacity of Michigan's farmers to produce for these markets is, in part, dependent upon increasing infrastructure for season extension. Hoophouses for Health (HhfH), part of the newest Michigan Farm to School project, works to increase access to good food for vulnerable children and families while simultaneously increasing good food production and season extension infrastructure for Michigan farmers.

Through HhfH, farmers receive zero-interest five-year loans to build hoophouses (passive solar greenhouses) that are then repaid over three to five years by providing the equivalent amount of food to their communities by:

1. distributing vouchers to community partners who, in turn, distribute vouchers, primarily through Head Start programs, to vulnerable families with young children that can be used at participating farmers markets to purchase from participating farmers, and
2. partnering with schools and early childhood programs to provide food directly to their meal programs.

Like the MI Farm to School Grant Program, HhfH has similar requirements to ensure it benefits vulnerable populations, including those in the 50 percent free and reduced price meal reimbursement rate threshold, or the equivalent for early childhood programs, to determine eligibility for farm to school partnerships.

The three partner organizations (MSU CRFS, MIFMA and the MSU Department of Horticulture) have complementary roles in executing this program, which draw on their respective areas of expertise and relationships: MIFMA staff members develop and expand farmers market partnerships, recruit farmers, and distribute vouchers to community organizations; MSU Department of Horticulture staff members provide technical assistance and expertise to farmers in hoophouse site development and construction, planning and planting, business development and marketing; and MSU CRFS staff (the MI Farm to School Grant Program managers)

identify partnering schools and early childhood programs and provide technical assistance on using local, seasonal foods in their meal programs.

The primary way for farmers to repay their loans is at farmers markets where vouchers are redeemed by families for products sold at standard farmers market prices. Evaluation is still ongoing, but rates of voucher distribution by families at farmers markets seem to depend on having strong community partners willing to distribute vouchers as well as educate parents about farmers markets and the voucher system, and help get families to the markets. In some cases, partners have even provided transportation and education at the farmers markets to encourage participation. Participating markets with strong community partners typically see higher voucher redemption rates and more families using the market. In other cases where community partners simply distribute vouchers without offering additional support, farmers see less market traffic and may have trouble meeting their repayment amounts.

Starting in 2014, participating farmers were allowed to repay up to half of their loan amounts through the farm to school option. MSU CRFS staff members identify qualifying schools and early childhood programs that are ripe partners for interested farmers. They then communicate with each other about specific product availability and quantities, delivery schedules and other logistical details. Farmers set their own wholesale prices for the food products and return zero-balance invoices both to the school for verification and/or record-keeping purposes and to MIFMA to be deducted from their total loan agreement. As relationships develop, some farmers and their partnering staff at schools or early childhood programs work together to develop planting and sourcing plans that will best meet the needs of both parties.

The process of finding both farmers and ready school and early childhood partners is labor intensive and requires significant staff time. Farmer recruitment activities include informational sessions with participating farmers markets, internet-based outreach, word of mouth between participating farmers, and educational opportunities such as workshops on selling to institutions. These workshops, which serve dual purposes of

educating more farmers to sell to institutions and recruiting more farmers to participate in HhfH, also require significant planning and coordination, partner involvement, and financial resources.

Identifying partnering schools and early childhood programs requires a similar level of one-to-one outreach. Previous MI Farm to School grantees provide a pool of trained farm to school practitioners to partner with HhfH farmers, when appropriately located, and current grantees are often the first connections to be considered. However, as neither program is active in every community across the state, interested farmers may be located in areas where no known farm to school activity is occurring. In these cases, searching for partners includes cold calling area schools and early childhood programs that qualify and conducting outreach through partner organizations such as the Michigan Department of Education, Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) sponsors, early childhood organizations, community organizations, food hubs, and MSU Extension. Seeking these connections provides an outreach opportunity to educate those unfamiliar with farm to school about the initiative and uncover additional interested practitioners, but it tends to require substantial staff time and education about farm to school basics.

In developing these partnerships with school and early childhood partners, HhfH addresses the seasonality issue with school food procurement. The square footage of hoophouse production added through HhfH increases the number of months when

farmers can produce food to provide to these food programs, and the schools and early childhood programs are able to find sources for their local food purchasing that last through more of the school year. The financial incentive whereby schools and early childhood programs essentially receive free food products during the farmers' repayment period, allows them to develop relationships with farmers and temporarily overcome financial constraints of farm to school. Additionally, these relationships allow for a trial period in which farmers are able to gain practical experience working with these institutional markets and build their capacity and knowledge without the typical financial risk.

No farmers have yet completed the program and paid off their loans in full, so it remains to be seen if they will continue these relationships with schools and early childhood programs after the financial incentive ends. The ideal long-term scenario is that through this trial period, schools and farmers deepen their understanding and trust of each other and gain a better idea which farm products are financially feasible for both parties so that they can continue a viable relationship in the future. Additionally, increasing the number of farmers who have both experience working with institutions and additional season extension capacity has the potential to elevate farm to school and farm to institution overall in Michigan. Although most partnerships are still in their early stages, we are already seeing strong relationships showing signs of trust, commitment, and long-term viability.

The Evolving Web of Support in Michigan

Since the start of the MI Farm to School Grant Program in Fall 2011, the web of food systems support in Michigan has grown and strengthened in important ways, creating a more fertile environment to cultivate and sustain farm to school programs. When the MSU CRFS officially launched in 2012, it did so with a number of work groups to reinforce and highlight its efforts. Work groups focusing on institutional food purchasing and livestock were initiated, along with the new Michigan Food Hub Network. A Local Food Council Network was later launched in 2015.

In 2014, the Institutional Food Purchasing work group formally transitioned to the Michigan Farm to Institution Network (MFIN) with broader statewide membership. Targeted institutions include schools and early childhood programs interested in or engaged with farm to school, but also hospitals, colleges and universities and senior centers and living facilities purchasing local foods. The purpose of the MFIN is to create a space for learning, sharing and working together around farm to institution, and it is guided by the Michigan Good Food Charter goals that institutions will source 20 percent of their food from Michigan by 2020 and that farmers will profitably supply 20 percent of institutional and other local markets. MFIN brings together institutional food buyers and chefs, farmers, food distributors and vendors, supporters, and advocates.

The management team of MFIN is intentionally working with the Michigan Food Hub Network and the Livestock Work Group to better link local and regional food supply chains with ready and interested institutional buyers. At the writing of this report, the concept of a network of networks is taking root to further coordinate and support good food work in Michigan, including farm to school programs.

In 2014, the MSU CRFS also initiated a shared measurement project to track the statewide progress toward the Michigan Good Food Charter goals. A contracted team was hired to coordinate and execute initial project activities, including surveys and interviews of food systems stakeholders in Michigan. These efforts revealed that healthy food access and economic impacts, along with institutional food purchasing, were top priorities for stakeholders. Given that MFIN launched with Cultivate Michigan, a local food purchasing and tracking campaign targeting institutional food buyers, the team is primarily working to support this shared measurement project already in progress. At the writing of this report, MFIN management team members engaged in Cultivate Michigan tracking were planning to attend a first national meeting to share measurement strategies with staff from other large-scale efforts (statewide, regional and national) to track local food purchasing.

FARM TO SCHOOL & HOOPHOUSES FOR HEALTH CONNECTIONS

All three of the following partnerships between Hoophouses for Health farmers and farm to school buyers highlight the importance and benefit of building personal and trusting relationships between farmers and food program staff.

Willingness to adapt and be flexible, taking time to understand each other's needs and constraints, and continuing commitment to goals are characteristics of these working relationships. Though ideal matches are occasionally found on the first try, in some cases it can take several attempts by program staff to identify appropriate partners as each participating farmer and food program is unique. In spite of the investment of staff time, developing these relationships is critical for long-term viability of these farm to school programs and the project overall.

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

In 2014, one HhfH farmer began working with a children's center that prioritizes food and nutrition education in the classroom. This children's center was a farm to school grantee in both 2014-2015 and 2015-2016, and through this partnership it has been able to expand its cooking lessons with students to incorporate the local products provided from the farm. Though center staff had already integrated nutrition and cooking education into its programming, this partnership has allowed them to incorporate connections with farmers, seasonality, and local foods. The partnership also provides a market for the farmer as other markets dwindle during the winter season, thereby allowing for expanded production. By working together, the farmer and chef at the children's center have begun developing planting schedules for food products that meet both their needs. Apart from providing food, the farmer is now involved in parent orientations and cooking demonstrations with the children to add depth to their farm to school programming. Trust, commitment to the partnership, and open and frequent communication have been essential in building this farm to school relationship.

JUVENILE CENTER

A partnership between an HhfH farmer and a residential juvenile center initiated in the summer of 2015 has proved to be uniquely beneficial to both. The juvenile center has flexibility built into its meal service, as all food preparation is done on-site and the support of administration has allowed the food service director to pursue new purchasing avenues, including direct from local farmers. The food service director, who is a trained chef, can accommodate surplus from farmers and is willing to try unique or unfamiliar products. The food service staff offers culinary education for residents, using local foods to provide hands-on educational experiences for residents that increase receptivity to new foods. In 2015, ample eggplant harvests found a new home through this partnership. The adaptability and flexibility of the food service staff, along with both the farmer and food service director's enthusiasm and willingness to communicate, help this partnership thrive. Because of their strong relationship, local food from this farmer is now part of the regular food service budget, and the food service staff has now made purchases beyond the HhfH program repayment.

SCHOOL DISTRICT PARTNER

In Fall 2014, one HhfH farmer began working with a school district already engaged in farm to school. This district was a recipient of a U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm to School planning grant and, prior to that, a MI Farm to School Grant. Though food service staff had already developed relationships with local farmers, none were using hoopouses. The HhfH connection helped them continue their farm to school program into months when local foods had not previously been available. As the produce is essentially donated through HhfH, school food service staff may need to be flexible in working with the products the farmer has available, and the farmer occasionally delivered quantities of products that at first seemed excessive for the school food program. However, this opportunity encouraged the staff to find new uses for these products. They adapted by having contests among the cooks to develop

new recipes, which then resulted in sourcing more food locally and better planning for seasonal availability. The enthusiasm and willingness from both the farmer and food service director to adapt have been critical to the success of this partnership. With a shared plan to continue the relationship after the loan repayment period, the farmer and the food service director are also working together to develop planting schedules for products meeting both of their needs. The food service director has noted how this relationship has expanded the school district's commitment to farm to school: "It started with just wanting to feed the kids healthy nutritious foods, but it's expanded as we see the need in Michigan. We really want to support the Michigan farmers and have everyone in our community really understand the need for a good agricultural food system and the benefits it could do for Michigan."

CONCLUSION

In the first three years of the grant program, the MI Farm to School Grant Program provided \$91,000 to 49 schools, districts and early childhood programs serving over 40,000 vulnerable children (some of which were duplicated over multiple grant years). About one-third of total grant dollars disbursed was used to purchase local foods, meaning we know that at least \$30,000 was invested back into local communities and the Michigan economy. Grantees' expenditures toward kitchen equipment, building connections with local farmers, and supporting farm to school teams are investments to maintain and expand farm to school programs that can endure beyond participation in the grant program. Farmers that have been selling to participating schools and early childhood programs have gained experience and knowledge of the unique structure and needs of food programs that serve children, which may better prepare them to work with institutions of all types in the future should they seek to. Likewise, the approximately \$7,500 invested in staff training contributes to building the collective skills and knowledge of farm to school practitioners to implement these programs. Many food program directors and staff who participated in the grant program continue to engage in a larger network of farm to school and farm to institution practitioners throughout the state that support their efforts going forward, including through food production and supply chain connections.

The MI Farm to School Grant Program's benefits to children, farmers, and the state economy make the case for adapting a similar program to the needs and capacity of other communities, states or regions. However, it is not without challenges that must be addressed or acknowledged when programs are established elsewhere. Significant and growing farm to school interest and activity in Michigan made for fairly easy recruitment of applicants, and a strong existing network of farm to school technical assistance providers and facilitators contributed ground-level support for grantees. If these conditions had not existed, more effort would have been put toward promoting the benefits of farm to school to help with recruitment, connecting with and educating local partners to help support grantees, and/or providing more extensive training and technical assistance to grantees. The grant program requires significant staff time to administer, including provision of training and education opportunities and adequate technical

assistance. However, this close experience with grantees has enabled CRFS staff to deepen their expertise, widen their network, and expand the suite of educational resource materials that can help farm to school programs grow across the state. Each farm to school program is unique to its local characteristics and priorities, but as relationships are the heart of farm to school so are they the heart of a successful grant program. A thoughtful, intentional series of touches through in-person trainings, educational webinars, and evaluation activities can help uncover program challenges or roadblocks that may go otherwise unnoticed, so a plan of consistent and regular communication is required for a successful overall program. The development of farm to school teams seems to be a key strategy to support grantees, increase community capacity to maintain and expand farm to school programs, and improve the chances that the program will be sustained despite staff changes and beyond the external funding support.

Funding provided through the MI Farm to School Grant Program represents not only annual, direct expenditures, but also longer-term investments to increase good food access and availability for Michigan's children and create viable market opportunities for Michigan farmers, food processors and vendors. The majority of farm to school programs that were established through this grant program were maintained or still growing after the grant funding had ended. Most of the continuing programs had received both planning and implementation grants, which point to the benefits of sustained and multi-year funding opportunities. The MI Farm to School Grant Program has proven a fruitful strategy to help offset the structurally tight budgets of food programs at schools and early childhood programs and support planning and implementation activities over time. As the web of food systems support in Michigan grows stronger and wider, barriers associated with farm to school programs, including the seasonality of local agricultural production, the lack of local producers and lack of distribution systems for local food, will weaken. Still in operation at the time of this writing in 2016, the MI Farm to School Grant Program continues to contribute to the vision and goals for a good food system in Michigan by helping institutions source more of the local foods they want, increasing kids' access to healthy and local foods, and expanding institutional market opportunities for farmers.

ENDNOTES

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