



Minnesota Department of Agriculture Farm To School Grant Evaluation

**Economic impact, grant administration,
grantee successes and challenges**



Prepared by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy
and the University of Minnesota Extension

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the MDA Farm to School grantees and the farmers they purchased from for their support of our evaluation efforts, including submitting purchasing records, responding to evaluation surveys and participating in focus group conversations. Your perspective is essential to understanding the impact of these grants! Special thanks to Kate Seybold and Emily Mehr of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA), Samantha Burington from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), Jackie Billhmer of the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Family Development, and Colleen Matts and Megan McManus of the Center for Regional Food Systems at Michigan State University for their insightful review of this report.

Thank you to our partners from the MN Farm to School Leadership Team and MN Farm to Early Care Network for their ongoing collaboration and partnership, especially to the Farm to School support and grants administration team for their work administering this important grant program. We are grateful and proud to be part of this community of dedicated partners working to support and grow Farm to School and Early Care throughout Minnesota.

This evaluation work was conducted through funding from a USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant administered by the MN Department of Agriculture.

For more information about Farm to School and the MDA Farm to School Grants, please see:

- MDA's website, with overview and application information:
<https://www.mda.state.mn.us/farm-school-grants>
- MN's Farm to School website, with resources for applicants, grantees and supporters (maintained by IATP):
<https://farmtoschoolmn.org>
- U of MN Extension's Farm to School website, with resources for schools and farmers:
<https://extension.umn.edu/school-and-child-care-nutrition/farm-school>

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IATP works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems and envisions agriculture, trade and food systems that are good for people, farmers and food system workers, ecosystems and social justice globally. With our partners, we advocate for policy in the public interest at the state, federal and international level. The Community Food System Program's long-term goal is to build vibrant community-based food systems that give all people access to sufficient, safe, culturally appropriate and nutritious food while also developing local food supply chains that will allow small- to mid-scale farmers to access a variety of new markets. We envision decentralized, local food systems that are accountable to, and largely controlled by, the community members who depend on them, where food is produced and distributed in a manner that builds equity, justice, and resiliency in policy and practice.



The University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality makes a difference by engaging Minnesotans to strengthen the social, civic, economic and technological capacity of their communities. The Community Economics program helps communities retain and expand local businesses, know and grow the retail sector, make informed public finance decisions and develop tourism opportunities.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) Farm to School Grants allocated nearly \$300,000 to Minnesota schools for local food purchases in 2021-22, awarding 27 total Farm to School grants. These local purchases, combined with schools' match dollars and economic ripple effects, created an estimated nearly \$1.2 million in economic impact on Minnesota's economy so far. Most purchases were made directly through producers, with food hubs and distributors also providing products for some districts. School districts purchased a range of different products. Of note, nearly half of sales (47%) were for local proteins, 22% were local vegetables and 9% were for the popular Farm to School entry point: apples.

Feedback from farmers who provided products through this funding indicated overwhelming interest in continuing sales to schools, with many indicating the ability to increase production. Farmers also

cited challenges with delivery, pricing and size of orders when selling to schools. Other grower challenges mirrored those reported by school foodservice, including seasonality, lack of flexibility and lack of school foodservice staff time. Foodservice staff noted many benefits of their Farm to School efforts, including increased meal program participation (which boosts their overall food budget), expanded relationships with growers, students and the community, and the high quality of products received.

Both growers and foodservice staff indicated challenges with connection and logistics, and the desire for support in connecting schools with growers and growers with schools. Additional support with promotion, recipes and training can assist school districts in successful implementation of Farm to School in Minnesota.

OVERVIEW OF THE MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE'S FARM TO SCHOOL GRANT PROGRAM

Background

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture's grants supporting Farm to School activities launched in 2013, with early grants providing extra funding to schools for planning and reimbursement for purchases of kitchen equipment to prepare local ingredients. This key grant support helped grow the fledgling movement of Farm to School supporters in the state, and there has been

increased demand and interest in the Farm to School grants each year.

Starting in the fall of 2014, a broad group of Minnesota stakeholders supporting Farm to School at the K-12 level and Farm to Early Care initiatives serving children 0-5 years old came together to discuss what programs were needed to advance and expand Farm to School and Early Care throughout the state. This diverse Stakeholder Group included staff members from organizations and state agencies representing agriculture, small business, public health and nutrition, academic research, education, healthy food access, anti-hunger, rural development and more. This group



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agreed that grants offering direct reimbursement to schools and early cares for their food purchases from local farms — which had proven successful in several other states — would be an excellent complement to MDA’s existing Farm to School grant program. MDA’s program to that point had funded part of the cost of feasibility studies and kitchen equipment for schools to incorporate local foods. Additionally, the need for staff positions to support training and technical assistance for Farm to School and Early Care was recognized as key to success. The Stakeholder Group worked over several legislative sessions to advance these priorities, and in 2019, they were able to support passage of a bill to establish the current Farm to School reimbursement grant and create an MDA Regional Marketing Specialist position with dedicated time for Farm to School.

In the summer of 2020, MDA pivoted to administer a modified “Rapid Response” grant to quickly respond to community needs during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic-related supply chain disruptions, providing planning, kitchen equipment and milk cooler grants and including both early cares and K-12 schools as eligible applicants.

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) and the University of Minnesota Extension secured a Specialty Crop Block Grant to support the evaluation of MDA’s new Farm to School Grant Program. This report provides detailed information about the Fiscal Year 2021 (FY2021) MDA Farm to School Grant implementation, which received requests for more than \$400,000 and awarded \$292,407 through their first round of Farm to School reimbursement grants. Grantees could expend funds between May 2021 and August 2022, and if needed, submit for an extension until November of 2022. Future reports will explore the Fiscal Year 2022 implementation, which experienced a significant increase of funding, with requests totaling \$1.3 million and awards of nearly \$750,000. Fiscal Year 2023 will be another significant year, with a large increase of federal funding through USDA’s Local Foods for Schools Cooperative Agreement awarded to Minnesota allowing MDA to offer almost \$4.25 million in Farm to School reimbursement and kitchen equipment grants. MDA is currently preparing to support local purchasing for this third cohort of Farm to School reimbursement grantees during the 2023-2024 school year.

The FY2021 MDA Farm to School Grant Program

The intent of the MDA Farm to School Grants, including the FY2021 reimbursement Farm to School Grant round, has been to support Minnesota school districts that want to begin or expand purchasing and serving Minnesota agricultural products in the meals they serve to students. Public or private schools or school districts that participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and serve food to K-12 students were eligible to apply, including school districts serving sovereign tribal nations. For the initial rounds of the Farm to School reimbursement grant, early care settings serving children 0-5 were not included as eligible applicants.

Schools were free to use grant funds to boost their purchases from MN producers in a variety of ways, including:

- Trialing new Minnesota-grown products on the menu or through taste tests
- Participating in the Great Lakes Apple Crunch
- Hosting a Breakfast or Lunch with a Farmer meal
- Increasing the number of times a Minnesota item or meal repeats on the menu
- Expanding the number of featured items or meals during Farm to School Month
- Adding Minnesota Thursdays as a monthly feature to the menu



All the purchases schools made for reimbursement had to be directly for food grown or raised in Minnesota that was served as part of the school district’s school meals for students. Schools were allowed to purchase directly from farmers, through food hubs or

distributors, from farmers markets, etc., if the food was grown and produced in Minnesota. Schools were also encouraged to think about purchasing Minnesota items for all components of the school lunch tray, including vegetables, fruits, meat, fish and poultry, eggs, grains and dairy products, excluding fluid milk. Milk was not included since all milk served with school meals is already local; thus, reimbursing for these purchases would not meet the grant intent of increasing local Minnesota purchases. Local products that were unprocessed or minimally processed were prioritized (MDA used the USDA definition of “unprocessed locally grown or locally raised agricultural products” as outlined by the federal government in support of the [Geographic Preference Procurement Process](#)). This allowed for local items to be chopped or frozen, etc., but did not include items with additives or fillers, or premade processed items.

It was important for MDA to communicate the intent of the grant and outline eligible expenses to potential applicants to avoid common misunderstandings about what funds could be used for, including ineligible purchases of items grown outside of Minnesota (for example, in neighboring states), purchases related to gardening instead of buying food from MN producers, and costs related to staff time or promotion and marketing of Farm to School.

For the Fiscal Year 2021 awards, MDA strategically designed the Farm to School reimbursement grant program with two levels:

■ Farm to School [First Bite Mini Grants](#)

Designed for schools with little or no experience with local food procurement as part of a Farm to School program, MDA’s Farm to School First Bite Mini Grant offered smaller grants to help schools test local procurement strategies and learn from their experiences. The application was simpler, with no requirement to get letters of support, and schools were not required to match the grant funding with their own additional purchases. Schools could only receive one First Bite Mini Grants before levelling up to the Full Tray Grant. The First Bite grants were each a minimum of \$2,500 and maximum of \$5,000 (with all but two of the 12 First Bite grantees receiving the maximum amount of \$5,000).

■ Farm to School [Full Tray Grants](#)

Designed for schools with some Farm to School experience, MDA’s Full Tray grants offered a larger amount of money for schools to build on their activities and expand their Farm to School initiatives. The application asked for a more detailed workplan and required at least one letter of support from a MN producer who would benefit (with additional letters welcome from distributors, community members, etc.), and schools were required to match the amount of grant funding they requested with their own additional purchases from local producers. The grants could be up to \$35,000 each; the amount of funding the applicant was eligible for was determined using a formula multiplying \$0.10 by the number of meals served the year prior to the application. For example, if a school served 7,500 reimbursable

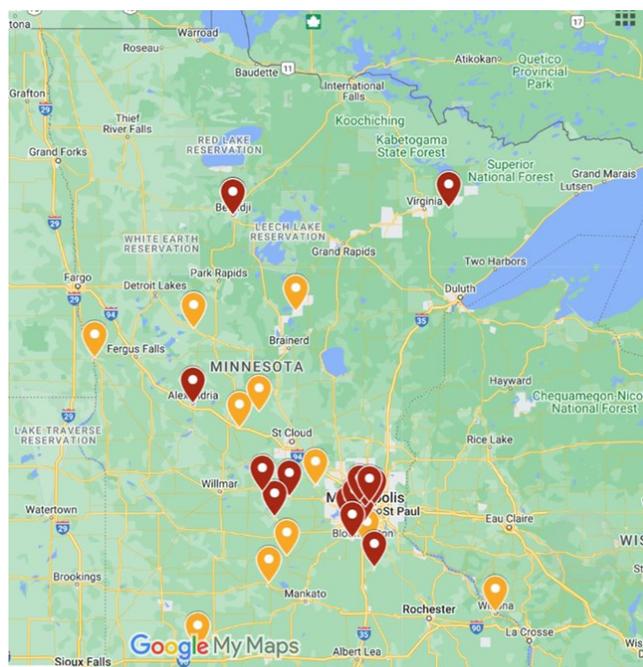
EMERGING FARMERS

In the selection process, MDA prioritizes applicants that purchase Minnesota grown and raised foods from socially disadvantaged and “emerging farmers.” This includes farmers of color; American Indian or Alaskan Native farmers; women; veterans; farmers with disabilities; young farmers; beginning farmers; LGBTQ+ farmers; and urban farmers. The application includes a question asking applicants to share whether and how they plan to purchase from emerging farmers, and applications can receive additional points for demonstrating ability to follow through with that plan. MDA has produced [legislative reports](#) documenting the Minnesota landscape for emerging farmers, and recently developed some [additional guidance to support applicants](#) in making a connection with emerging farmers near to them.



lunches and 5,000 breakfasts in a month: $(7,500 + 5,000) \times \$0.10 \times 10 \text{ months} = \$12,500$ eligible Full Tray grant amount.

The FY2021 grant round did not include equipment funding, but the program was modified to include this in FY2022. The Fiscal Year 2021 (FY2021) MDA Farm to School Grant round was competitive, receiving requests for more than \$400,000 for the \$292,407 they awarded. MDA convened a review committee to select the grantees from the pool of applicants. Each reviewer scored the applications individually using a defined rubric of selection criteria covering whether the proposed project would increase access to local foods, enhance the school's Farm to School program and increase purchases from emerging farmers as well as rating whether their plan was sufficiently detailed and realistic to complete during the proposed time period. Full Tray applications also included letters of support and more detail on their budget plans, including their plan for the cash match. Reviewers' numeric scores were combined by MDA, and the evaluation group met virtually to come to a consensus on funding recommendations to pass on to the Commissioner for approval.



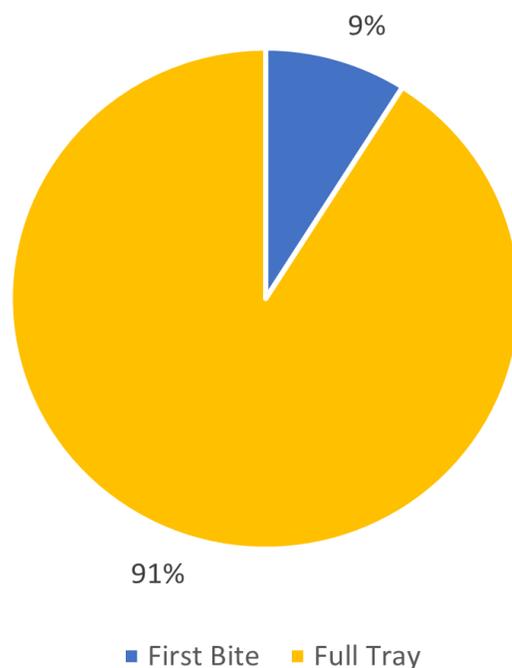
MDA awarded 27 total Farm to School grants in the 2021 round of funding, with 12 First Bite Farm to School grants totaling \$55,900 and 15 Full Tray grants totaling \$239,006. Nine 2021 grantees were located in the Twin Cities Metro area and the remaining two thirds of grantees were distributed across the state.

The sections that follow explore the product mix and economic impact of FY2021 Farm to School grant purchases, impacted farmer/producer feedback and grantee school foodservice staff perspectives. These indicate both strengths and challenges in the grant program's goal to promote the advancement of Minnesota's agricultural industry.

ECONOMIC IMPACT AND PRODUCT MIX

To understand the mix of products sourced from producers, the evaluation team analyzed data provided by MDA staff from school reimbursements. The schools provided MDA copies of invoices from their Farm to School suppliers as proof of their purchase from a Minnesota-based food supplier. As of the time of writing this report, MDA had received and reimbursed \$200,118 in requests from grantees, approximately \$95,000 short of the total grant allotment due to grantees not yet submitting for their reimbursements.

Figure 1: Total spending by grantee type



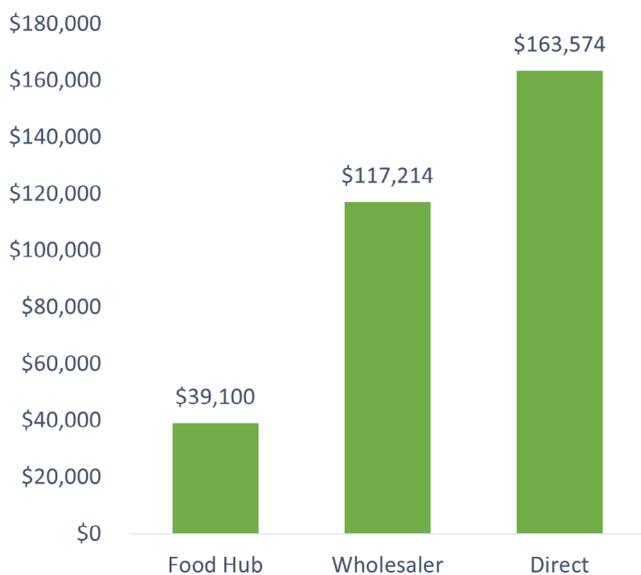
In addition, since the Full Tray grantees were required to match their grant with at least an equal amount of spending on local food purchases, the evaluation team included these matching purchases in our analysis of the overall economic impact of this procurement grant on the state. With the match included, the FY2021 MDA Farm to School Grant spurred a total of \$319,889 in local food purchases as of the time of this report. The

economic impact of the required matching purchases is also important because the Full Tray grantees had significantly greater spending than First Bite grantees. For example, the match requirement for Robbinsdale Public Schools (\$35,000) was equal to seven First Bite grantees at \$5,000 each. Full Tray schools accounted for 91% of the local purchasing analyzed here, including matching purchases. (Figure 1)

Purchasing Methods

About half of the purchases of local foods spurred by the grant were direct from Minnesota farmers or food businesses who billed the schools directly. Out of a total of 53 vendors, most of the direct sales were from farmers, although a few meat processors were vendors along with some food manufacturers. Purchasing through wholesalers was only used by a few large school districts, but total sales through wholesalers such as Russ Davis or Upper Lakes Foods were still 37% of all sales. The Good Acre Food Hub played a prominent role in supplying Metro area school districts.

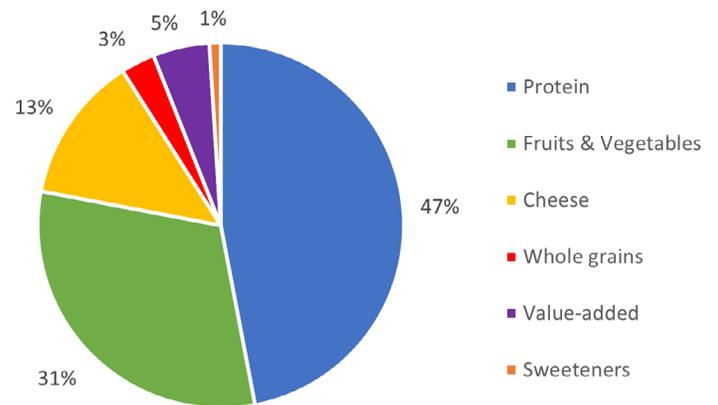
Figure 2: Total sales (including match) by source



Product Mix

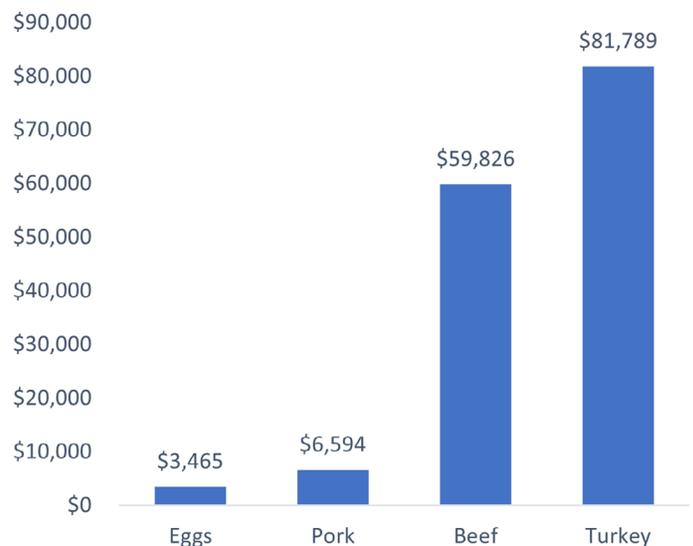
The detailed sales records from grantees provides a view of the purchasing patterns of schools engaged in Farm to School efforts. Extension analyzed the data by category and type of product.

Figure 3: Products by category and percent of total dollars spent



Clearly meat was a large component of total school purchases from this grant round (47%), more than twice the amount spent on vegetables and fruits (22%). As a point of reference, the 2019 USDA Farm to School Survey indicates that only 6.9% of Minnesota respondents served local meat weekly, whereas 36.3% and 35.9% reported serving local vegetables and fruits respectively. An obvious reason for the difference is the relatively high cost of proteins. Schools may have only chosen to engage in the purchasing of these expensive products with the direct support of the procurement grant.

Figure 4: Total protein purchases by type

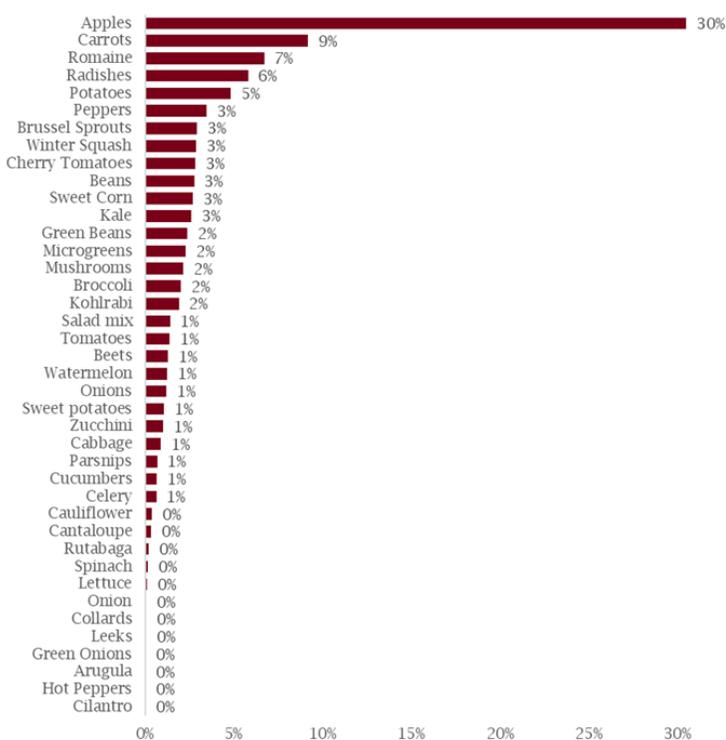


Accounting for nearly half of total sales, the proteins category consisted of turkey, beef, pork and eggs. Turkey was the most popular meat purchase,

accounting for 54% of all meat sales in part due to the successful positioning of Ferndale Market in the state, which makes turkey products available to schools both directly and through the Good Acre food hub.

Vegetables and fruits, which have traditionally been a focus of Farm to School efforts, were 31% of total school spending. In this category, schools purchased 38 different products, with the most popular vegetables by percent of sales being carrots (13.2%), Romaine lettuce (9.6%) and radishes (8.3%). The least commonly purchased vegetables include six crops with two purchases or less for each. Schools favored crops that stored well, such as root crops, Cole crops and winter squash. These crops are doubly favored, no doubt, because they are also available in the fall when the school year begins.

Figure 5: Vegetables and Fruits by percent of sales



Economic Impact Analysis

As part of the evaluation process, stakeholders were interested in understanding the potential economic impact of Farm to School food spending in Minnesota.

Economic impact includes direct, indirect, and induced effects. The direct effect is spending directly for the project or activity. In this analysis, it is the spending by

schools for local foods spurred by the grant funding. To quantify the direct effects, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture provided Extension with school district receipts detailing what food item was purchased and amount of spending for those items.

As of the time of this report, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture had reimbursed \$200,118 of the total \$294,607 awarded to Farm to School grantees, including both the Full Tray and First Bite awards. Notably for this analysis, Full Tray grantees were required to match their award with an equal amount of local food purchases, which accounts for a significant amount of direct effect.

Table 1: Allocated awards for grant by type

Awardee	Award	Match	Total	Percent
First Bite	\$55,900.00	-	\$55,900.00	10%
Full Tray	\$239,006.65	\$239,006.65	\$478,013.30	90%
Total	\$294,906.65	\$239,006.65	\$533,913.30	100%

Evidence from reimbursements suggests that Full Tray schools are purchasing even more local products than required to meet the match. Based on receipts submitted as of the time of this report, Full Tray schools had provided receipts for \$28,282 more than necessary or 19.1% more than their required match. Considering that the grant is asking school districts to shift their purchasing pattern to meet grant requirements, it is reasonable to assume that Full Tray grantees (who already have experience and relationships necessary to purchase from local producers) would have an overall shift in their purchasing pattern greater than the grant requirements.

Schools were only required to submit documentation of the amount to reimburse plus the match, so collection of the receipts showing this overage was incidental. Considering that these purchases were submitted together with evidence of receipts for their match, Extension took this overage as an estimate of purchases spurred over and above grant requirements and projected this proportion across all Full Tray recipients for a total estimate of associated purchases (Table 2). There may have been additional overage that is not captured if schools spent further funds on local foods.

ECONOMIC IMPACT TERMS

- **Direct effect:** initial change
- **Indirect effect:** business-to-business impacts
- **Induced effect:** consumer-to-business impacts

Table 2: Estimated direct effect

Type of direct effect	Dollars	Percent
Grant award	\$294,906.65	51%
School match	\$239,006.65	41%
Associated purchases	\$45,650.27	8%
Total	\$579,563.57	100%

At the time of writing this report, schools still have some time remaining to submit invoices to be reimbursed, and 12 of 27 grantees had completed their requirements and received their full award. The total direct effect we include here is an estimate of the grant impact at full capacity based on two assumptions: One, all grantees submit their reimbursements and meet their grant requirements; and two, the associated purchases of the schools who have already received reimbursement are similar in scale to those who have not. Should grantees fail to reimburse their full award, the direct and overall impact will be less. If this should happen, the evaluation team would investigate the reasons for incompleteness after the window for reimbursements is complete. This failure analysis may uncover primary factors in grant processes or characteristics of grantees which could inform future grant operations for greater success in subsequent rounds.

Indirect and induced effects are also known as “ripple” effects. Spending for goods and services in the supply chain generates indirect effects. Take as an example when a school district purchases cheese produced by a local company. To produce the cheese, the local company will in

turn purchase goods and services from its suppliers, creating an increase in the supply chain. Spending by the company’s employees — spurred by their paychecks — generates induced effects. Workers are paid and then purchase items, such as health care, housing and groceries, generating further economic activity in their local community.

Extension used the input-output model IMPLAN to measure the economic impact of the Farm to School grant funding. Input-output models capture the flow of goods and services within an economy. Once the pattern is established, the model can show how a change in one area of the economy (say food purchases) affects other parts of the economy (such as manufacturing and health care).

As you can see in Table 3, the farm to school grants had a total impact of \$1.2 million on the state of Minnesota when adding the induced and indirect effects together with the grant spending. Overall, the direct impact of the Farm to School procurement (\$594,971) grant generates nearly an equal amount of indirect and induced impact in the Minnesota economy (\$592,046) by an increase in suppliers and labor necessary to generate the purchases in sales to schools. Put another way, **for every one dollar spent by schools using the farm to school procurement grant, an additional dollar of impact is generated in economic activity in the state.**

Figure 6: Top 10 Industries impacted by output (does not include direct output)

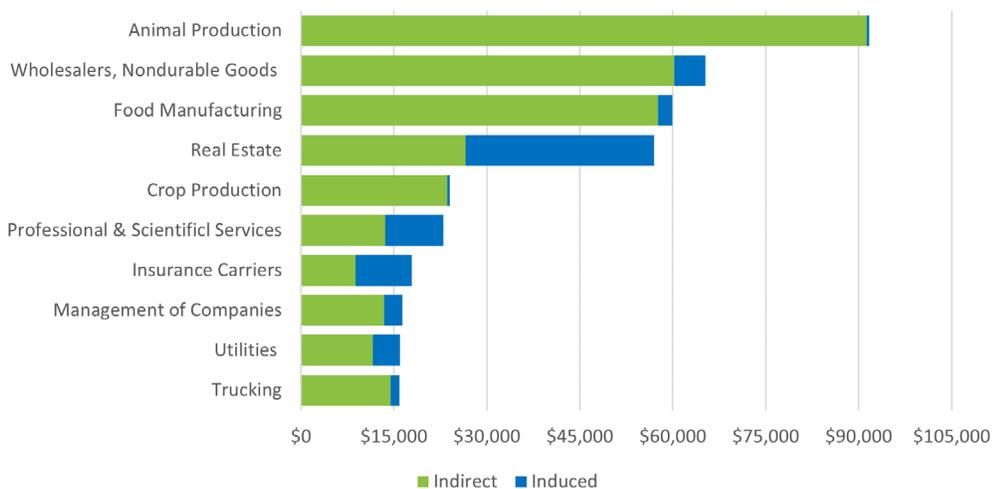


Table 3: Total economic impact in Minnesota generated by Farm to School procurement grant

	Employment	Labor Income	Output (Sales)
1 - Direct	2.0	\$91,093	\$594,971
2 - Indirect	1.9	\$103,104	\$407,806
3 - Induced	1.1	\$61,924	\$184,240
Total	5.0	\$256,121	\$1,187,017

The impact on other businesses is not consistent across the economy but concentrated in industries most closely related to the businesses engaged in supplying the schools, such as animal production, wholesalers and food manufacturing (Figure 5).

SURVEY OF PRODUCERS

Extension sent a short 5-minute pulse survey by email to the 42 of 53 Farm to School vendors whose addresses the team was able to locate. Eighteen of the 42 responded for a 43% response rate.

The short survey asked only for limited information about their operation, challenges of selling to schools and ability to scale up to meet demand. The latter query was important due to the drastic increase in the Farm to School grant budget for fiscal year 2023 after MDA received a sizable federal Local Food for Schools grant.

Two-thirds of producer respondents had been selling to schools for less than three years. (Figure 7)

Figure 7: Respondents by number of years selling to schools

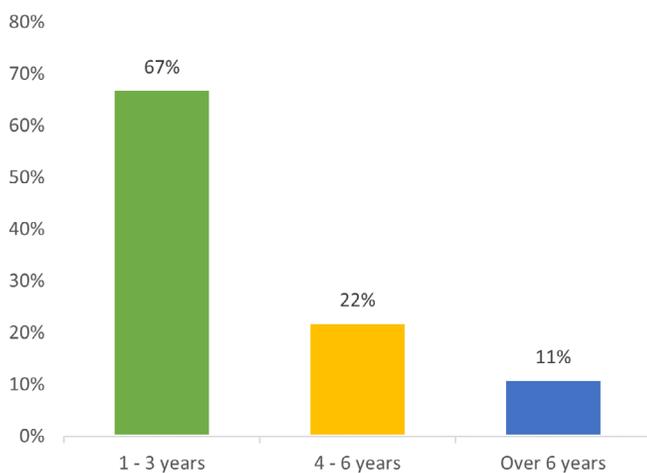
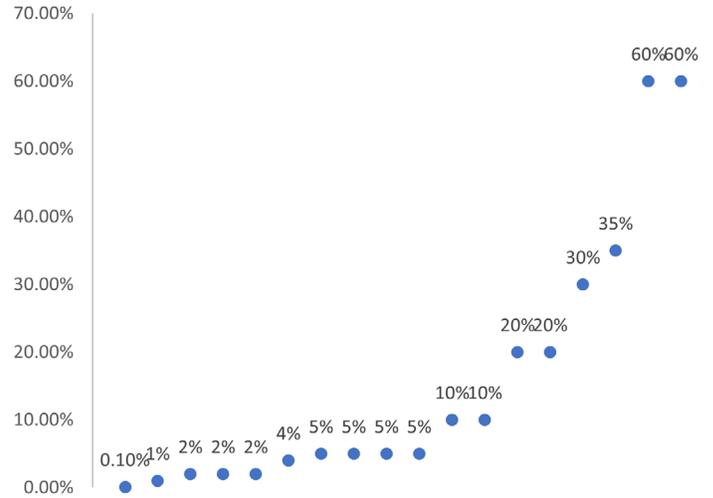


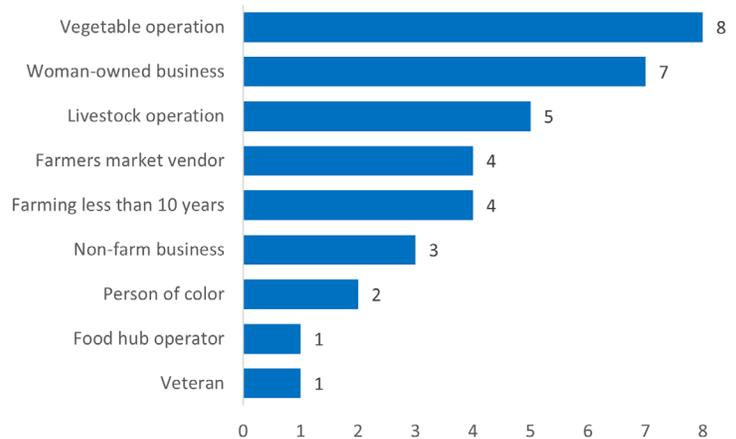
Figure 8: Respondents by percent of sales to schools in past 12 months



For most vendors who replied to the survey, sales to schools are a limited part of their marketing mix with some notable exceptions. The median percent of sales to schools was 5%, with a range from 0.1% to 60%. (Figure 8)

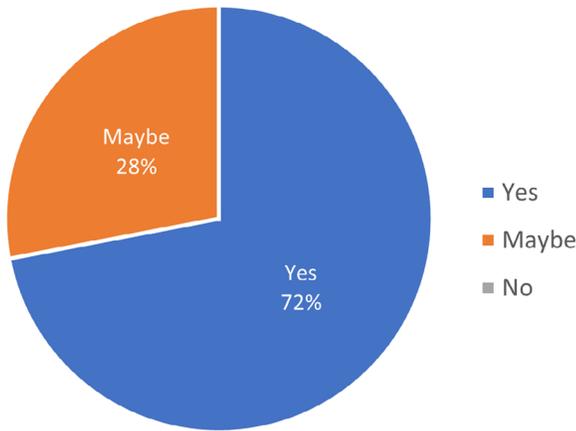
Looking at different self-identifications of the producer respondents, a large percentage described their businesses as vegetable operations or women-owned businesses. Five of the 18 respondents were livestock operators. (Figure 9)

Figure 9: Number of respondents by identification



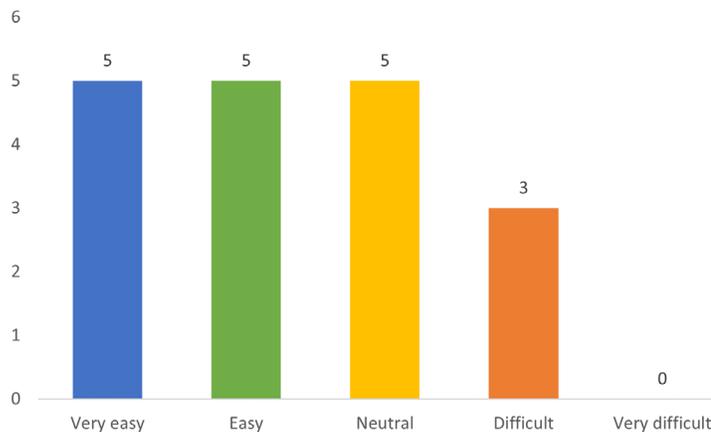
The survey asked participants whether they were interested in increasing the amount that they were selling to schools in the next 12 months and a strong majority responded “yes” with no respondents saying “no.” (Figure 10)

Figure 10: Interest in increasing sales to schools in next 12 months



Respondents were evenly split on the question about ease of scaling up to meet increased demand with three of 18 determining that increasing supply of product to schools would be “difficult” (Figure 9). Of those who considered it difficult to increase production for schools, two of the three cited internal production issues. (Figure 11)

Figure 11: Number of respondents by level of difficulty to increase products



The survey asked participants to provide their top three challenges when selling to schools. Respondents chose to share about some structural issues related to season and production levels, although generally the biggest challenges were logistics, pricing, and size of order. These points were echoed in the open-ended comments about how to make selling to schools more attractive. One theme of the comments relates to size of order. Responses about budget and volume constraints indicate that there is an issue with the overall return on the costs related to selling to schools. (Figure 12)

Figure 12: Number of respondents by top 3 challenges of selling to schools



Several respondents chose to provide and specify another challenge not on the list. Many related to production and structural issues such as the current labor shortage, which are out of the control of school food service staff. More than half could at least be addressed, if not solved, by food service staff and/or state agency or other support:

Production Issues:

- *Time of the year*
- *Season extension/high tunnel to produce during the school year*
- *Scaling manufacturing operation*
- *More time needed on farm, rather than having to work full-time off farm*
- *Labor: having enough to grow and harvest product*
- *Too much of the same product at times*

Process and Marketing Issues:

- *The labor situation with lunch staff*
- *Inflexibility-having to contract in the winter. Not being able to spontaneously sell extra surplus in the fall, or items not on the contract.*
- *Supporting buyers with materials about our farm to share with students and key stakeholders.*
- *Produce knowing year prior demands*
- *Budget allowed for purchases*

- *Distributor's charges*
- *Not much of a problem*
- *Promptness of payment*
- *USDA reps not understanding the program*

The survey also asked in an open-ended format what changes would make selling to schools more attractive. 13 of 18 participants provided feedback, which touched on issues of volume, pricing and resources which would be helpful to producers when planning for a school season. Notably, five of 13 respondents point to volume as a primary issue.

Responses to what changes would make selling to schools more attractive:

- *A list of all schools participating in the program.*
- *Capital to build out our own production facility and financial support for increased food prices that are driving our costs up.*
- *Having more buyers that are genuinely motivated to get local farm products in the school. It doesn't work unless the buyer really wants it and they train their staff to be excited about the produce coming into the kitchen.*
- *If there was a processor who could prepare/cook the products to school specifications making it easier for them.*
- *Money money money (volume).*
- *More communication on when and what type of produce is wanted.*
- *More flexibility for the schools to take local products and budgeting for it.*
- *Regular sales of meaningful volume. Commitment ahead of time.*
- *Right now it is working great! Extra farm labor and drought make it hard for us to grow more.*
- *Schools would need infrastructure (freezer capacity, space) and willingness to purchase beef as whole animals to be economically viable.*
- *Summer school, ok kidding. Really, the school has a great process.*

- *We are very interested in working with more schools. It would be helpful if the MDA could provide a list to the school meal planning professionals of those farms (with contact info) who are interested in working with the schools and what products they have to offer. Additionally, meal planning professionals have asked us for recipes and marketing materials. It would be helpful if the MDA could develop a databank of sorts of support materials. Thank you!*
- *We sell to one school, and they pick up the product, which works well for us. If we had to deliver, I don't know if it would be feasible.*
- *Working with a full-time dedicated regional F2S [Farm to School] coordinator who has close relationships with food service directors and faculty using our produce.*

FOODSERVICE STAFF FEEDBACK

In addition to analysis of school purchasing records, information regarding the MDA Farm to School grant was also collected from foodservice staff, using surveys and focus groups. Feedback touched on barriers and challenges encountered, successes and popular methods of connection and promotion of Farm to School efforts. Surveys were sent to each of the 27 districts that received a grant, and there were 18 respondents to the survey, for a completion rate of 67%. Survey questions were a mix of multiple choice and open-ended answer formats. Longer interviews were also completed with several food service staff to gain a better understanding of the context, motivation, challenges, and benefits of Farm to School in their districts. There was a range of sizes and types of districts represented. Districts indicated a fair amount of “heat and serve” style cooking, with some districts indicating a lack of equipment for more scratch cooking, and some with satellite sites that lack kitchens on site.

Application and Documentation

Before receiving a grant, foodservice staff had to find, apply for, and be awarded, either a First Bite or Full Tray grant. The process of finding and applying for grants was a burden noted especially by smaller schools or districts, where there are fewer staff people with responsibilities that prevent them from having much “desk time”: “There are some challenges,

maybe more with the smaller schools and independent schools, just with the lack of knowledge of how to do it and maybe even the time to do it.”

Most interviewees indicated the documentation required was in line with other grants, and the purchase tracking and reimbursement were not overly burdensome. One interviewee noted the application seemed longer this year and expressed concern about grant applications getting too technical and becoming inaccessible to some districts. Some food service staff indicated the desire for more individualized support to get questions answered during the application process, and with specific questions during the purchasing process.

Motivations

There was strong agreement on the value of Farm to School, and district staff’s motivation to serve and source local purchases, supporting local farmers and the kids they serve. The top three motivations selected from a list by school foodservice staff surrounded supporting local farmers and the local economy and supporting student consumption of fruits and veggies.

School food service staff cited a desire to educate kids about where their food comes from:

“We served a chicken drumstick, and this little girl was panicking, and came up to me — ‘There’s a bone in my meat!’ — and I explained that meat does have a bone. My motivation is to teach the kids about real food, because we live in a world where it is all grab and go.”

Barriers

While grantees noted a variety of benefits, they also experienced barriers to implementing robust Farm to School programs. Grantees selected several offered key barriers to implementation:

In addition to product/producer availability and budget constraints, lack of staff time and staffing shortages were prominent challenges that were noted. Several districts mentioned procurement challenges, including finding where to purchase local foods, and figuring out the logistics required to order and track purchases outside of their mainline distributor.

Planning and flexibility in Farm to School was noted, with districts needing to flex with what was available and plan orders further out: “It does require a little bit more pre-planning, you can’t necessarily order two

MOTIVATIONS

- Help Minnesota Farms and Businesses
- Support the local economy
- Increase student consumption of fruits and vegetables

BARRIERS

- Lack of products available at certain times
- Lack of growers/producers in the area from whom to purchase
- Budget constraints

days before and expect to receive whatever that local protein or vegetable might be.”

Staffing challenges were the top logistical challenge selected by grantees; namely, a lack of staff labor to prepare local foods. Related to this issue, staff turnover and training needs were connected to the challenge of preparing and serving local foods:

“Staffing at some of our schools [is a challenge] — just having whole raw produce coming in does take considerably more time, and ... staff training on how to cut, prepare, and serve if we want to have more than one serve date.”

As in the application and reporting, lack of desk time was noted as a barrier in ordering and putting local foods on the menu. For example, one grantee who uses a service to provide menus, nutritional information, etc., found it harder to know how to source local items such as local meat and have it fit in their menu plan.

“As far as the calories, and the sodium, there’s so many things to follow, so I don’t know how to make sure that it fits in the guidelines.”

As noted by growers, the short growing in Minnesota was noted by foodservice staff as a persistent challenge, with some grantees struggling with ongoing vegetable purchases throughout the year. There was

LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES

- Lack of staff labor to prepare local foods
- Lack of distribution method to get local foods into building(s)
- Lack of equipment to prepare local food
- Lack of staff training to prepare local food

some difference noted between grantees working through a local food hub versus grantees purchasing directly from farmers. Also mirroring statements from the grower survey in the previous section, there is potential for ongoing education and support surrounding purchasing and preparation: Some of the longest available products were also noted as challenging to use, such as winter squash.

Connections with Local Growers

Grantees found and connected with local growers in a variety of ways. The top categories - word of mouth and Minnesota Grown online directory - align with our findings that most purchases were direct through producers. In some communities, school foodservice staff are farmers themselves and have deep local connections, so finding farmers was straightforward. Food hubs and other distributors play a key role for some districts, including providing localized support that allowed common-sense substitutions when required, and sourcing and delivering the quantity of product needed to multiple sites.

Promotional Activities

Schools were able to promote their Farm to School activities in a variety of ways. Farm to School Month activities were popular, along with the support of Minnesota Grown food highlights and availability of promotional items. The Minnesota Harvest of the Month pilot was running during the grant period, and these materials were mentioned as a complementary resource for schools for menu and sourcing ideas as well as promotional support.

Taste tests were also noted as an opportunity for student engagement, as well as immediate student feedback.

CONNECTIONS WITH LOCAL GROWERS

- Word of Mouth/community member recommendations
- MN Grown Directory
- Other schools/districts' recommendations
- Through existing distributors

School foodservice indicated they had purchased more Minnesota products as well as tried new Minnesota products because of the grant.

Benefits

Foodservice staff noted a variety of benefits to their Farm to School efforts. Grantees noted positive feedback from students, parents and the community at large. One staffmember stated, "We got a lot of compliments, and the parents appreciated the efforts we were making. [With] the students, fruit sales have gone up considerably." Another interviewee referenced feedback from parents and community members:

"I know parents always appreciate it, especially when we can get the word out...social media posts — when they do happen, the feedback is so much greater than anything else we put out on social media. That tells me that it's something that the community is interested enough in us continuing."

School food service also noted the high quality of Farm to School products: "I think [the grant] has really helped us to be able to get better quality food, and I think that's part of the reason our sales are up considerably."

TOP PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES

- Farm to School Month activities
- Posters in the cafeteria
- Highlighting local Minnesota food items on menus for families
- Social media photos and highlights of Minnesota items

School food service noted that taste tests, special events, or other promotion of local foods gave them the chance to interact more with students and build their relationship and opportunity for student feedback: “Through the farmers coming in, the kids started talking to me — ‘that’s not my favorite lunch.’ I appreciate that now I am someone that’s approachable.”

“I think it’s good to see the lunch lady — they just see the top half of us. ““Oh my gosh, you have legs!”“...yes, we do.”

Building the opportunity for feedback and relationship with students, staff and other community members was noted as a benefit of Farm to School efforts.

Future opportunities for support

Training for food service staff on preparation of whole, raw produce was listed as a support that would be beneficial for staff at both small and large districts. The top supports listed were help connecting with farmers and Farm to School recipes. These mirror supports indicated by growers in the producer survey. Foodservice staff also would appreciate strategies for engaging students, teachers, parents and community, as well as additional Farm to School promotional resources.

Training was another support that would be appreciated, given staff turnover and the ongoing training needs:

“I know with staff turnover, you may have done staff training in the past, but might have a whole new crop of employees that have just never been exposed to the cutting and process of whole, raw produce like that. So that’s been a barrier.”

Another staff member noted the role training could play in ongoing support for their program: “2 or 3-hour workshops that we could do once or twice a year to learn about this stuff, I think that would help.”

Overall, grantees indicated interest in further resources and support to expand their Farm to School efforts. Some of their recommendations have already been implemented — moving the office hours to the afternoon (2-3 p.m.), for instance, was at school foodservice staff’s recommendation. Another effort that has already begun is expanding the resources available through the MN Farm to School website, as well as highlighting existing resources and recipes.



CONCLUSION

In fiscal year 2021, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture’s Farm to School grants distributed nearly \$300,000 to local schools and had a nearly \$1.2 million impact on the local economy. Schools purchased a wide range of products – in this round of funding, local protein was particularly popular. Farmers noted challenges in partnering with schools, but also an interest in increasing this effort. Schools noted a variety of benefits of their farm to school efforts, and an interest in augmenting these efforts in the future. Both growers and school foodservice staff noted they would appreciate further support building connections between schools and producers. They appreciated communications and logistical support in their farm to school efforts. A continued focus on integration and promotion of resources, combined with keeping application and reporting processes as simple as possible, would be appreciated by school foodservice staff. IATP and Extension plan to continue evaluation activities for the 2022 and 2023 rounds of MDA Farm to School grants to document the impact and look for opportunities to improve this popular and growing program.

APPENDIX

Fiscal Year 2021 MDA Farm to School Grantees

FY 2021 Grant Recipients

First Bite Mini Grant

- All Saints Catholic Schools
- Aurora Waakaone Community of Learners
- ISD 0877 Buffalo Public Schools
- Crosslake Community School
- ISD 0330 Heron Lake-Okabena Public Schools
- Immanuel Lutheran School
- ISD 0740 Melrose Public Schools
- New Ulm Area Catholic Schools
- ISD 0553 New York Mills Public Schools
- St Mary's School (Breckenridge)
- ISD 0487 Upsala Public Schools
- Winona Area Public Schools

Full Tray Grant

- ISD 0206 Alexandria Public Schools
- ISD 0271 Bloomington Public Schools
- ISD 0466 Dassel Cokato
- ISD 0272 Eden Prairie Pub Sch
- ISD 0270 Hopkins Public Schools
- ISD 0423 Hutchinson Public Schools
- ISD 0465 Litchfield Public Schools
- ISD 2711 Mesabi East Schools
- ISD 0001 Minneapolis Public Schools
- ISD 0659 Northfield Public Schools
- ISD 0719 Prior Lake Public Schools
- Riverway Learning Community
- ISD 0281 Robbinsdale
- ISD 0623 Roseville Public Schools
- ISD 0282 St. Anthony New Brighton

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