



Farm to Summer

CONNECTING CHILDREN WITH LOCAL FOODS AND
FARMERS THROUGH SUMMER MEAL PROGRAMS



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INTRODUCTION

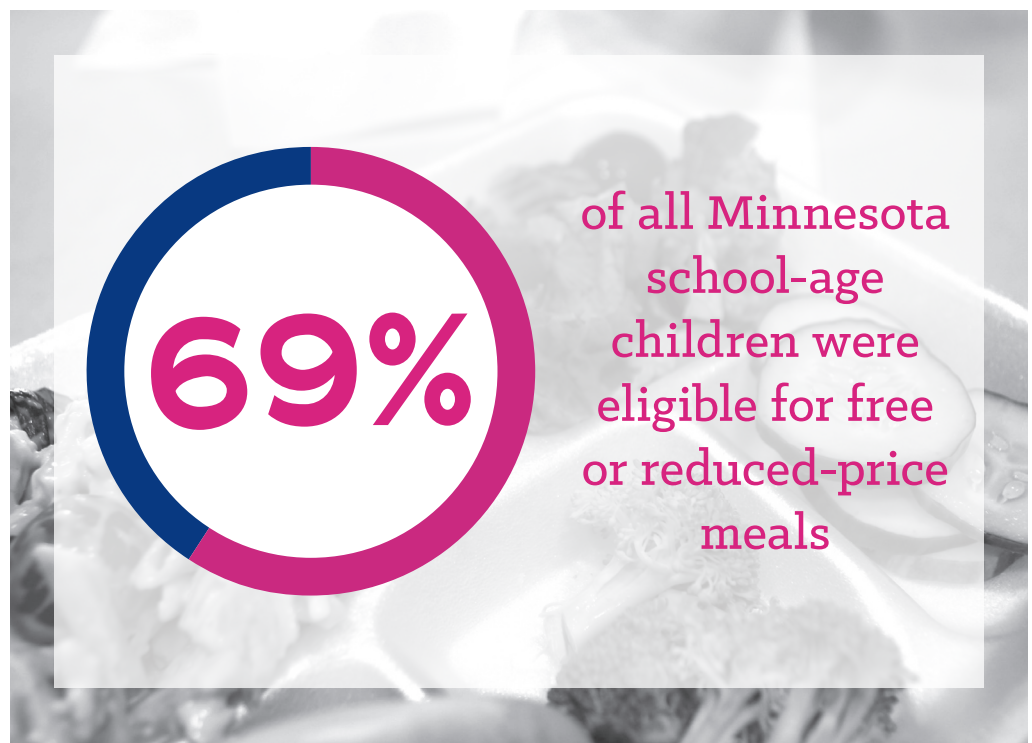
Interest in and appreciation of locally grown foods have been rising steadily in the United States, with rapid growth in demand and market share over the past 10 years. In their recent “U.S. Food Market Outlook” market analysis report, researchers from Packaged Facts named locally grown food as the number one innovation spurring growth in the food industry in 2019.¹ Institutional food service has followed along and been a leader in this trend, and many schools, early care environments, colleges, hospitals and other institutions have been purchasing intentionally from nearby farms. USDA conducted the first “Local Food Marketing Practices Survey” in 2015, finding that farmers produced and sold \$8.5 billion worth of food through direct marketing practices that year with nearly \$3.4 billion in sales to intermediaries and local institutions like schools, early care environments, colleges and hospitals.²

Farm to School and Farm to Early Care initiatives have been an integral part of the local foods revolution by encouraging K-12 schools and early care environments to incorporate locally grown, minimally processed foods into their meal programs while educating a new generation about local agriculture and the benefits of eating local. In Minnesota alone, over 50% of school districts have reported participating in Farm to School, investing over \$12 million in locally grown foods in the 2013-2014 school year.³ Farm to School participation has been growing steadily across the country, increasing access to locally grown foods for students during the school year. Recently food service operators and community partners have recognized that the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) offers an opportunity to expand local purchasing efforts to give kids year-round access to fresh healthy foods by launching Farm to Summer initiatives.

When the school year ends, children who depend on school meals can be left facing a nutrition gap, without easy access to balanced, nutritious meals. SFSP was created to address this need. With many children depending on SFSP to fill the critical hunger

gap during summer when school meals aren't available, SFSP meals offer a critical opportunity to get the freshest, healthiest foods available to the children who will benefit the most from access to healthy food. When SFSP programs purchase local foods, farmers in the programs' communities also have an opportunity to sell their products into this larger-scale market during the height of their growing season, keeping money circulating in the local economy at the same time.

This report explores the feasibility of expanding Farm to Summer initiatives, the opportunities and challenges that come with implementing these strategies, and best practices and lessons learned from early efforts around the country, including from two case studies in Minnesota. The report will particularly highlight the Minnesota context, but also draws from innovative work happening around the country and includes information that will inform national efforts more broadly. In conducting this research, IATP interviewed a wide range of SFSP managers, community partners, state and federal agency staff members and reviewed available literature (see list of interviewees in the Appendix). The authors would like to thank the individuals who contributed to this report and who are working toward a food system that enables our children, farmers and communities to thrive.



WHY FOCUS ON SUMMER FEEDING? SETTING THE STAGE IN MN

While Minnesota is generally recognized as one of the healthiest states in the nation by multiple indicators,⁴ those statistics often do not reflect the reality for many of the state's residents. Unfortunately, health disparities are easy to see at the confluence of race, poverty and obesity. In Minnesota, for example, 22% of white children live in low-income families. For African American children, that rate is 73%; for American Indians, 66%.⁵ Obesity, Type 2 diabetes and other diet-related diseases disproportionately affect communities of color and lower-income communities across the state. Children in these populations are at particularly high risk of adverse health outcomes.

According to a report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, while Minnesota has the fourth-lowest obesity rate for children ages 10-17 in the country, 9.4% of children in that age bracket are classified as obese.⁶ The long-term effects of poor nutrition on children can be particularly damaging: children who are overweight tend to be overweight as adults, perpetuating a national obesity epidemic.⁷ Individuals with obesity are also at higher risk of developing diet-related diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer.

Schools are critical settings for policies and practices that support children's nutrition. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers various nutrition programs that operate in a school-based setting, such as the National School Lunch Program. These programs enable kids from families of limited means to take advantage of

lower-cost or free meals in school. As of 2016, 69% of all Minnesota school-age children were eligible for free or reduced-price meals.⁸ Many children rely on these

ONLY
1 in 7



children who qualify
participate in summer food
service programs

programs to meet the majority of their daily nutritional needs. Some may eat at least two meals each day in school; others even participate in after-school meal programs. With the passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act in 2010, revamped federal policies require that school meals meet stricter nutrition guidelines and limit added sugar, sodium and fat. Thanks to these vital nutrition programs, children have access to nutritious school meals that support their learning and development regardless of their family's financial situation.

Funded by the USDA and administered in Minnesota through the state Department of Education, the SFSP serves free meals and snacks to any child under age 18 at eligible sites. Local organizations act as sponsors, responsible for managing the summer meal service and performing administrative duties. In return, sponsors are reimbursed for the number of meals they serve, approximately \$4 per meal for lunch and dinner in Minnesota.⁹ SFSP site locations are determined based on areas with high percentages of students who qualify for free and reduced-price meals



and census data that identify low-income areas. Children are not required to register or sign up to receive meals; they can simply go to any open site and receive a meal.

Since its inception in 1975, SFSP has been an important national hunger relief effort with a significant reach. The USDA estimates that, during the summer of 2018, more than 145 million SFSP meals were served nationwide.¹⁰ At the state level, Minnesota's SFSP served over 160,000 lunches at more than 1,100 sites in 2019.¹¹ Alongside their nutritional benefits, SFSP meals also help families stretch their food budgets and ease demands on food shelves, increasing food security for the entire community surrounding the children it serves. Including local foods in SFSP meals through Farm to Summer initiatives is a natural extension of the positive SFSP mission. Studies have shown that children who participate in Farm to School programs eat an additional serving of fruits and vegetables per day, consume a wider variety of fruits and vegetables and are more likely to try new foods.¹² Taste preferences and eating habits formed in childhood tend to continue into adulthood. Particularly for vulnerable communities served by SFSP that are disproportionately affected by diet-related disease and obesity, early intervention to promote positive dietary preferences offers a major opportunity to prevent these life-threatening issues before they start.¹³

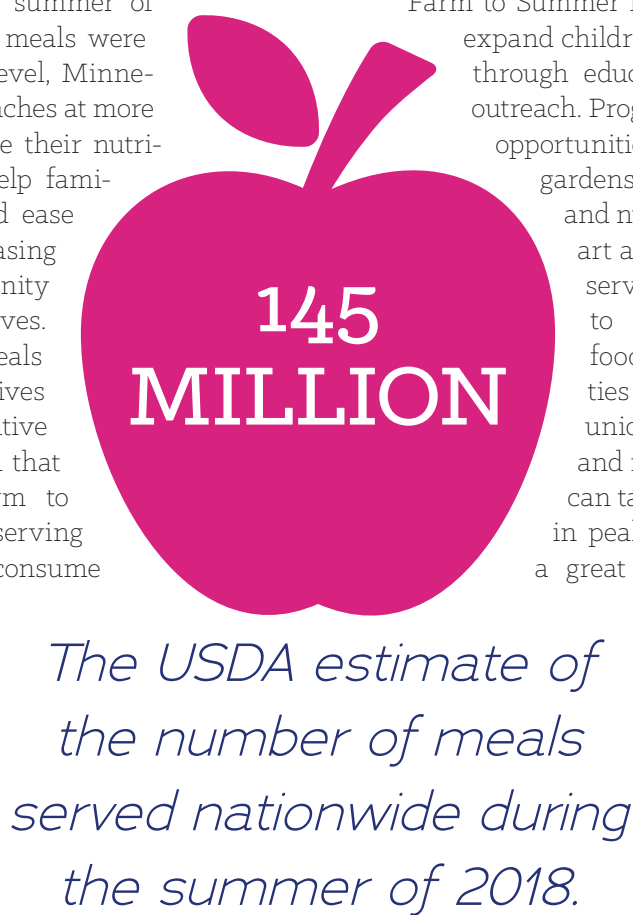
Including fresh local foods in SFSP meals is also an excellent strategy to increase participation in SFSP generally by making meals more attractive and pairing meal service with enticing local foods-focused educational activities. Though SFSP meals address an important need, the program is currently underutilized. According to the Food Research and Action Network's "2019 Summer Nutrition Status Report," in July 2018 an average of almost 2.9 million children received SFSP meals each day, representing only one in seven children who qualify to participate.¹⁴ USDA, state and local partners are prioritizing strategies to increase participation going forward. Increasing participation has many benefits. Not only does it get more healthy food to more hungry children, it also generates revenue at the local, state and federal levels from SFSP federal and

state reimbursement dollars, USDA food entitlements and state administrative funds. Increased participation creates a positive feedback loop making more money available for the program to use, potentially on local purchases to pay fair prices to farmers and to improve overall student nutrition.

Farm to Summer initiatives create an opportunity to expand children's knowledge of food and farming through educational activities and community outreach. Programs can and do facilitate learning opportunities at mealtime by cultivating gardens, coordinating taste tests, farmer and nutrition educator guest appearances, art and music activities and more while serving meals. Many programs choose to incorporate culturally responsive food items, recipes, games and activities into their program to reflect the unique backgrounds of the children and families they serve. These activities can take advantage of the many products in peak season during the summer, offer a great opportunity for enrichment and create continuity for children who experience similar learning opportunities during the school year through Farm to School initiatives.

In addition to expanding access to fresh healthy foods and learning opportunities for children, Farm to Summer initiatives have the added benefit of providing a market opportunity

for farmers to sell their products to SFSP sponsors at the height of the growing season in most areas of the U.S.. For many farmers, selling to schools and other institutions can be a dependable component of their business plan, allowing them to schedule some sales ahead of time and sell larger quantities at a time. Selling items to SFSP sponsors maintains the institutional market even when school is out of session, and the timing lines up with many items' peak harvest. Buying items when they are abundant in season translates to lower costs for the SFSP, too, benefiting all parties involved. Economic benefits extend beyond the farmers who sell their products to the SFSP, as studies have shown that every dollar spent on Farm to School food generates an additional \$2.16 of local economic activity.



THE NATIONAL FARM TO SUMMER SCENE

With the recognized benefits outlined above, Farm to Summer initiatives are gaining momentum across the country. However, they haven't become mainstream practice yet. USDA sees Farm to Summer initiatives as one strategy for increasing participation in SFSP generally through increasing the quality and appeal of SFSP meals, supporting USDA's larger national strategy to promote participation in SFSP. In 2016, USDA published a memo encouraging local purchasing for Farm to Summer programs, and they have been building their catalog of supportive Farm to Summer resources since then, including a webinar, fact sheet and suggested activity list in addition to other tools designed to support local purchasing for child nutrition programs generally. USDA has also completed Farm to Summer trainings of state agency staff who administer the SFSP, sharing resources, highlighting successful strategies, and encouraging their state Farm to School coordinators to host Farm to Summer promotions, including participation in a Farm to Summer Week as a way to get states engaged. Additionally, USDA is working on farmer support to build capacity and supporting USDA Farm to School grantees to provide technical assistance that can increase Farm to Summer participation. These intentional strategies are part of a shift towards a more holistic approach of promoting Farm to Child Nutrition Programs in general instead of separating school, early care and summer meals into separate categories.

Support organizations like the National Farm to School Network have also been promoting Farm to Summer initiatives through sharing success stories from around the country and created their own instructive webinars to help sponsors get started. State agencies in turn are offering more resources and support around local procurement by incorporating information about local foods in their annual trainings for SFSP sponsors.

As support and resources at the national and state level have increased, innovative Farm to Summer efforts have blossomed around the country. Michigan has incorporated questions to assess Farm to Summer activity into its regular administrative reviews for SFSP, creating a valuable way to measure Farm to Summer growth over time. Texas motivates its sponsors by promoting a two week Farm Fresh Challenge during summer session to celebrate serving and teaching about local foods and formally recognizes sponsors that are doing a great job with Farm to Summer initiatives. Wisconsin sponsors source local produce from Amish



A Roseville Area School student enjoying a cucumber at the Cucumber Crunch.

farmers and food co-ops and are looking at expanding their local procurement to include local grain products soon. Kansas has developed recipe books for Summer programs and a quick list of different farmers in different regions that sponsors could contact to arrange purchases. Kentucky has started a Vegetable Incentive Program to provide increased reimbursement for local foods in SFSP. Around the country, Farm to Summer is growing in popularity and scale, and there is increasing recognition of the positive impact these initiatives have on children, farmers and communities.

MINNESOTA FARM TO SUMMER CASE STUDIES

Minnesota Summer Food Service Programs are enthusiastically joining the Farm to Summer movement. In 2019, IATP partnered with two school districts to launch pilot Farm to Summer initiatives: the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Nay Ah Shing Schools in north central Minnesota and Roseville Area Schools in the Twin Cities metro area. There were two primary goals: the first was to build upon the expertise we had developed over the past seven years providing direct technical support to early care providers to launch Farm to Early Care initiatives. The second goal was to learn about the unique opportunities and challenges around local procurement in the SFSP specifically. We had the added benefit of working with the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe community for a second consecutive year: in 2018

NAY AH SHING SCHOOLS, MILLE LACS BAND OF OJIBWE (ONAMIA, MN)

Our partnership with the Nay Ah Shing School on the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe reservation started to take root in 2018 when we worked with the Wewinabi Early Education Head Start to begin a Farm to Head Start initiative. They successfully created partnerships with both a local farmer as well as their mainline distributor to purchase and serve a variety of local produce. Our goal was to build upon that existing supply chain and expand the number of children who could benefit from local foods by tapping into the Summer Meals program. When we approached Nay Ah Shing's Nutrition Services Coordinator Deb Foye about incorporating locally-grown produce into her summer menu, she was immediately supportive. She saw the Farm to Summer pilot project as an extension of her commitment to help children engage more deeply with their food and educate them on the cultural connections with local foods.

As we began to talk with Deb about her goals for the project, it became clear that community partnerships would play a major role. In particular, Deb was interested in making sure children who participated in the SFSP were also gaining knowledge and developing skills that related to the foods they saw on the menu. That objective was a perfect match

we partnered with them to establish a Farm to Head Start initiative and were eager to continue working together for a second year after they expressed an interest in expanding their local purchasing efforts to the SFSP. Our work with Roseville Area Schools was the result of an existing partnership with The Good Acre, a nonprofit food hub near St. Paul. Roseville was already purchasing local fruits and vegetables from The Good Acre for meals during the school year and was interested in supporting local growers year-round. In addition to Roseville and Mille Lacs we initially had a third Farm to Summer partner that, due to unforeseen staffing challenges, was not able to fully participate in the pilot project.



Deb Foye, Nay Ah Shing's Nutrition Services Coordinator with the cucumbers for the Cucumber Crunch



Nay Ah Shing student at trying a cucumber at the Cucumber Crunch



The Nay Ah Shing School garden

for the Mille Lacs Band SNAP-Ed team, who worked with Deb to create culturally-relevant lessons that they delivered weekly after the lunchtime meal. SNAP-Ed staffers Brittany Smith and Jolene Gansen used an Ojibwe-specific curriculum to teach children about the cultural significance of certain foods that Deb would feature on the menu that

day; each lesson also included a hands-on cooking activity that allowed children to be creative and develop important food literacy skills.

Deb noted that local products can sometimes be more expensive, but “it’s a decision I have made because I know it’s better for us in a lot of ways – not only for our health and nutrition but also for our farmers and our communities.” She addresses the higher prices by watching carefully for deals on other products and also by joining the MN School Food Buying Group to save money over time. She also credits having the backing of her school administration and supervisors, who agree with her reasoning about why it’s important. She notes that she is lucky, as not all food service staff in her position have that support and budget that her administration has given her.

In addition to highlighting a variety of locally-grown food items on the SFSP menu, a second core component of our Farm to Summer model was community engagement. Our intention was to use Farm to Summer activities as a catalyst to begin larger conversations around local foods and, for the Mille Lacs community in general, the connections between Indigenous foods and community health and resilience. To that end, we engaged Colleen McKinney from the Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) as we identified opportunities to expand the reach of the Farm to Summer initiative into the wider community. Administered through the Minnesota Department of Health, SHIP is focused on implementing local-level policy, systems and environmental approaches to health across a variety of settings. Colleen and Deb worked closely to plan outreach events that would build awareness of Farm to Summer activities and highlight the connection between local foods and health in the community. One event was focused on educating children on Indigenous edible plants in their own backyards: a local ethnobotanist and educator, Linda Black Elk, led children on a walk around the school and helped them identify edible plants. Later, the children used some of the plants they harvested to make a salad. Another event, the Cucumber Crunch, brought together children, family members, school foodservice staff and teachers in celebration of Farm to Summer Week as everyone crunched into local cucumber sticks simultaneously. These community engagement activities not only built enthusiasm around local foods and Summer Meals in general, but also created opportunities for children to explore their own cultural connections with food.

ROSEVILLE AREA SCHOOLS (ROSEVILLE, MN)

Our second Farm to Summer partnership took place in Roseville, a first-ring suburb in the northeastern Twin Cities metro area. In contrast to Mille Lacs, Roseville had already established a formal Farm to School program that operated during the school year. While they had not made the transition to serving local produce in their Summer Meals program, they were fortunate to have a successful partnership established with a local food hub that allowed them to seamlessly integrate local items into Summer Meals using their existing purchasing methods.

Nutrition Services Supervisor Angela Richey's primary goal, in addition to increasing the quality of Summer Meals and providing more local fruits and vegetables for children, was to focus on promotion and marketing of their Farm to Summer initiative. With IATP's commitment to community engagement in mind, we worked with Angela and her

partners at The Good Acre food hub to plan outreach activities that would build familiarity with Farm to Summer, as well as the SFSP in general, among kids, families and community members.

During the spring, IATP's communications team worked with Angela and The Good Acre to produce a series of short promotional video clips introducing the Farm to Summer pilot project. Each video focused on a different partner: from a kitchen manager at one Roseville school talking about why she was excited to serve local foods during the summer to an elementary student discussing her love for seasonal cucumbers. The videos were featured on social media to build momentum while school was still in session, but outreach and promotion continued throughout the summer. Roseville also participated in the Cucumber Crunch event in celebration of Farm to Summer week, inviting members of the school board and local legislators to participate. It was an opportunity to showcase Roseville's commitment to supporting local farmers and the local economy through their partnership with The Good Acre, as well as to generate excitement among the kids to have adults eating and "crunching" with them!



Serving cucumbers for the Roseville Cucumber Crunch



Facebook post featuring one of the Roseville videos

MN FARM TO SUMMER WEEK

In addition to the launch of the two case studies above, 2019 also represented the first year that the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) declared and promoted a formal Farm to Summer Week to take place across the state during the third week of July when most SFSP programs were in full swing. USDA has promoted the concept of official Farm to School weeks as a good strategy to raise the profile of local purchasing for SFSP meals and encouraging participation. MDE created a handout to publicize the promotional week, including an introduction to the concept of Farm to Summer and its benefits, links to resources and suggestions for ways to celebrate. The Governor's Office also made an official Declaration of Farm to School Week helping to raise the profile of the celebration, and the framework of the official week attracted media coverage for Farm to Summer activity gaining traction. Farm to Summer Week helped give Mille Lacs and Roseville a focus for their community



Shared Ground Farmers' Cooperative delivering the cucumbers to the Good Acre the week of the Cucumber Crunch.

engagement activities, and both programs scheduled their Cucumber Crunch events during this week. MDE is considering ways to capture how many programs participate and to expand Farm to Summer Week in the future.

FARM TO SUMMER OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While similar in many ways, Farm to Summer initiatives have opportunities and challenges that are unique from Farm to School initiatives that take place during the regular school session. Partners highlighted the following recommendations to keep in mind when planning for Farm to Summer:

- The summer session can be quite short, with some SFSP sponsors serving meals for only two, four, six or eight weeks. The shorter session leaves less time to plan and coordinate order, delivery and educational activity logistics. Depending on an area's local growing season, local products may not be available at the beginning of the program, which can further cut into the time Farm to Summer can be active. In Minnesota, our SFSP partners started serving meals in June, but a late spring meant that local products weren't served until the end of the month. Planning ahead and integrating local purchasing into the regular purchasing practices and schedules can relieve some of this time pressure. Another strategy is to get started with an entry level challenge such as



a special event like the Cucumber Crunch or limited

time commitment that can be a gateway to making bigger changes over the long term.

- SFSP usually have lower participation numbers than regular school session meal programs. This can make it more difficult to meet thresholds to qualify for delivery or bulk purchase discounts. However, smaller numbers of children can also create opportunities to do some educational activities or to prepare more complex recipes that would be difficult or impossible with larger numbers of kids. The smaller scale SFSP may also have the opportunity to partner with a smaller farm whose volume may not be sufficient for a full district but could be a fit for SFSP needs.
- The SFSP format can also create wonderful opportunities for educational activities and community outreach events related to food and farming. Special events like the Cucumber Crunch brought in many community members that might not have previously attended a SFSP meal, and these educational, celebratory activities can be a strategy to increase general participation and get kids and community members excited about the program overall.
- Strengthened relationships with other community organizations such as SNAP-ed, development councils, 4-H and other local groups can increase chances for Farm to Summer initiatives to succeed and be sustainable while also reaching mutually beneficial goals and building up community ties. Farm to Summer initiatives can also benefit from building on Farm to School supply chains and activities that may also be in place in their communities.
- Some SFSP sponsors may be confused or intimidated by rules and regulations around local procurement. State agencies and USDA staff have been working to integrate local procurement training into their regular and required trainings and resources they provide for SFSP sponsors. report that it makes a big difference in increasing confidence that sponsors are allowed to purchase from local farms and gives them the tools and techniques to get Farm to Summer initiatives off the ground.
- Similar to Farm to School, balancing the food budget is a primary concern to keep meal service viable for SFSP sponsors. Some sponsors may be concerned that local foods will cost more. In our interviews and experience, however, we heard that usually the cost

for local products is in line with regular budgetary expenses. In some cases, local products can be less expensive when abundant during their peak growing season. Some interviewees also expressed that the local products lasted longer before spoiling because they were so fresh when they were delivered, which ultimately led to less waste and more cost savings.

- At the state level, celebrating success and recognizing achievement is important to encourage successful programs to continue and to highlight great examples that other sponsors might draw inspiration from. Starting small and building up Farm to Summer initiatives incrementally increases chances for success.
- Looking at the growing momentum and innovative activities happening around Farm to Summer in Minnesota and nationally, we are excited to see the potential for growth these initiatives represent. Farm to Summer initiatives are a great opportunity to get fresh, healthy local foods to children who face the largest barriers to accessing healthy foods outside of SFSP meals. They give farmers a new market to sell their products at the height of the growing season and build on the supply chain connections farmers already rely on during the school year. Farm to Summer initiatives also strengthen community connections, creating opportunities for children and community members to learn where their local foods come from and strengthening relationships. Though they face some unique challenges, their smaller scale and operation during the growing season also create unique opportunities to serve local products and offer educational engagement to participating children. As Farm to Summer initiatives continue to grow in popularity, USDA, state agencies, community partners and sponsors can support this growing movement through continued creation of resources and step-by-step guides, promotion of local purchasing as a best practice and institutionalizing support through policy changes that make it easier to purchase from local food sources. We look forward to seeing these initiatives continue to grow, benefitting more children, farmers and communities as they take off!

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE ABOUT FARM TO SUMMER

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm to Summer website

- [Farm to Summer: Why Summer Meals Programs are Ripe for Local Foods and Agriculture-Based Activities](#)
- [Farm to Summer: How Regional Offices and State Agencies Support Farm to Summer](#)
- [Local Foods and Related Activities in Summer Meal Programs, with Questions and Answers](#)
- [Summer Meals: Incorporating Local Foods Webinar](#)
- [Local Foods and Enriching Activities in Summer Meal Programs webinar](#)
- [Newsletter focusing on Farm to Summer](#)
- [The Lunchbox Farm to Summer promo video](#)
- [Farm to School Census Farm to Summer data](#)

- [Farm to Child Nutrition Programs Planning Guide](#)

National Farm to School Network (NFSN)

Farm to Summer Resources

- [NFSN recording of Farm to Summer Trending Topics Webinar](#)
- [Farm to Summer Blog](#)

- [NFSN Farm to Summer Lunch Bites webinar slides](#)

Other resources

- [Food Resource and Action Center \(FRAC\) Fresh From the Farm report](#)
- [Michigan State University Farm to Summer Webinar](#)
- [Meals4Kids Farm to Summer Resources and Toolkit](#)
- [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction Farm to Summer Website](#)

APPENDIX OF INTERVIEWEES

Thank you to the following partners who shared their knowledge and experience of Farm to Summer with us during the research for this report!

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