



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).

Local Food Purchasing in a Pandemic: A Summary of 2019-2020 Grantee Survey Results

The coronavirus pandemic has required extraordinary and ever-changing adjustments to school food service operations since March of 2020. Schools statewide were mandated to close for in-person education for a time, but many food service operations continued providing meals to children and families, including through sack lunches, to-go meals, meal kits, and in bulk.

Although the total amount available from the state legislature remained the same as the previous year (\$493,500), 10 Cents grants looked very different in 2019-20. Due first to political negotiations and then to pandemic-related delays, state funding was not available until August when the traditional 2019-20 school year was complete. At that time, the Michigan Department of Education disbursed funds to 41 grantees to reimburse previous purchases of eligible products – Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables, and legumes in fresh and minimally processed (including frozen) forms - for which FSDs had receipts and invoices that indicated the farm of origin.

Findings from a survey of 10 Cents grantees for the 2019-20 school year show that all participating FSDs (41) planned to continue purchasing and serving local foods in the 2020-21 school year, despite the ongoing challenges of the pandemic.

10 Cents Funding Matters to Food Service Directors

Since 10 Cents funds remained unavailable to FSDs until after the traditional school year was over, we asked FSDs how the absence of grants affected their programs. While four FSDs (about 10% of grantees) indicated that the absence of 10 Cents funding did not affect their food service programs, most reported some negative impacts during the 2019-20 school year. Some FSDs cited more than one type of impact or a combination. Adjustments related to product sources were mentioned four times and adjustments related to products purchased for school food programs were mentioned 15 times.

“We didn’t purchase ‘unique’ or ‘different’ produce that we normally would have with the grant money for our salad bar and taste testing activities,” reflected one FSD. Without 10 Cents grants, cost and/or budget concerns related to local food purchasing were reported 15 times.

One FSD provided insight into how school food budgets work:

“**Any amount of funding loss, even 10 Cents, affects the bottom line of a school food budget. Most schools get \$1.00 per plate (and) that includes milk, which is 28 cents on average.**”

Despite the delay in funding availability, about half of all grantees (21 of 41, 51%) indicated that 10 Cents grants helped their school meals programs in some way during the shutdown caused by COVID-19 in spring 2020.

Some of these FSDs noted they were able to serve additional items or had more options and variety with local food products, “ensuring we are providing ‘the rainbow’ to our students,” as one FSD put it. Greens and asparagus were mentioned specifically as local items FSDs used during this time.

Local Food Purchasing in a Pandemic: A Summary of 2019-2020 Grantee Survey Results (cont.)

Michigan fruit, especially whole hand fruits (such as apples) and bagged fruit, seemed especially helpful and enjoyed by families. Reduced cost of local foods was mentioned for two school districts (although the reason was unclear), reduced labor was associated with bagged Michigan apples for another, and yet another indicated increased participation after advertising “fresh farm products.” Another FSD was able to support more farmers than in previous years and two mentioned using farm surplus, products that had lost their intended markets.

Three FSDs noted the reliability of local vendors during the pandemic. Other distributors, especially broadline (full-service) distributors that are more reliant on the national food supply chain, were reported as struggling to fulfill orders. One FSD’s experience illustrated well some of the pandemic-related supply chain challenges:

“Our main distributor had trouble keeping produce items in stock. We had a local farm reach out to us. They serviced restaurants and since they were closed the produce was just going to be composted. We were able to purchase produce from them for our meal kits.”

Just seven grantees indicated that local food purchasing did not help their school meals programs during the shutdown. (Ten FSDs provided no response to this question, and two replied “not applicable,” one because of a school shutdown.) Some FSDs were not able to maintain sourcing local foods as they made necessary adjustments.

One FSD noted,

“The rapid change in programming during the pandemic reduced our capacity for seeking out local items to include in our program.”

Other concerns related to local food purchasing were cost and a lack of available prepackaged Michigan items. One FSD who was unable to source local foods during this time voiced appreciation for serving as a distribution site for USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Program.¹

Among the FSDs who maintained some local food purchasing in 2019-20, FSDs from 11 school districts reported using 10 Cents grants to purchase and serve specific types of Michigan-grown foods for the first time. One FSD, who managed more than one food service program, listed five fruits and five vegetables: asparagus, corn, cucumbers, green beans, tomatoes, apples, strawberries, blueberries, cherries, and plums – that were purchased and served for the first time. The greatest number of “new foods” mentioned by any other FSD was three. Across all responses, FSDs reported purchasing and serving the following local foods for the first time: ²

- plums (three times) and apricots, Asian pears, peaches, saskatoon berries, and yellow watermelon (once each), and
- beets (two times) and kale (two times), and Brussels sprouts, rainbow carrots, mixed greens, lettuce, microgreens, onions, parsnips, squashes, and watermelon radishes (once each).

Twelve FSDs mentioned Michigan-grown foods they would like to use but have been unable to find or buy for their food service programs: cherries (three), asparagus (two), and carrots (two) in ready-to-eat or small forms; Asian pears; peaches (whole); celery; cherry tomatoes; corn; parsnips; Romanesco; and chickpeas. Two FSDs said they would like to try any Michigan-grown foods that would be new to their students.

¹The USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Program was part of the federal Coronavirus Food Assistance Program beginning in April 2020. The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service partnered with distributors to purchase food from producers that was then packaged into boxes and distributed through food banks and other sites, like schools, to families in need. Learn more at ams.usda.gov/selling-food-to-usda/farmers-to-families-food-box.² This count excludes the duplicate responses from a single FSD who manages multiple school food service programs.

Local Food Purchasing in a Pandemic: A Summary of 2019-2020 Grantee Survey Results (cont.)

Farm to School Support

FSDs were asked what they need to support their efforts to purchase and serve more Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables, and legumes in the 2020-21 school year. Two indicated they did not need anything, and 16 did not respond to this question. The themes among the 23 FSDs who did indicate a need for support are shown below.

- Vendors and food supply chain (11):
 - a Michigan produce box that meets requirements of weekly meal packs
 - delivery to individual school buildings
 - more farmers
 - a food hub and a distributor to carry more Michigan foods and more information about local food products available
 - connections to food suppliers - more demand from nearby school districts
- Financial support (four)
- Marketing and education support (three):
 - premade free and reduced-priced materials to promote local foods including signage, flyers, clings, social media posts, and posters, including a 10 Cents grantee poster specifically
 - information about local foods and student taste testing with fresh fruits and veggies
 - information about how 10 Cents works, including for school and community members
- Food service support (two):
 - recipes students like
 - menu development for fresh fruits and veggies
- General support (two):
 - flexibility related to forecasting 10 Cents spending due to the pandemic
 - “continued overall support from all those involved in this wonderful program”

FSDs were also asked about farm to school support needed beyond the 2020-21 school year. These responses included:

- additional food service staff and equipment, including for processing and proper refrigeration,
- lower prices for local products,
- a network of farmers to sell and deliver to schools (in southern Michigan),
- a food processing business that could use bulk foods for minimally processed items,
- financial support for purchasing other (meats and milk) or all Michigan products,
- matchmaking opportunities with vendors,
- opportunities similar to MDE Town Halls, hosted by video and phone conference, for FSDs to share ideas with each other, and
- political support and advocacy for 10 Cents to help FSDs continue to purchase and serve more Michigan-grown foods.



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Conclusion

Overall, these survey results point to the value of local food purchasing, including the reliability of local food sources, in the midst of uncertainty and crisis, in this case caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Despite the ever-changing conditions that FSDs had to respond to throughout 2020, all grantees remained committed to trying to source local foods.

“10 Cents grants are one critical way the state can provide financial support for local farms and food businesses while also ensuring healthy and local foods are provided to students by FSDs, even in the most uncertain of times.”

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

The Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) leads evaluation of 10 Cents. The work presented here is part of What a Dime Can Do: An Evaluation of the 10 Cents a Meal Pilot by Colleen Matts, CRFS; Kathryn Colasanti, School of Social Work, University of Michigan (formerly CRFS); and Elissa Trumbull, consultant, and was funded by the Michigan Health Endowment Fund. To learn more, visit tencentsmichigan.org and canr.msu.edu/10-cents-a-meal.

