



Insights into the Stories of 10 Cents a Meal Farmers

10 Cents a Meal for Michigan’s Kids and Farms (10 Cents a Meal) is a state-funded program that aims to improve daily nutrition for Michigan school children and invest in the state’s agriculture economy. The program is administered by the Michigan Department of Education and matches what schools, early care and education centers, and other organizations participating in USDA Child Nutrition programs spend on Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables, and dry beans.

Photo credit: Sarah Rypma

In October 2024, a series of discussions took place among team members of the 10 Cents a Meal program and eight individuals representing small farms and businesses around the state. All participating farms and businesses had been reported as sources of 10 Cents a Meal grantee purchases over recent years. The purpose of the discussions was to gather and listen to the unique stories of farmers and their experiences with the 10 Cents a Meal program. To maintain confidentiality, the following findings have been aggregated and anonymized.

Below are top themes that emerged from the conversations:



FARMERS NEED FUNDS TO SCALE UP THEIR BUSINESSES TO BETTER SERVE GRANTEES OF THE 10 CENTS A MEAL PROGRAM.

- **All eight farmers** shared that selling to grantees can require more equipment and infrastructure (e.g., additional storage containers, walk-in coolers, and delivery vehicles) to grow and sell their local foods.
- Farmers also shared that grantees often request minimally processed options such as chopped or frozen products; however, this requires significant financial investment by farmers for additional processing equipment and storage.



“Miniature grants for farmers so we can scale up and better serve them...we applied for a few thousand bucks so that we could buy a refrigerated truck which solved a huge bottleneck for us. We store at the volume that [buyers] want and [we] deliver it to them. And this is all logistics that we were just like jumping hoop after hoop to do it before and it wasn’t a huge amount of money in the grand scheme of things.” — RURAL FARMER

IT TAKES A SIGNIFICANT TIME TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND CONNECT TO 10 CENTS A MEAL GRANTEES.

— **All but one farmer (88%)** shared that this was a common barrier to selling local foods to schools, and some shared that they volunteered their time to help with educational activities in the classroom to help promote local foods.



“We hear all the time from grantees, ‘I need help connecting with farmers, I don’t know how to start relationships, I don’t know what it’s going to be like because I’m so used to working with [broadline distributor].’ This is a whole new world for them, they don’t even know how to get started.” — URBAN FARMER

A majority of rural farmers reported a lack of food distribution channels as a barrier.

IT TAKES A SIGNIFICANT TIME TO SUPPORT THE EDUCATION OF 10 CENTS A MEAL TO PURCHASE AND SERVE LOCAL FOODS.

— Farmers often reported that their local 10 Cents a Meal grantees lacked readiness to effectively participate in farm to school and there was a need for more resources related to education, procurement, and menu development and food preparation.

- **Six of the eight farmers** said their local schools needed support with education related to seasonality and how to prepare local foods.



“...Our local public school doesn’t participate in 10 Cents a Meal and I was asked to go talk to their food service director about it. I was like, I don’t know what to say... so having more resources and information that we’re able to share would be amazing... I think it would get more people on board.”

— RURAL FARMER

- **Two farmers** shared about the need for more grantee education around culturally relevant foods and the importance of this work.

THERE ARE REGIONAL INFLUENCES ON THE INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS OF FARMERS.

— **Four out of five rural farmers** reported that a lack of food distribution channels and interested school food buyers as barriers. They also noted that delivering food to grantees in rural areas took more time than they could afford to spend away from the farm.



“I don’t mind [delivery] as long as it’s worth the drive if we’ve got enough product...but it’s when you start getting into small orders that you’re like, this is not worth the time off the farm.”

— RURAL FARMER

— **All three urban farmers** reported challenges related to growing within city regulations/restrictions, finding the right buyers to match smaller scale production (e.g., childcare centers), and educating potential grantees about the 10 Cents a Meal program.

THERE IS A DESIRE FOR MORE COLLABORATION WITH FARMERS, INCLUDING ACROSS SECTORS.

— All farmers shared the importance of collaboration with organizations, community members, and other farmers and suppliers. Some partnerships mentioned included FoodCorps, local tribes, food hubs, and regional land funds. Almost all farmers shared a desire for more collaborative partnerships to help support farm to school work in their region.

SOME OTHER THEMES MENTIONED BY FARMERS INCLUDED BUILDING SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES INTO THEIR BUSINESS AND THE DESIRE FOR PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES—SPECIFICALLY WITH OTHER FARMERS SELLING TO SCHOOLS.



“There’s probably other people that you’ve interviewed who could probably utilize what we’ve talked about and share some of the ideas we came up with ... maybe even some of us could come up with something!”

— RURAL FARMER

TOP QUESTIONS FROM FARMERS TO THE 10 CENTS A MEAL TEAM AND FARM TO SCHOOL PARTNERS:

1

HOW CAN 10 CENTS A MEAL GRANTEE ONBOARDING BE IMPROVED SO THAT GRANTEES HAVE THE RESOURCES AND EDUCATION TO PURCHASE AND PREPARE MORE LOCAL FOODS?

2

HOW CAN WE BUILD A THRIVING CULTURE OF FARM TO SCHOOL IN OUR COMMUNITIES AND WITH 10 CENTS A MEAL GRANTEES?



“How do you build relationships as the quintessential point of moving the needle...people willing to do the paperwork and say, I want to change my menu.”

— URBAN FARMER

3

HOW CAN WE FUND FARMERS AND FOOD SUPPLIERS TO SUPPORT THEIR WORK IN CONNECTING TO AND EDUCATING GRANTEES?

The work presented here is written by Megan McManus and May Tsupros of the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS). Thanks go to Emma Beauchamp, Mel Hill, and Bekah Galang for communications guidance and design, as well as Jen Anderson of Clearing Blocks LLC for copyediting. The authors are continuously grateful to the farmers and suppliers who participated in these discussions and provide 10 Cents a Meal grantees local food. This effort was generously funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and 10 Cents a Meal administrative funds for partner organizations.

To learn more, visit tencentsmichigan.org, canr.msu.edu/10-cents-a-meal, and mifarmtoschool.msu.edu.