



WHAT A DIME CAN DO: An Evaluation of the 10 Cents a Meal Pilot

10 Cents a Meal for School Kids & Farms (10 Cents), administered by the Michigan Department of Education, matches what participating schools spend on Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables, and legumes with grants of up to 10 cents per meal. This brief is part of What a Dime Can Do, an evaluation report on two years of the pilot program (2017-18 and 2018-19).

Recommendations for Future Evaluation

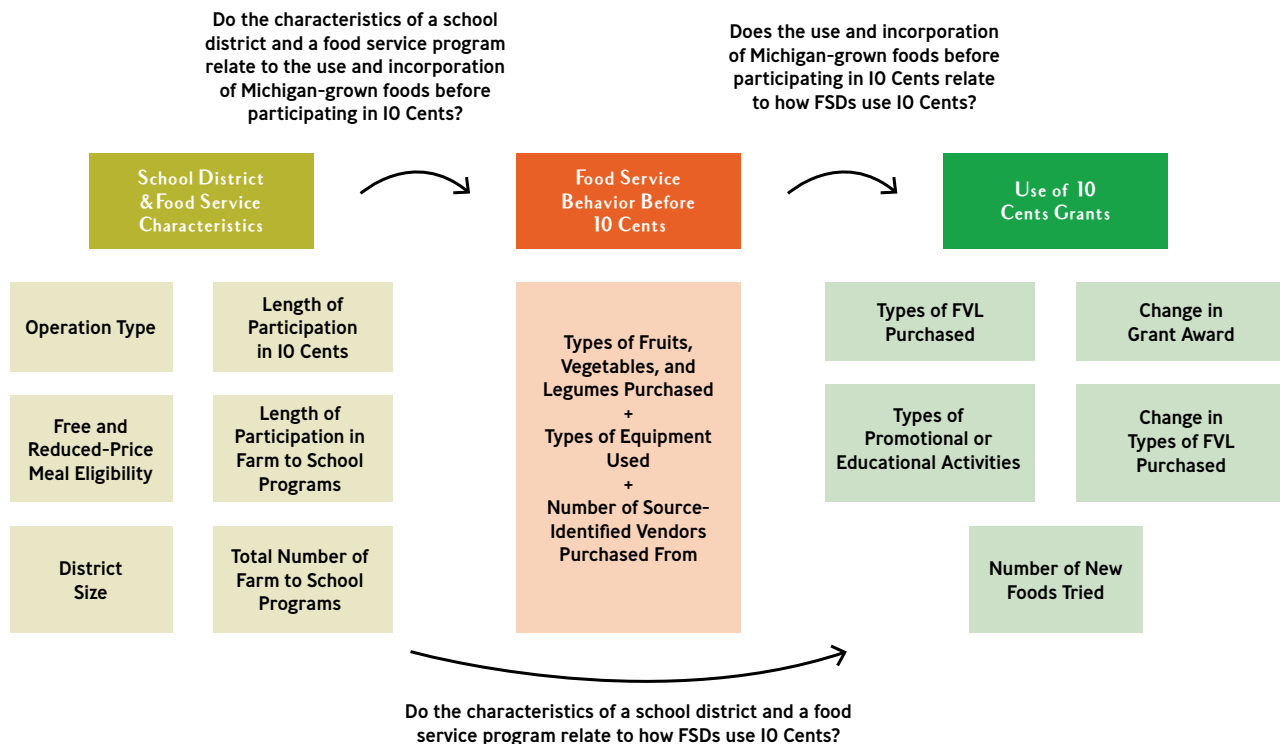
As part of our evaluation of 10 Cents, we were interested in understanding the culture of food service programs and ways that food service culture related to either school district and food service characteristics or food service directors' (FSDs) use of 10 Cents.

While culture has many elements, including knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, norms, and behavior, we focused only on behavior. To do this, we created a composite variable that reflected three data points from FSDs' applications to participate in 10 Cents: 1) reported purchases of Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables, and legumes (FVL), 2) types of equipment used to prepare Michigan-grown foods, and 3) the number of source-identified vendors purchased from.¹

We then looked at whether the characteristics of school districts and their food service programs related to this composite measure of food service behavior. We also looked at whether food service behavior related to FSDs' use of 10 Cents. Finally, we looked at whether the characteristics of school districts and food service programs directly related to FSDs' use of 10 Cents.

These potential relationships are shown in the conceptual model below. Based on our analyses of these potential relationships, we offer the following recommendations for future evaluation.

The diagram below depicts a conceptual model of potential relationships between district characteristics, food service behavior prior to participating in 10 Cents, and how food service directors used 10 Cents grants.



¹ See Technical Notes for additional details on how this measure was calculated.

Recommendations for Future Evaluation (cont.)

Consider other ways to capture the extent to which 10 Cents leverages additional spending on Michigan foods.

Current 10 Cents tracking mechanisms only capture what is spent on local foods within the program. While some grantees report additional purchases, most only reported the purchases needed to demonstrate their required match. In other words, the data is a better reflection of reporting behavior than of purchasing behavior. Initial interview findings indicate that 10 Cents does capture the vast majority of spending on local FVL, but this may not be universally the case or remain true indefinitely.

If understanding whether participation in 10 Cents leverages additional local purchases is a priority for future evaluation, it will be important to incentivize or compensate this additional reporting. Presumably, many districts only reported the minimum required because of the burden involved with identifying eligible products and submitting invoices.

One potential approach could be considering overspending in the program as a factor in the 10 Cents application and selection process for the following program year. Another approach is to work with distributors to add information on FSDs' purchases of Michigan-grown foods directly to the tracking platform used for 10 Cents, rather than expecting FSDs to input all of the required information themselves.

Continue to track the percent change in grant awards and match spending.

At the midpoint of the school year in 2017-18 and 2018-19, MDE reviewed what FSDs participating in 10 Cents had spent to date and reallocated funds for some of the districts to ensure that all 10 Cents grant awards were fully spent by the end of the year.

MDE decreased the award for some grantees that were not on track to meet the required match and increased the award for some grantees that were on track to exceed the required match. Some districts that were on track to exceed the required match were not able to receive additional program funds because they had already been granted the maximum amount of ten cents per school meal.

Our analysis showed that the percent change in grant award – whether the award was increased or decreased and by how much – appears to relate to the direction of change in FVL types purchased before and during the program.² In other words, the FSDs who purchased fewer FVL types through 10 Cents than they reported purchasing in their application were also the FSDs who had the largest average decrease in grant awards.

Continuing to track the percent change in grant awards could show if this relationship continues to hold as well as help reveal if some FSDs struggle to meet the required match and why. At the same time, if future evaluations show that the ability to meet the match requirement increases with experience in the program, as indicated in our findings, this may cease to be a meaningful indicator. If fewer districts struggle to meet the match requirement, there will be less money to reallocate and there will be fewer districts with changes in their grant awards.

Continue to track the number of fruit, vegetable, and legume types grantees purchase.

Our analyses show that increased experience with 10 Cents specifically and farm to school generally correlate with increased FVL types purchased. However, our findings also show that low numbers of FVL types purchased could be a reflection of sourcing challenges, sophisticated decision making, an effort to maximize multiple funding sources, including federal school food funds, and individual food service priorities.

In other words, it is not yet clear whether the number of FVL types purchased is a reliable indicator of optimal use of the 10 Cents program. For some food service programs, a large number of FVL types may not be an appropriate goal, and FSDs need the flexibility to determine what works best for their programs and students. Additional information from the perspective of FSDs is needed to better understand the extent to which purchasing a variety of FVL types is an appropriate program goal.

² For this analysis, see Farm to School Experience Matters: Insights from an Analysis of Food Service Director Behavior.

Recommendations for Future Evaluation (cont.)

Add a question on farm to school experience to the 10 Cents application.

We found that food service behavior appears to be related to the number of FVL types purchased in the program. Operation type (self-operated or contract managed food service programs), length of participation in 10 Cents, length of participation in different farm to school programs, and total number of different types of farm to school programs also related to food service behavior.

However, with the exception of operation type, which was related to food service behavior but not to the number of FVL types, we found all of these same relationships between the food service characteristics and FSDs' use of 10 Cents grant awards directly.

In other words, farm to school experience and food service behavior are similarly related to the FVL types purchased in the program. However, farm to school experience is simpler to measure and recall than the aspects of local food purchasing and use that comprise the food service behavior variable.

Therefore, **we recommend adding two questions to the 10 Cents application: one on the school district's experience and another on the FSD's individual experience with farm to school programs.** Both questions are necessary since FSDs' individual leadership and district level factors are both important to the success of local sourcing programs and because FSDs move positions fairly frequently.

Adding these questions to the application would allow for experience to be a factor in selection as well as provide insight into the level of support or technical assistance that grantees may need in the program.

Do not rely on free and reduced-price meal eligibility or district size to predict utilization of 10 Cents.

We did not see any relationships between either the rate of free and reduced-price meal eligibility or the district size (measured by number of students as well as number of meals served) and any other variables in our dataset.

Because we saw no patterns with district size, which often correlates with community type (e.g., urban vs. rural), we would not expect to see any relationship between community type and 10 Cents program utilization. We did not run this analysis, however.

The one characteristic that may be relevant to how the program is used is operation type – whether a food service program is self-operated or contracted. While we did not see any relationship between operation type and the number of FVL types purchased or changes in grant awards, we did see a relationship between operation type and food service behavior.

Do not rely on the number of new foods tried or the number of promotional/educational activities to predict utilization of 10 Cents.

While the number of new foods tried and the number of promotional and/or educational activities are helpful to describe the ways in which the program was implemented and supported within a school district, we did not find any relationships between these variables and experience with 10 Cents, experience with farm to school, or operation type. Nor did we find any relationship between these variables and food service behavior or any other elements of how 10 Cents grants are used.

We hypothesize that the lack of patterns in the number of new foods tried is partly due to variations in FSDs' enthusiasm for new foods as well as the fact that the possibility of trying new foods will decrease over time.

The wide variation in promotional/educational activities may reflect differences in reporting behavior – since these figures reflect the number of types of activities each month rather than the number of actual activities each month, some FSDs may have counted individual activities in multiple categories while others may not have reported this way. The variation may also reflect differences in FSDs' awareness of activities happening outside of the cafeteria.

Recommendations for Future Evaluation (cont.)

Continue to explore food service culture.

Although there are many dimensions to food service culture, our evaluation was only able to look at behavior. Based on anecdotal conversations, it appears that a growing number of FSDs in Michigan are increasingly prioritizing local sourcing and food quality.

Future evaluations could seek to capture these changes in priorities or better understand the ways in which the attitudes, beliefs, and values of FSDs and their staff influence behavior and use of 10 Cents grants.

Survey students to learn more about potential health impacts.

One of the legislative aims of 10 Cents is to positively impact students' daily nutrition and eating habits. **Student surveys would provide valuable insights about how Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables, and legumes served in 10 Cents districts are being received by students and help assess potential health impacts** of the program.

Through this project, we developed a scalable electronic survey tool and protocol, though surveys could not be administered due to school closures resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. These tools were adapted from instruments devised and tested by FoodCorps³ and informed by insights from classroom teachers and participating FSDs through prior 10 Cents evaluation activities.

Additionally, while not an area of focus for 10 Cents as currently funded, student awareness of and connection to the foods they eat and where they come from may help support healthy eating behaviors.

Continue to examine purchasing data to learn more about 10 Cents suppliers and how products are prepared and served to students.

Learning more from FSDs about the forms in which 10 Cents products are purchased (e.g., fresh, dried, or frozen) and how they are prepared would increase our understanding of how Michigan-grown foods are incorporated into school meal programs throughout the year. To this end, FSDs could be asked to provide this information when submitting invoices.

Additionally, **increased knowledge of suppliers may help verify eligible purchases and meet the 10 Cents policy intention to track and report the farm of origin, while also easing some of the reporting burden** for MDE, 10 Cents partners, and participating FSDs.

We built on a draft categorization of suppliers and products as eligible or not for our internal use in this evaluation, but it could become a tool for more timely oversight of tracking purchases and real-time corrections. However, additional staff time would be needed to manage and vet purchasing data on a regular basis.

³Paxton, A., Domel Baxter, S., Fleming, P., & Ammerman, A. (2011) Validation of the School Lunch Recall Questionnaire to Capture School Lunch Intake of Third to Fifth Grade Students. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 111, 419-424.

foodsystems.msu.edu/what-a-dime-can-do