

Local Food Incentive Programs for K–12 School and ECE Settings:

STAKEHOLDER NEEDS AND VALUES

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Introduction

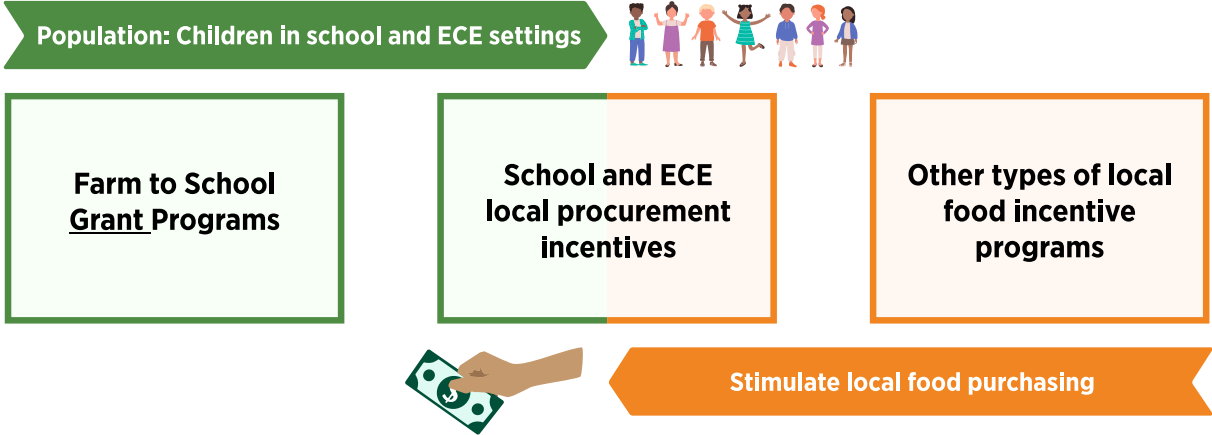
Policy support for the core elements of farm to school initiatives, including school gardens, education, and local food procurement (National Farm to School Network (NFSN), n.d.), continues to expand. This is evidenced by the growing number of bills introduced and adopted in states across the United States (NFSN and Vermont Law School's Center for Agriculture and Food Systems (CAFS), 2021). Local food incentive or reimbursement programs for K-12 schools and early care and education (ECE) settings, in particular, demonstrate sustained support, both in policy and practice (NFSN and CAFS, 2021, p. 25).

It is challenging to set forth a precise definition of local food incentive or reimbursement programs, as they are designed and administered in different ways across locations to meet local goals. In general, these programs provide additional money with the intention of stimulating increased purchasing of local foods for food programs that serve children in school and ECE settings. For simplicity, we will refer to these programs as “local food incentive programs” throughout this summary.

Local food incentive programs often differ from, though they may be part of, more general farm to school grant programs that fund various activities related to the core elements of farm to school. They are also typically distinct from other types of healthy food incentive programs intended to stimulate local food purchasing among a broader array of community members (including households with children) through farmers markets and other retail settings, such as Double Up Food Bucks¹

Although our lens for discussing local food incentive programs will focus primarily on state-level policies funded by state legislatures, it is important to note that they can occur and be supported at various geographic levels by diverse policy and funding partners. Piloting these programs on a smaller, local level may even be one key to their longer-term success and sustainability (NFSN and CAFS, 2021).

Different structures for local food incentive programs



¹Double Up Food Bucks matches USDA SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly known as food stamps) purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables at participating grocery stores and farmers markets, as well as at corner stores in some locations. It is coordinated by the Fair Food Network, and now operates in over 25 states. www.doubleupamerica.org.

By 2020, the five most popular types of farm to school bills introduced in state legislatures were appropriations; grant programs; training for food service and farmers; promotional events, programs, and resolutions; and reimbursement programs (NFSN and CAFS, 2021). That year alone, over 20 state bills were introduced for incentive or reimbursement programs. Between 2010 and 2020, at least nine states had successful legislation for local food incentive programs: Alabama, Alaska, California, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, and Washington, DC (NFSN and CAFS, 2021, p. 159).

As legislation for local food incentive programs becomes more prevalent, it is critical to understand the interests of supporters as well as the educational and technical needs of the people implementing them, whether they are pursuing continued funding for existing programs or new funding for emerging programs.

High levels of interest and increased activity across the United States may also warrant more communication among the staff and partners of existing programs. Increased connectivity among programs could facilitate more learning and sharing, including practical tools and lessons learned. This, in turn, could create an even more supportive environment for success, ultimately increasing the introduction, adoption, effective implementation, and evolution of these programs or policies in more places.

National Survey

In 2022, staff from the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS), with support from partners at NFSN, developed and launched a national survey to better understand interests and education needs related to K-12 and ECE-based local food incentive or reimbursement programs. The electronic survey was designed with CRFS evaluation partners at the University of Michigan. It included questions about interests in learning more; geographic location; important program attributes beyond local food; topics for learning more (both from a list and with an open-ended written response option); interest in participating in webinars to learn more; and a space for open-ended responses about needs for support and future learning. Respondents could also choose to provide their contact information for follow-up.

A survey request and link were emailed by CRFS directly to individuals across all 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, and some U.S. Territories and tribal entities. The initial contact list (420 email addresses) was compiled from a database maintained by NFSN, including contacts for current partners as well as a group of state partners who are Farm to ECE Implementation Grantees (FIG).² After duplicate and undeliverable email addresses were removed (70), a request to complete the survey was emailed to 350 unique email addresses. These contacts primarily included individuals from non-profit organizations, state agencies, and university Cooperative Extension that supports farm to school in their area. The survey was first sent on April 13, 2022 and closed two and half weeks later. A total of 144 unique survey responses were collected, for a 41% response rate. The following analysis reflects the responses of individual survey respondents.

RESULTS

Respondents represented 45 states and Washington, DC. In some cases, multiple people from the same organization or program responded to the survey. Locations with the most respondents included:

- Virginia (12),
- Connecticut (8),
- Ohio (8),
- Pennsylvania (7),
- Michigan (6), and
- Washington, DC (6)³

The affiliations of survey respondents included:

- 42 (29%) nonprofits;
- 27 (19%) government agencies, including departments of education, agriculture, and health, a regional commission, and a city government;
- 20 (14%) universities, including staff from Cooperative Extension and faculty or staff from other university departments;

²The Farm to ECE Implementation Grant (FIG) operates in 10 states and Washington, DC. It is coordinated by the Association of State Public Health Nutritionists (ASPHN) as one of their Farm to ECE Grantee Programs, which also include a Capacity Building Grant (CABBAGE) and the Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network (MINI COIIN). <https://asphn.org/farm-to-ece-grantees-program>

³Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Washington, DC all had farm to school grant or local food incentive programs that were, at the time of this survey, funded at the state-level (or at the city-level, as was the case of Washington, DC). Farm to school stakeholders from these places may have been more likely or motivated to respond to this survey, although three other states without programs still had higher numbers of respondents.

- 10 (7%) schools or school districts;
- 7 (5%) networks, including farm to school networks and a food policy council;
- 5 (3.5%) farms; and
- 5 (3.5%) other food businesses.

One fifth (22%) of survey respondents did not include their affiliation in their survey response.

In addition to prioritizing food that is produced locally, survey respondents were interested in incorporating other values⁴ into local food incentive programs, including:



Themes that emerged from open-ended responses were interest in supporting small-scale producers and interest in supporting beginning farmers and ranchers. Other values suggested by respondents included prioritizing organic food (2) and food grown with integrated pest management (IPM) practices (1), supporting women farmers (1), supporting a universal school lunch program (1), and development of culinary skills (1).

Almost all (97%) survey respondents indicated that they are interested in learning more about local food incentive programs.⁵ More specifically, they wanted to learn about:

- how existing programs are administered (68%),
- personnel and teams that support programs (60%),
- tracking and reporting for participants (59%),
- evaluation tools and activities (59%),
- ways to address equity and other value-based attributes in food procurement (57%),
- outreach (47%),
- policy advocacy (45%),
- bill language to establish programs (41%),
- communications (38%),
- storytelling (37%), and
- position descriptions for personnel administering programs (33%).

The most common themes noted in open-ended responses included a desire to learn more about funding these programs, data collection and reporting, and existing programs in other cities or states.

⁴For this survey question, respondents were asked to choose all that apply from a list of options, along with an open-ended response option, so responses will add up to more than 100%.

⁵Again for this survey question, respondents were asked to choose all that apply from a list of options, along with an open-ended response option, so responses will add up to more than 100%.

The survey also included questions about existing, funded local food incentive programs (including their names, geographic scope, funding, and settings served) and the status of programs in development. A wide range of responses were provided to these questions, some of which did not relate to local food incentive programs but to other types of farm to school programs (such as grant, garden, and farm to ECE programs, and programs highlighting champions). Therefore, results from these questions are not summarized and presented here.

These diverse responses demonstrate the need for more education about local food incentive programs, including how they are different from other farm to school grant programs and healthy food incentive programs. In the meantime, for the most comprehensive and current information about existing programs, their growth across the country over time, and their scope and reach within specific geographies, farm to school practitioners, supporters, and advocates should continue to refer to the State Farm to School Policy Handbook that is published and regularly updated by NFSN.

CONCLUSION

Results of this survey confirm and reinforce that there is a swell of interest in local food incentive programs in K-12 and ECE sites across the country. While this survey offers only a snapshot in time, the needs and priorities expressed by respondents can guide critical awareness-building, education, and resource-gathering and -sharing efforts.

References

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