

# Farm to School Program



**Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP)**

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## Introduction

Farm to School Programs exist in more than 2,200 school districts across the country in 45 of 50 states.<sup>1</sup> These programs provide a way to incorporate fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables into the school meals program while simultaneously providing educational opportunities to students and economic development opportunities to the community. In the southeast Michigan region, Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP) works with school districts' food service directors to develop comprehensive Farm to School (F2S) programs that are inclusive and mindful of the diversity that exists within the district's student population.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of a balanced diet, rich in healthy, nutritious foods, and the impact it can have on behavior, attention span and test scores in school-age children. Additionally, new research reveals that many diseases afflicting Americans today (diabetes, obesity, heart disease) can be controlled by the foods we eat. By adopting a Farm to School program for the district, Food Service Directors can increase the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables served to students and address some of the health issues facing students in the district.

Through a partnership with FSEP, Food Service Directors and school districts can develop a comprehensive program that will: incorporate a greater variety of fruits and vegetables into the school meals program; develop educational opportunities in the cafeteria; host classroom visits by local farmers; and enhance school garden opportunities where appropriate. Not only will the Farm to School program address increased access to fresh fruits and vegetables, it can also be utilized as a way to meet Wellness Policy goals and Snack Vending Guidelines set forth by individual school districts.

Food System Economic Partnership, a non-profit organization serving Southeast Michigan, exists to catalyze change in the region's food system. This is accomplished through the creation of strong relationships between urban and rural partners that result in economic development opportunities and healthy, sustainable communities. Farm to School programs are one of the means used to increase the demand for locally grown fruits and vegetables which results in the economic development of local area farmers. In addition to the health and nutrition benefits for the students, the program also provides the opportunity to stimulate economic development opportunities across the region. A 2006 study conducted by the C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems and the Michigan Land Use Institute found that "\$187 million in new personal income and at least 1,889 new jobs"<sup>2</sup> could be created if more fresh produce was consumed. If only one percent of the school food budget was spent on the purchase of locally grown fruits and vegetables, this would translate into a substantial school district investment in the community. Each dollar spent by the food service department with area farmers is then multiplied an estimated seven to nine times across the community. The purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables by the school district translates into the development of employment opportunities for the region and the creation of healthier eating habits in our children.

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<sup>1</sup> National Farm to School Network, [www.famtoschool.org](http://www.famtoschool.org)

<sup>2</sup> Conner, D., Hamm, M., et. al. *Eat Fresh and Grow Jobs, Michigan*. September 2006.

## Recognizing Challenges and Barriers

Although the concept of Farm to School is simple in nature, the practice of bringing locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables into the school cafeteria is much more complicated. A number of barriers, both perceived and real, exist when beginning program implementation. As you work through these challenges, it is important to recognize that there is no one right answer or solution to the problem. Overcoming the barriers of Farm to School require relationship building, communication and problem solving. We have provided some examples and solutions to the most common challenges and barriers in a farm to school program below.

**Distribution** – How will farm fresh products be delivered to the school meal program? As plans evolve for the implementation of a school district’s Farm to School program distribution methods will need to be explored. The answer could be something as simple as the farmer delivering to the school’s dock at a set date and time or something more complex such as a group of farmers delivering their product to one central point and then someone distributing the produce to the schools.

**Seasonality** – The school year does not coincide with the growing season in Michigan, how will we get produce? One of the greatest strengths of the Farm to School program is that it teaches our students about the seasonality of food, storage methods and health benefits of eating a seasonal diet. It also provides an opportunity to talk with students about our global food system and how in the average American meal our food has traveled 1,500 miles before reaching our plate. In the *Program Implementation* section of this Tool Kit we discuss produce availability by season.

**Identification of Items Available** – The Food Service Department will need assistance in identifying produce availability throughout the year and assistance in locating farmers to purchase from. Several organizations exist to help in this area. In Southeast Michigan, Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP) works with farmers in Jackson, Lenawee, Washtenaw, Monroe and Wayne counties to help them grow food for the local market. FSEP will work with school Food Service Directors and farmers to bring them together and help identify local food availability.

**Menu** – The food purchased for school lunch programs is largely menu driven. Efforts to change the menu and focus on an increase in fresh fruits and vegetables will need to be both culturally appropriate and ensure that an increase in food waste does not occur. One easy way to start including local food in the school meals program is through the salad bar. We strongly recommend school district’s start small and get the “kinks” worked out before trying to drastically change the menu all at once. Once you’ve tackled the “easy” stuff, (items that require little prep time), and the staff becomes familiar with using fresh produce again, then a district will advance onto produce that requires more preparation and cooking.

**Role of Summer Program** – Summer food programs are a great way to introduce local food into your school meals program. Typically school districts are feeding fewer students in the summer when produce is readily available. This is also a great time to try the produce from several different farms to get an idea of the quality, consistency, flavor and availability. Some ways to introduce produce into the summer feeding program include: cucumber slices, summer squash sticks, cherry tomatoes, peaches, watermelon slices, etc.

**Impact of National School Lunch Program/Commodity Purchases** – Regardless of the school districts size, the commodity purchasing program directly impacts the meal planning for a school meals program. Many districts that have a high percentage of students eligible for free or reduced meals have started successful farm to school programs. We are actively working in conjunction with the National Farm to School Network and Community Food Security Coalition to advocate for changes to the National School Lunch Program and Commodity Purchasing programs, that would allow for the use and inclusion of more local food. It is important to not that while these programs exist and influence the school meals program, they should not be a barrier to starting a farm to school program. By identifying items available locally, a Food Service Director can strategically use the commodity program to maximize their food dollar.

**Number of School Buildings** - The sheer size of the district may present challenges in terms of preparing local food and outreach to students about the Farm to School Program. It is important to send a clear, consistent message and delivery of produce to schools so starting with a pilot program in a few schools within a district may be necessary before implementing the program district wide.

**Role of school gardens** – Produce grown in school gardens may be incorporated directly into the school meals program as part of the Farm to School program. School gardens are also an excellent way to connect students to how their food is grown and the seasonal nature of produce in Michigan.

**Connecting to Farmers** - Farm to School Programs strive to connect students to the farmer growing their food and make food production more tangible to students. Ideally farmers in the community or surrounding area will work with the school districts Farm to School program. Many programs across Southeast Michigan have found that when they utilize farmers in their communities, their students take their parents to the farmers market where the farmer sells his produce and they make purchases for their families. FSEP will work with school districts and local farmers to help make this connection and to build relationships between the food service director and farmer.

**Revenue benefit to the Farmer** – By selling to a school district, farmers are able to diversify their market base and strengthen their business. By teaching children how to eat local, we are cultivating the next generation of buyers and developing a future local market for the farmer. Farm to school has indirect benefits to the farmer as

many students encourage their parents to buy from farmers at their local farmers market or produce stand.

**Connecting to Community Partners** – Community partners play a vital role in the success of Farm to School programs and are essential to the sustainability of the program in the school district. Farm to School programs take work and it is important to have the support and encouragement of community members. Several school districts have created a Farm to School Collaborative in which community members, teachers, parents, coaches and food service staff come together on a monthly basis and discuss how to overcome challenges and barriers, how to reach students and effectively implement their Farm to School programs.

**Funding** – Farm to School programs do not require funding, however, some money may be needed to purchase equipment, train staff, promote programming or pay farmers a stipend for classroom visits. Some ways school districts in the region have raised money for their Farm to School programs include: requesting donations from area businesses (not farmers), holding a “Farmraiser” in which locally produce products are purchased in fundraiser fashion, hosting a special event dinner such as a “Harvest Dinner” to raise money and awareness and writing grant applications to local organizations such as Community Foundations, Rotary Club, Lions Club, etc.

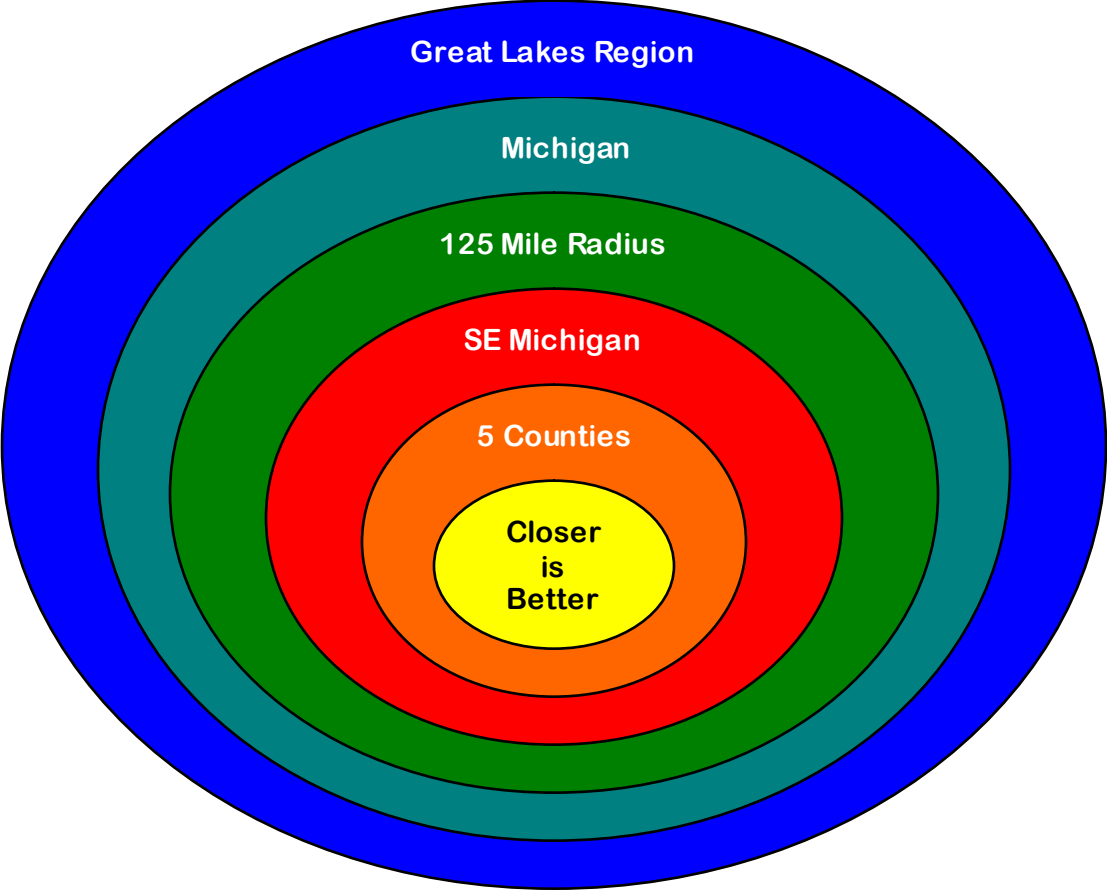
**Planning for the Future** – Many districts are faced with declining enrollment, financial problems, dismal test scores and numerous other challenges. Farm to school is a way for the district to improve its image within the community, support the local economy and model healthy eating habits to the children, all of which have lasting and profound impacts on our society.

**Sustainability** – The Farm to School Program needs to be sustainable for the district, the farmers and the environment. FSEP works to help school districts develop sustainable programs by pulling together a variety of community resources and by facilitating relationship building.

**Definition of local** – The definition of local as it pertains to Farm to School programs in Southeast Michigan is provided on the following page.

# Definition of Local

Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP) will seek to connect school food service providers to farmers located as close to the school district as possible when sourcing produce for the Farm to School Program. The following diagram depicts the method that will be used to define “local” for Farm to School programs in Southeast Michigan.



\*\* Note \*\* 5 Counties referenced in the diagram above represent the five counties FSEP serves. The FSEP service area includes: Jackson, Lenawee, Monroe, Washtenaw, and Wayne counties in Southeast Michigan.

## Program Implementation in the Cafeteria

### Food of the Month

Farm to School Programs can be implemented in a variety of ways. The following example shows what a school district utilizing a “Food of the Month” program might serve to their students. Some districts choose to feature a local item on specific day of the month, for example on the third Thursday of the month, while other districts highlight the item in different forms each week on the school menu.

Month	Item
September	Melon, Tomatoes, Corn, Broccoli
October	Cabbage
November	Winter Squash
December	Rutabaga
January	Carrots
February	Potatoes
March	Eggs
April	Maple Syrup
May	Asparagus
June	Spring Salad Greens

## ACORN SQUASH



### FUN SQUASH FACTS...

- Acorn Squash is considered a winter squash and is a cousin to the melon and cucumber. Did you know winter squashes grow on vines too?
- The hard outer skin of acorn squash allows it to be stored for long periods of time after harvest. Acorn Squash is available from August—March but we typically eat it in the late fall.
- Acorn Squash is rich in Vitamin A which helps keep our lungs healthy and reduces inflammation.
- Winter squash has a variety of different flavors, ranging from sweet to nutty.

**Food of the Week**

Some school districts in the region choose to highlight a food of the week during September and October as these are the months which Michigan produce is most plentiful. The chart below provides an example of a “Food of the Week” Program.

	Day	Item
<b>September</b>	Wednesday	Musk Melon
	Friday	Yellow Watermelons
	Wednesday	Radishes
	Friday	Grape Tomatoes
	Wednesday	Fresh Green Beans
	Friday	Musk Melon
	Wednesday	Cucumbers
	Friday	Watermelons
<b>October</b>	Wednesday	Collard Greens
	Friday	Acorn Squash
	Wednesday	Yellow Squash
	Friday	Cauliflower
	Wednesday	Baked Potatoes (100 CT)
	Friday	Assorted Sweet Peppers
	Wednesday	Corn on the Cob
	Friday	Butternut Squash



## **Seasonal Availability of Produce in Michigan**

The following lists provide typical produce availability by month for the school year. This list indicates harvests direct from the field. Additional produce will be available based on hoop house production and storage crop capacity of area farms.

**September** – green beans, snap beans, beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, sweet corn, cucumbers, turnip greens, mustard greens, collard greens, kale, lettuce, leaf lettuce, bibb lettuce, Boston lettuce, Romaine lettuce, mushrooms, onions, green onions, parsnips, peppers, potatoes, radishes, rutabagas, spinach, summer squash, winter squash, tomatoes, turnips, apples, cantaloupe, muskmelon, watermelon, grapes, nectarines, peaches, pears, plums, raspberries

**October** – beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, mushrooms, onions, green onions, parsnips, peppers, potatoes, radishes, rutabagas, spinach, winter squash, tomatoes (if warm fall), turnips, apples, grapes, sweet potatoes

**November\*** – winter squash, pumpkin, beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, onions, parsnips, potatoes, radishes, rutabagas, spinach, winter squash, turnips, apples, sweet potatoes

**December\*** – cabbage, brussel sprouts, winter squash, beets, cabbage, onions, parsnips, potatoes, rutabagas, turnips, apples, sweet potatoes

**January** – popcorn, dried beans (navy, pinto, kidney, cranberry), potatoes, apples

**February\*\*** – popcorn, dried beans (navy, pinto, kidney, cranberry), potatoes, apples

**March\*\*** – honey, maple syrup, eggs, apples

**April\*\*** – spring salad greens, apples

**May\*\*** – asparagus, spring salad greens, rhubarb, apples

**June\*\*** – asparagus, strawberries, pea-pods, broccoli, cabbage, turnip greens, mustard greens, collard greens, kale, lettuce, leaf lettuce, bibb lettuce, Boston lettuce, Romaine lettuce, mushrooms, green onions, sugar peas, radishes, turnips, apples,

\*Note – Some produce availability is dependant on the farmer utilizing cold storage methods. Additional items may also be available from farmers using hoop houses to grow food.

\*\*Note – Additional items may be available from farmers using passive solar hoop houses to grow food.

### **Marketing and Outreach**

Farm to School programs across the country have helped improve the image of school food service, resulting in increased school meals participation. Participation by both paid and free/reduced meal students is crucial to the food service budget, which is expected to be self-sufficient. Potential ways to reach out to students and staff to engage them in the Farm to School Program may include:

- Highlight local food during morning announcements
- Use of local media to highlight “Food of the Month” items
- Mystery Harvest basket in classrooms – students play 20 questions to guess what the food item is (great for the beginning of the month)
- Take home recipes – distribute recipes for food item of the month through school newsletters, food service menus, food service website, etc.
- Partner with local grocer – partner with neighborhood grocers to highlight “Food of the Month” at their store. Promote “grocery partner” within the school. (Ideally grocer would buy from same farmer as school)
- Partner with farmers markets – promote “Food of the Month” at farmer’s booths at local farmers markets.
- Engage teachers/administrators - serve samples of monthly “harvest” to teachers/administrators during in-service days or staff meetings to build support for program. Highlight local foods in-season that month at staff meetings and offer taste-tests.
- “Eat your veggies” contest – great for elementary age students: encourages them to try new things – the winners get to come to participate in cooking activity. (Example: making salsa, making applesauce, etc)
- “Eat Good, Look Good” Campaign – teach older students how what we eat affects our bodies. Engage role models that students look up to in this project. Have celebrities, and/or professional athletes discuss importance of food and fitness.
- Advertise on website – show pictures of the food items and farmers on Food Service and/or school website’s each month.

### **Utilize Existing Programs**

A number of different events occur throughout the school year during which the Farm to School Program could be featured. For example:

August – Orientation/Open House Nights

February – Black History Month

September – Select Michigan Week

March – National School Breakfast Week

October – National School Lunch Week

May – Senior Award Nights

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