The Benefits of Local Food Purchasing Incentives

NATIONAL FARM to SCHOOL NETWORK

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Center for Regional Food Systems

This document is part of a resource series on Local Food Purchasing Incentives (LFPIs), produced through collaboration between the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems and National Farm to School Network. This project aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on LFPIs and provide more information for farm to school advocates and practitioners nationwide.

For more information, visit:

- https://foodsystems.msu.edu/local-food-purchasing-incentives
- https://www.farmtoschool.org/policy/lfpi

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Farm to school is a triple win for kids, farmers, and communities. While these programs are broad in scope and vary by context, the three core elements of farm to school include procurement, in which schools source and serve local foods in the cafeteria; education related to food, agriculture, and nutrition; and school gardens.[20]

As farm to school programs have grown and evolved over the past several decades, Local Food Purchasing Incentives (LFPIs) have grown in interest and adoption in states around the country. These programs support the procurement aspect of farm to school by providing additional funding to child nutrition program (CNP) operators to directly offset or incentivize local food purchases. Typically funded and operated at the state level, LFPIs intend to increase the purchasing of local foods in school and early care and education settings. The first state-level LFPI was established in 2001, and as of August 2023, at least 16 states and Washington, DC, have established LFPIs.[5]

Drawing inspiration from the National Farm to School Network's influential fact sheet, "The Benefits of Farm to School",[20] this resource focuses on aggregating insights specific to the benefits of LFPI programs. Through an exploration of peer-reviewed journal articles, program evaluations, and legislative reports, we aim to shed light on the diverse advantages LFPIs offer. This resource can also act as a tool to lay the groundwork for creating shared tracking systems and metrics across multiple states. These programs can be an effective policy tool to increase educational experiences for children, support local farmers, and nourish communities, making them a vital catalyst in the ongoing success of the farm to school movement.

Benefits of Farm to School[20]

Economic Development

Public Health

Education

Environment

Equity & Community Engagement

Several limitations and considerations must be acknowledged related to this resource. First, benefits of LFPIs were only included in this resource if they were supported with data from tracking, evaluation, or research efforts available by the time of its publication. Many programs do not have extensive research or evaluation support yet, so benefits supported with data are often limited and may not yet meet the stated goals or aims of each active LFPI. Therefore, some LFPIs may be represented more extensively than others in this resource, and some stated program goals or designs are not supported with benefits summarized in this resource in its first issue. The authors intend to update this resource in the future to include additional benefits as data become available to support the goals or claims of LFPIs in action across the country.

Additionally, the benefits listed in this resource are nuanced and contingent upon the program's design and its unique implementation context and do not apply to all LFPI programs. As LFPIs are implemented in real school settings with many variables at play, there are often insufficient data to determine the direct causality of an LFPI on factors relating to health, economic development, or equity.

As several publications have noted, more reporting data are needed on school purchases from farmers, ranchers, and agribusiness owners identifying as Black, Indigenous, and people of color.[9,24] While some evaluations have been conducted that incorporate producer identity and values-aligned purchases, we note that this is an emerging area of LFPI evaluation that needs more attention. More insights are needed directly from farmers and food business owners on their sales and experiences with these types of programs.

Further, this resource attempts to provide a comprehensive list of observed quantitative benefits but may be limited in its ability to capture all public resources to date. If there were similar benefits observed across multiple years of a program, this resource captures data from the latest program evaluation. For external review and to capture potential additions, the authors shared a draft of this publication with LFPI program coordinators, authors of LFPI program evaluations, and evaluators in the sector. Lastly, this resource does not address negative connotations or effects from LFPIs found in the literature review and sheds light only on benefits observed in state programs across the nation.

To learn more about these programs, please see the references provided in this resource.

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To find more resources on LFPIs, go to foodsystems.msu.edu/local-food-purchasing-incentives and farmtoschool.org/resources. Contact Cassandra Bull at cassandra@farmtoschool.org or Colleen Matts at matts@msu.edu for more information.

Overview: Observed Benefits of Local Food Purchasing Incentives

Benefit Category	States Reporting Benefits	Benefit Types
 **Equity & Community Engagement**	MN WA	Support emerging and underrepresented farmers and ranchers[18,27]
	MN MI OR WA	Encourage direct purchases from local farmers[11,17,18,19,27]
	CO MI NY OR WA	Support socially, geographically, and economically diverse student populations[6,8,9,17,19,27]
	AK WA	Increase culturally relevant ingredients in school meals[12,14,28]
 **Economic Development**	AK CO NY	Increase demand for local foods[2,4,7,16]
	CO MI MN NY OR WA	Create new school food markets for local farmers and other food businesses[3,4,8,17,18,19,27,28]
	MI	Foster diverse spending on local foods and market channel innovation[19]
	NY MN OR	Have a positive economic impact within the state[8,15,18,23]
	AL CO CT KY ME MI MN NY OR VT	Yield a positive return on investment of incentive dollars in the local economy[1,5,7,15,17,18,19,26]
	MI	Improve local food supply chain logistics, such as delivery methods and sharing of product and vendor information[8,19]
 **Education**	CO MI OR	Increase opportunities for nutrition and agricultural education[8,17,19]
	OR	Connect the cafeteria with school gardens[17]

Overview: Observed Benefits of Local Food Purchasing Incentives (cont.)

 Environment	WA	Reduce food waste from school meals[27,28]
 Public Health	AK CO MI MN WA	Increase meal quality, scratch cooking, and menu innovation to incorporate local ingredients at participating schools[7,8,12,18,19,28]
	OR MI	Introduce new types of foods and unique foods in school food programs[11,19]
	MI OR WA	Serve nutrient-dense, fresh, and minimally processed local foods[8,18,19,27]
	MI	Increase the number of students trying and accepting new local ingredients[19]
	MI NY OR	Increase the number of children benefiting from local foods served in school food programs[6,17,19]
	CO MI	Increase student consumption of local foods and participation in school food programs[8,19,28]
 Other Benefits	Overarching	Increase overall farm to school intensity[13]
	Overarching	Help states gather extensive data on local food purchasing trends and related activities
	MI	Provide certainty for food service directors to better plan local food purchases[19,28]
	MI	Empower and support school food service professionals[19]

A Closer Look: Benefits of Local Food Purchasing Incentives

States Reporting	Year or School Year (SY) Observed	Benefit Explanation

Equity and Community Engagement

Support emerging and underrepresented farmers and ranchers

MN	SY 21–22	Of participating farmers and ranchers, 39% identified as women-owned businesses; 11% identified as BIPOC-led businesses; 6% identified as veteran-owned businesses; and more than 20% of these producers had been farming for less than 10 years.[18]
WA	June–August 2022	Fifty-six percent of LFPI grantees purchased from underrepresented farmers and ranchers; and 80% of LFPI grantees purchased from small producers.[27]

Encourage direct purchases from local farmers

MN MI OR WA	Multiple years	Grantees purchased 10–66% of their local foods directly from farmers, fisheries, ranches, cooperatives, food manufacturers, and school gardens rather than through traditional school food distributors.[17,18,19,27]
OR	2018	New connections between farmers and schools have been directly attributed to the state's LFPI. Farmers saw farm to school sales as a source of pride and noted that the LFPI created deeper connections between the school and farm that resulted in school presentations and field trips.[11]

Support diverse student populations: *Demographic diversity*

OR	SY 2015–16	The LFPI reached a greater percentage of districts with more than 25% nonwhite students than the state as a whole (43% vs. 37%).[9]
MI	SY 21–22	LFPI grantees served a higher percentage of African American, Asian American, and Hispanic/Latinx students than the state student population as a whole (combined 31.6% vs. 28.8%).[19]
WA	June–August 2022	The LFPI reached two tribal programs.[27]
OR	2019–21 program cycle	While some LFPIs have not yet supported tribal communities, the existence of the LFPI and efforts from state agencies to engage tribal communities have deepened these relationships and caused state agencies to consider innovative strategies to increase LFPI participation in tribal communities.[17]

Equity and Community Engagement (cont.)

Support diverse student populations: *Economic diversity*

CO OR	Multiple years	Forty-six to 64% of LFPI grantees served a majority of students who qualified for free or reduced-price meals.[8,9] In one instance, this was seven percentage points above the state average (64% vs. 57%).[9]
WA	June–August 2022	More than half of grant funds supported grantees at schools where the majority of students qualified for free or reduced-price meals.[27]
NY	SY 22–23	Eighty-three percent of CNPs that qualified for the LFPI participated in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) when the federal qualification rate was 40% Identified Students. CEP is a federal program only open to schools and districts with limited financial resources.[6]
OR	SY 2015–16	The LFPI reached a higher percentage of low-income districts than the state as a whole (81% vs. 65%).[9]
OR	SY 2014–15 vs. SY 2015–2016	Switching from a competitive grant to a universal LFPI design allowed the program to reach more demographically and economically diverse student populations and increased local food purchasing of fruits and vegetables in participating low-income districts.[9]
MI	SY 21–22	LFPI grantees had two percentage points more students eligible for free and reduced-price meals compared to the state student population as a whole (51.5% vs. 49.3%).[19]

Support diverse student populations: *Small and rural communities*

CO	SY 22–23	Sixty percent of grantees were located in rural areas.[8]
CO	SY 22–23	Forty-five percent of grantees were both small-sized and rural, with fewer than 6,500 students enrolled.[8]

Increase culturally relevant ingredients in school meals

AK	SY 12–13	Forty-five percent of food service directors believed their state's LFPI allowed them to serve more culturally relevant meals.[12]
AK	FYs 13, 14	Thirty-five to 55% of purchases by weight were local seafood.[14]
WA	SY 22-23	Grantees used LFPI funding to purchase: local tomatillos and other culturally relevant crops; local flour to make scratch-cooked tortillas; native foraged and wild caught foods such as salmon, fiddlehead ferns, mushrooms, nettles, and berries; native vegetables to align with education about Native American growing techniques such as the Three Sisters (beans, corn, and squash).[28]

Economic Development

Increase demand for local foods

NY	SY 19–20	Three-quarters of school food authorities that qualified for the LFPI increased their overall spending on local ingredients for lunch from 20% to 30% to qualify for the program.[4]
CO	SY 21–22 vs. SY 19–20	LFPI grantees increased spending on local foods by 63% based on purchasing estimates provided by grantees before they participated in the program.[7]
CO	SY 17–18	An LFPI case study analysis estimated an incentive program would increase local fresh fruit and vegetable purchases by 11–12% from August to October and by 0–1% during November and December.[16]
AK	2015	The LFPI was more successful at increasing local purchases than a state-level 7% geographic preference policy.[2]

Have a positive economic impact within the state

NY	SYs 17-18, 18-19, 19-20	A case study of one participating school district showed a positive economic multiplier of 1.54, meaning that for every dollar spent in LFPI reimbursement, economic impacts to the state increase by $1.54.[23]
MN	SY 21–22	The LFPI granted nearly $300,000 in funds to schools, resulting in an estimated $1.2 million in direct and indirect economic impact.[18]
CO	SY 22–23	Using a local food impact calculator, the estimated impact on the state economy was 57% greater than the amount awarded to grantees.[8]
OR	2010-2011	An impact assessment of LFPI legislation estimated it would: • Generate 270 jobs, with an employment multiplier of 2.67, meaning that for every job created by this program, another 1.67 jobs would be created due to resulting economic activity; and • Have an overall economic multiplier of 3.16, meaning that for each dollar spent on the program, an additional $2.16 of "unique value" is added to the local economy.[25]

Yield a positive return on investment of incentive funds in the economy

AL CO NY OR VT	Multiple years	The CNPs participating in LFPIs without a matching requirement have been shown to spend 2.5–3.6 times what they receive in state reimbursement on local foods.[1,7,15,26]
ME MI KY MN	Multiple years	Some LFPIs have match requirements or offer rebates in which CNPs only receive partial reimbursement for local food purchases. These partial rebates can range from 15% to 50%, ensuring that these programs yield a 100–568% return on investment of state program dollars.[5,18,19]

Economic Development (cont.)

Support farmers and food businesses by creating new market channels

CO MI WA	Multiple years	Fifty-two percent to 90% of LFPI grantees developed new relationships with producers.[8,19,27]
MN	SY 21–22	Local agribusinesses that sold to schools participating in the LFPI reported that sales schools represented a median of 5% of all sales within the last 12 months (range: 0.1%–60%).[18]
MN	SY 21–22	More than two-thirds of producer respondents that sold to schools participating in the LFPI had been selling to schools for less than 3 years.[18]
CO	SY 22–23	50% of producer respondents reported selling to a new school district.[8]
NY WA	Multiple years	The LFPI resulted in products specifically being developed for school markets, such as pita chips, hot dogs, beef patties, and bread rolls or pizza dough with local flour. In many cases, grant recipients worked with local producers and food processors to develop these new products.[4,28]
AK	2012	Schools developed new recipes to adapt to locally available products, such as whole grain barley flour.[3]
OR	2019–21 program cycle	The LFPI fosters a culture of public-private partnerships to support the implementation of the state's LFPI, resulting in greater collaboration between cross-sector groups.[17]
WA	June–August 2022	Grantees developed four new farm connections on average in the first year of the LFPI.[27]
MI	SY 21–22	More than half (54%) of LFPI grantees reported the LFPI allowed them to strengthen their relationships with existing food and farm businesses.[19]
MI	SY 21–22	More than two-thirds (69%) of LFPI grantees believed that the program positively impacted local farms and food businesses to meet the needs of school food markets. Specifically, many grantees believed the program resulted in increased business opportunities (30%) and increased demand for local products (14%) because of the program.[19]

Foster diverse spending on local food and market channel innovation

MI	SY 21–22	LFPI grantees bought local foods from an average of six different farms.[19]
MI	SYs 20–21, 21–22	LFPI grantees that participated in the program for at least 5 years were statistically more likely to purchase local foods from more farms and used more market channel types to purchase local foods compared to grantees who had participated in the program for 2 years or less (9.3 vs. 4.7 farms and 3.2 vs. 1.8 channels in 21–22 SY).[19]
MI	SY 21–22	In addition to regular school food sales, some local farms and food hubs sold Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) boxes to LFPI grantees. The CSA sales can provide more unique varieties of produce to schools and support producers earlier in the year by providing them a source of revenue before the season's harvest begins.[19]

Economic Development (cont.)

Improve local food supply chain logistics, such as delivery methods and sharing of product and vendor information

MI	SY 21–22	Nearly a quarter of LFPI grantees (24%) believed that the program improved local food supply chain logistics, such as improved delivery methods and improved information sharing about local products and vendors.[19]
CO	SY 22–23	Fifty percent of grantees viewed shortened supply chains as a successful outcome of purchasing local products.[8]

Education

Increase opportunities for nutrition and agricultural education

CO	SY 22–23	Fifty-five percent of LFPI grantees reported that the incentive assisted in creating opportunities for nutrition and agricultural education at school.[8]
OR MI	Multiple years	Grantees promote local foods through: • Harvest of the Month materials in the cafeteria (52%)[17] • posters of local foods (14%)[19] • social media (9%)[19] • nutrition education in both the classroom (9%) and cafeteria (9%)[19] • taste tests (7%)[19]

Connect the cafeteria with school gardens

OR	SY 19–20	Seventy-seven percent of LFPI grantees incorporated produce from school gardens in school meals.[17]

Environment

Reduce food waste from school meals

WA	SY 22–23 vs SY 21-22	Thirty-five percent of LFPI grantees reported reduction in food waste as a benefit of program participation. This represents a large increase from the first year of program implementation, where 22% of grantees reported a reduction in food waste.[27,28]

Public Health

Increase meal quality, scratch cooking, and menu innovation to incorporate local ingredients at participating schools

MI MN WA	Multiple years	Statewide, schools participating in their state's LFPI purchased 38–49 varieties of fruits and vegetables in one year and over 140 unique food products.[18,19,28]
CO	SY 21–22	Forty-seven percent to 60% of LFPI grantees reported that the incentive assisted in the creation of new menu items.[7,8]
AK	SY 12–13	More than 60% of food service representatives attributed their state's LFPI to increasing the quality and variety of foods served in school meals.[12]
MI	SY 21–22	The LFPI grantees who participated in the program for at least 5 years were statistically more likely to purchase more types of local foods than those who had participated in the program for 2 years or less (17 types vs. 7.9 types).[19]
MI	SY 21–22	Nearly half of LFPI grantees (48%) reported an increase in the variety of produce served in school meals.[19]

Increase the number of children benefiting from local foods served in school food programs

MI NY OR	Multiple years	Depending on the LFPI design, LFPIs are estimated to reach 7–90% of students in their state.[6,17,19]

Increase student consumption of local foods and participation in school food programs

CO WA	Multiple years	Fifty-eight to 65 percent of LFPI grantees reported that the incentive assisted in increasing student engagement in school meals.[8,28]
WA	SY 22-23	Fifty-one percent of LFPI grantees reported that the program increased consumption of items in meals.[28]
MI	SY 21–22	Two-thirds of LFPI grantees reported that the program increased student fruit (69%) and vegetable (64%) consumption.[19]

Public Health (cont.)

Increase the number of students trying and accepting new local ingredients

MI	SY 21–22	Sixty percent of LFPI grantees reported that the new local foods they served were accepted or eaten by students.[19]

Introduce new types of foods and unique foods in school meals

OR	2018	The LFPI provided a market for unique or small produce from farms and food businesses.[11]
MI	SY 21–22	Most LFPI grantees (66%) reported that the incentive allowed them to try new kinds of foods they would not have otherwise tried.[19]
MI	SY 21–22	On average, LFPI grantees served three new kinds of foods during the year.[19]
MI	SY 21–22	The LFPI grantees purchased unique varieties of produce as part of the incentive program. These include products such as fennel, rhubarb, and saskatoon berries, among others.[19]
MI	SY 21–22	The LFPI grantees were also able to try many different varieties of common produce, including over 30 apple varieties and six bean varieties.[19]

Serve nutrient-dense, fresh, and minimally processed local foods

WA	June–August 22	Fifty-one percent of LFPI grantees reported purchasing local food weekly, and 28% of LFPI grantees reported purchasing local food daily.[27]
WA CO OR	Multiple years	The LFPI grantees spent 44–71% of grant funds on local fruits, vegetables, and legumes, as opposed to other food categories including dairy, meat and poultry, and grains.[8,17,27]
CO	SY 22–23	In the program's second year, grantees decreased spending on value-added processed products by 11% and increased spending on raw and minimally processed products by 15% when compared to the program's first year.[8] This indicates a shift in purchasing behavior once LFPIs become more established over time.
CO	SY 22–23	Eighty-eight percent of purchases were spent on raw and minimally processed local foods, and the remaining 12% of purchases were spent on value-added processed products.[8]
MI	SY 21–22	Three-quarters of LFPI grantees reported that they offered more local fruits (78%) and vegetables (75%) in school meals because of the LFPI.[19]
MI	SY 21–22	In Michigan, 81% of funds were used to purchase fruits and 18% of funds were used to purchase local vegetables. Michigan only incentivizes fresh and minimally processed fruits, vegetables, and legumes in its program.[19]

Other Benefits

Provide certainty for food service directors to better plan local food purchases

MI	SY 21–22	More than a third of LFPI grantees (36%) reported the program allows them to plan local food purchases with more certainty.[19]

Empower and support school food service staff

MI	SY 21–22	Ninety percent of grantees reported food service staff had a positive response to local foods purchased through the incentive program. Grantees shared that staff were excited to serve and had pride in serving local foods and increased their knowledge of preparing local foods as a result of the incentive program.[19]
WA	SY 22-23	Forty-five percent of LFPI grantees reported increased kitchen staff satisfaction due to program participation.[28]

Overarching Benefits

Increase overall farm to school intensity

State farm to school legislation that supports local food purchasing is positively associated with a greater extent of farm to school participation, as reported in the USDA Farm to School Census.[13]

Gather extensive data on local food purchasing trends and related activities

The LFPIs often require the submission of purchasing information by food program managers to receive incentive funds. Without an incentive program, gathering robust local food purchasing data is difficult. With these policies, governments can also better understand the landscape of school food markets, and their evolution over time, in their states.

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