Farm-to-School Opportunities in Michigan: What do Food Service Directors Say?

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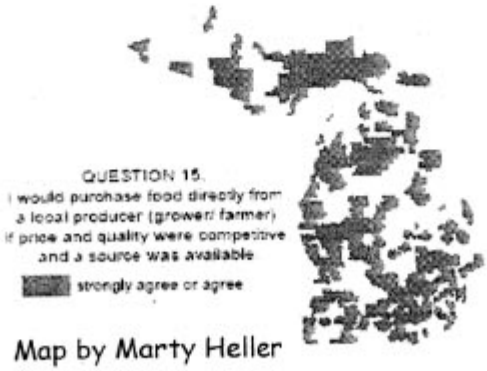
Executive Summary

In the spring of 2004, we surveyed Michigan K-12 School Food Service Directors (FSDs) about their interest in incorporating Michigan-grown foods into their school lunch programs. The results? FSDs appear ready and willing to make linkages to Michigan agriculture. It's a sentiment consistent with activities across the country, especially in the last ten years, to foster mutually beneficial relationships between farms and schools.

In Michigan and across the country, farmers and farmland are disappearing at an alarming rate due in part to increased competition from global markets. Selling to schools can be an effective way for Michigan farmers to access a new and reliable group of customers, diversify their market and remain economically viable. With statewide total school food expenditures of over $200 million per year this is potentially a huge market for Michigan farmers. Farmers can tap this market through the school lunch program, special events, school fund raisers, catering activities and more.

Food service directors play a critical role in the nutrition of our youth and are working hard to insure that healthful foods are available at lunch and throughout the day. By sourcing locally, FSDs can provide high quality fruits and vegetables and possibly even meats, eggs and dairy products. These foods can be purchased directly from farmers, through farmer cooperatives and alliances, and potentially through existing distributors, making it possible to add Michigan foods to every school meal program throughout the year.

Throughout the country, advocates for food security, health and agriculture have recognized farm-to-school programs as an important opportunity to help farmers remain economically viable while, at the same time, addressing national health concerns such as childhood obesity.



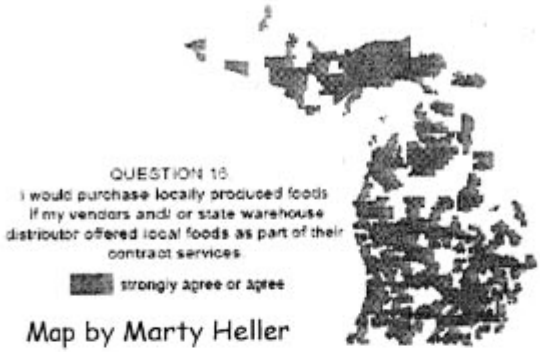
Map by Marty Heller

This survey consisted of twenty-four items which assessed (1) purchasing practices, (2) local sourcing, (3) interest in local sourcing, as well as (4) motivation, concerns and barriers to local sourcing. Surveys were mailed to 664 FSDs across Michigan with 383 responding.

Across the state FSDs reported a high degree of interest in sourcing from a local producer (figure 1) with 73% of those responding positively. When asked

to assume that local foods were available from their vendors , positive responses increased to 85% (figure 2). In fact, 10% of respondents indicated that they had purchased from local farmers already.

While FSDs reported an interest in purchasing a broad range of Michigan fruits, vegetables and animal products, only 11% said they would be willing to pay a premium for these products. The rest of the respondents were roughly split - 40% being neutral and 46% feeling they could not pay more for Michigan products.



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Food service directors expressed diverse motivations for their interest in farm-to-school programs including supporting the local economy and community, accessing fresher, higher quality food, generating good public relations, ability to purchase small quantities and increasing students' consumption of fruits and vegetables. While there is broad interest and passion across the state, FSDs also identified concerns. Those expressed by more than 40% of FSDs were:

- Cost
- Reliable supply
- Seasonality of fruits and vegetables
- Food safety
- Delivery considerations
- Quality
- Ordering and payment
- Volume

There's no uniform way to implement farm-to-school initiatives. A school close to farms that produce and process appropriate foods might serve local foods daily or perhaps in a regular "Michigan Foods Lunch Day" Program. Another may find it more cost effective to buy local foods through its distributor(s). Another may develop a hybrid approach, sourcing through a distributor while highlighting the community's food and agriculture, by inviting local farmers to provide foods for special catered events. The broad interest across the state means that there will likely be a variety of strategies utilized in launching a farm-to-school program.

The full report of this study will be available Nov. 15 at http://www.carrs.msu.edu/Main/.

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