

AGENDA PRIORITIES

18. Develop a farm-to-institution grant program to provide planning, implementation and kitchen or cafeteria equipment grants to maximize the use of locally grown, raised and processed foods in institutional cafeterias.

INNOVATIVE FOOD SERVICE DIRECTORS KICK LOCAL PURCHASING INTO GEAR

Leann Smith, food service director for Clare Public Schools, wasn't sure what to expect when she put fresh, locally grown vegetables in front of first- and second-graders for a personal pizza making activity.

"I was really proud of the kids for trying all the different things," said Smith, who works for Chartwells, a private dining services company that the district contracts with.

The pizza party was part of a nutrition building effort she is developing for Clare Public Schools thanks to a small grant from the Michigan Farm to School program at Michigan State University's Center for Regional Food Systems.



Photo courtesy of Clare Public Schools

Smith applied for and received \$2,000 to develop a plan for integrating more fresh and healthy local farm products into the daily school menu and learning experience. In addition to purchasing local produce, she is working with students, faculty, and community partners to plant fruit trees, teach gardening, and build a composting bin.

Clare Public Schools is a mostly rural district with 1,600 K-12 students. It is one of eight rural and urban schools and districts in Michigan that received the \$2,000 grants for the 2011-2012 school year as part of a three-year W.K. Kellogg-funded initiative. The grants provide support for food service staff to step a little bit outside their normal day to take some innovative and important steps toward improving food nutrition and education with purchases of quality locally produced food. The grants support either planning projects or implementation projects.

Montrose Public Schools in northwest Genesee County is another recipient. The rural district has 1,400 students. Food service director Angie Florian was able to take significant steps toward implementing her farm to school plans. The grant provides funding flexible enough to cover travel costs associated with going out to meet with farmers and build her network of vendors. Florian also made local food purchases with the money.

"We are making big strides here in our district. This year we've added apples, peaches, plums, and pears. We also hope to have a local farmer's sweet corn for our summer programs," she said. "We have banners up promoting fresh fruits and veggies in the cafeteria."

Jekeia Murphy administers the Michigan Farm to School grant program. She said the program's flexibility is especially important, supporting the research and development food service directors need to move in new fresh and local food directions.

“It allows grantees to use the money in a number of ways, whether in mileage to visit farmers or attend trainings, for teaching knife skills needed to prepare fresh foods, or purchasing an extra refrigerator to store perishable produce,” Murphy said. “These are things schools usually struggle to pay for.”

Need

Food service departments are on the frontlines of the state’s childhood obesity epidemic. Many are working to improve the nutritional profile of the food they serve, change dietary habits, and keep dollars circulating in their local economies by purchasing fresh and quality food from area farmers. A little R&D support can help these community entrepreneurs put farm-to-school in higher gear across the state’s nearly 900 school food programs.

Opportunity

Michigan could put a healthy \$41 million into its economy if school districts across the state sourced just 20 percent of their food from local farms.¹ This is the kind of money that can further stimulate broader market shifts to local and regional food now underway. More Michigan farmers and related supply chain businesses, such as processors and distributors, will be able to participate.

The state is already well on its way to its farm-to-school potential with initial efforts that school food service directors are making. Responses to Michigan Farm to School surveys show that, from 2004 to 2009, the number of Michigan school food service directors participating in farm to school nearly tripled. In 2004, 11 percent reported purchasing foods from a local farmer or producer in the previous year. In 2009, 41 percent reported having done so.

Action

After one year, the Michigan Farm to School Grant Program has demonstrated clearly that the value of small grant investments for farm to school planning and implementation projects is high and the payoff is quick. But the program is limited to only three years and focuses funding on the most vulnerable schools, those with at least 50 percent free and reduced lunch rates. Local and state leaders can keep the ball rolling and expanding with these steps:

- *Support the promotion and replication of the Michigan Farm to School Grant Program model by other organizations, small and large, across the state. The program has developed and tested application and reporting forms, criteria, and other parameters that can help others get started easily.*
- *Prioritize expanding the grant opportunity to all schools and early childhood and daycare centers, both public and private.*
- *Keep the grant program flexible enough to cover the range of activities food service personnel may need to pursue, from travel and purchase to signage and equipment.*
- *Support the training and technical assistance resources available from Michigan Farm to School and other resources so they’re readily and widely available.*

1-2-3 Go!

Get started in your community. Work with your local hospital auxiliary, community foundations, and others to round up money for small farm to institution planning and implementation grants in your area.

¹George, V., Matts, C., and Schmidt, S. (2010) Institutional Food Purchasing: Michigan Good Food Work Report No. 3 of 5. Available from www.michiganfood.org.