



FARM TO SCHOOL IN MICHIGAN: 2012 SURVEY SHOWS INTEREST IN PURCHASING LOCAL FOODS CONTINUES TO GROW

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In February 2012, researchers from the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems surveyed Michigan school food service directors regarding their food purchasing and serving practices and, in particular, their perspectives about and use of local foods (defined as from the state of Michigan). This was the third such survey, following similar efforts in 2004 and 2009. A thirty-question electronic survey was emailed to 933 school food service directors from a Michigan Department of Education database. The response rate was 34%, with 317 fully or partially completed surveys.

Survey respondents represented 53 counties and 129 zip codes. The majority represented public school districts (58%) and schools (e.g., charter, private) (32%), while a small percentage of respondents (4%) represented other institutions (e.g., detention facilities, emergency shelters) that provide meals to school-aged children. The mean reported free and reduced price meal eligibility rate was 57%, compared to the statewide rate of 48% as of fall 2011. Most respondents reported at least some use of each of three modes of food preparation, with heat-and-serve most frequently used, followed by semi-prepared, and then scratch cooking. The majority of respondents' food service operations (75%) were self-operated; 24% indicated contract management, and just 2% indicated that they use only outside vendors, similar to a food court. Chartwells (or their parent company, Compass Group) was indicated as the management company by 30 of the 68 respondents to this question.

Nearly 89% of respondents were interested in purchasing local foods for their school food service program in the future. Although the rate of respondents purchasing food from a local farmer or producer nearly tripled from 11% in 2004 to 41% in 2009, only 34% reported doing so in 2012, which may have been impacted by question wording. Taking into account all possible sources listed in the 2012 survey (local farmer/producer, farmer cooperative/collaborative, broadline distributor and specialty distributor), 54% reported purchasing local food through one or more channels.

SUMMARY OF SURVEYS OF MICHIGAN SCHOOL FOOD SERVICE DIRECTORS

Selected Survey Item	2004	2009	2012
Number of responses	383	270	317
Response rate	58%	28%	34%
School/district free and reduced price meal eligibility*	36%	46%	57%
Interest in purchasing local foods	83%	70%	89%
Purchased food from a local farmer/producer	11%	41%	34%

*In each survey, respondents were asked to report rates of the schools/districts they represented for the previous school year. Statewide free and reduced-price meal eligibility was 39% for the 2002-2003 school year, 41% for 2008-2009 and 46% for 2010-2011, as derived from state totals reported by the Center for Educational Performance and Information at www.michigan.gov/cepi.

School food service directors' motivations to purchase local foods have been fairly consistent across the three surveys. Helping Michigan farms and businesses was ranked 11th by respondents in 2004 but was first in 2009 and second in 2012, representing the biggest difference in how a particular motivator was rated. Access to fresher and higher quality food remained fairly strong motivators throughout the three surveys. In 2012, the most frequently selected logistical challenge to serving local food was lack of a distribution method to obtain local food (69%), followed by lack of labor/staffing to prepare fresh foods (55%) and lack of facilities to handle fresh produce, uncooked meat, etc. (46%).



INFLUENCES ON LOCAL FOOD PURCHASING

	2004	2009	2012
Top Factors Motivating Local Food Purchasing			
1	Supporting local economy	Helping Michigan farms/businesses	Supporting local economy
2	Access to fresher food	Supporting local economy	Helping Michigan farms/businesses
3	Higher quality food	Higher quality food	Access to fresher food
Top Barriers to Local Food Purchasing			
1	Procurement regulations	Procurement regulations	Limited seasonal availability
2	Limited seasonal availability	Budget constraints	Food safety concerns
3	Internal purchasing policies	Food safety concerns	Budget constraints

Respondents were also asked about specific local food purchases during the previous (2010-2011) school year. Fruits were most frequently purchased (35%), followed by vegetables and dairy (each 26%), grains (20%), meats (7%) and beans/legumes (4%). The ten most frequently purchased local food items were apples, milk, cucumbers, cherry/grape tomatoes, carrots, broccoli, slicing tomatoes, bread, potatoes and lettuce. When asked about specific forms (fresh, processed or frozen), directors reported greater interest in fresh and whole produce, similar to 2009 responses. However, interest in local meats was greater for ground beef and formed (e.g., patties, nuggets) chicken, beef and turkey than whole muscle meat of any type. Interest in purchasing local beans and legumes was higher for canned beans than any dried beans, with red kidney, chickpea/garbanzo and black beans as the top three beans of interest.

ITEMS AND INTEREST IN PURCHASING LOCALLY

Category	Fresh and whole	%	Processed	%	Frozen	%
Vegetables (n=145)	Cucumbers	79	Carrots	41	Corn	45
	Cherry tomatoes	73	Lettuce	40	Green Beans	43
	Slicing tomatoes	59	Salad greens	30	Peas	41
	Peppers	57	Broccoli	27	Broccoli	31
	Carrots	57	Potatoes	25	Carrots	26
Fruits (n=137)	Apples	82	Apples	39	Strawberries	30
	Strawberries	80	Cherries	23	Blueberries	27
	Grapes	70	Peaches	18	Raspberries	20
	Watermelon	70	Strawberries	16	Cherries	19
	Peaches	67	Watermelon	13	Peaches	19

Many Michigan school food service directors have explored options for purchasing and serving local foods to their students, as reflected in their responses to 2004, 2009 and 2012 surveys. As they have tried new food sources and processes, their perceptions about motivations, barriers and logistical challenges have shifted. Administering these surveys annually will allow better understanding of the factors that support and inhibit local foods in school meals, how they change over time, and how they interact with changes in the school food environment, such as the new federal nutrition standards enacted in the 2012-2013 school year. Maintaining and increasing responses from school food service directors, however, will be a challenge as they continue to report increasing demands on their time.

For more information, visit www.foodsystems.msu.edu or contact Colleen Matts, Farm to Institution Specialist, at matts@msu.edu or 517-432-0310.

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