



# FARM TO SCHOOL IN MINNESOTA: 2023 Survey of MDA Farm to School Grantees

## Challenges and opportunities to grow the Minnesota Farm to School movement



April 2024

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The authors would like to thank the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) Farm to School grantees and the farmers from whom they purchase for their support of our evaluation efforts, including submitting purchasing records, responding to our statewide survey and participating in evaluation conversations to share deeper insights. Your perspective is essential to understanding the landscape of Farm to School in our state and planning for the best ways to support you. Special thanks to Ryan Pesch at the University of Minnesota Extension for supporting the administration of the statewide Farm to School survey and to Kate Seybold and Emily Mehr of MDA and Jayme Anderson of the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) for 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, including in developing and promoting this survey. We are grateful 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 U.S. Department of Agriculture (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 Farm to School and Early Care grant overview and application information: <https://www.mda.state.mn.us/farm-school-grants>
- Minnesota's Farm to School website, with resources for applicants, grantees and supporters (maintained by IATP): <https://www.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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The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (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.

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# FARM TO SCHOOL IN MINNESOTA: 2023 Survey of MDA Farm to School Grantees

## Challenges and opportunities to grow the Minnesota Farm to School movement

### Background

Farm to School initiatives connect students with fresh, locally grown foods and support farmers in their communities through:

- Serving local food in meals, snacks or taste tests.
- Food and farming education, including cooking and agriculture education, field trips to farms or farmers markets, imaginary play, food and farm-related books, and more.
- Gardening, including indoor, outdoor and container gardening.

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) has supported Farm to School efforts locally and nationally since 2007. Our work has included training for K-12 school staff and farmers, creation of supportive

resources, promotion, outreach, research and policy advocacy. Along with 10 other member organizations, IATP is part of the MN Farm to School Leadership Team, which works through partnerships across Minnesota to build Farm to School initiatives that help kids eat healthy, support nearby farmers, foster economic vitality and strengthen communities.

### Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Farm to School Grant Program

#### Grant Program History

This report is being prepared as part of IATP's activities evaluating the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's (MDA) Farm to School grant program. MDA's grants supporting Farm to School activities launched in 2013, with early grants providing funding to K-12 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 demand and interest in the Farm to School grants have continued to increase since.

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



Fourth-graders participate in a corn-husking activity at Five Hawks Elementary School in Prior Lake during Farm to School Month.



access, anti-hunger, rural development and more. This group agreed that grants offering direct reimbursement to schools and early care providers 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. 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 the passage of a bill to establish legislative directive and funding for MDA to reimburse for local food purchases through the current program, as well as create an MDA Regional Marketing Specialist position with one-third of the specialist’s time dedicated to supporting 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, including both early care and K-12 schools as eligible applicants. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2021, MDA was able to implement the Farm to School reimbursement grant as planned, awarding over \$290,000 to reimburse schools for purchases from Minnesota farms. IATP and the University of Minnesota Extension published

an [evaluation report](#) analyzing the economic impact, grant administration and grantee successes and challenges of the first year of the reimbursement model of the grant. In FY2022, funding for the popular program was increased to award over \$740,000, and in FY2023, grant funding was increased significantly to over \$4.2 million, due to a one-time infusion of federal [funding to MDA through the U.S. Department of Agriculture \(USDA\) Local Food for Schools \(LFS\) program](#).

Grant funds are now used to reimburse both the purchase of local food and kitchen equipment. Grantees are currently continuing to spend down grant funds from FY2022 and FY2023, and future reports will examine implementation of these rounds of grants. Funding for FY2024 is lower than FY2023 without the boost of federal dollars; however, after the 2023 legislative session, state funding has increased to nearly \$1 million. Additionally, after continued advocacy by stakeholders, in 2023 a bill was passed to support creating a full time Farm to Institution Coordinator position at MDA, significantly boosting capacity to support farmers, schools and early cares interested in starting or expanding Farm to School and Early Care activities. Another significant change coming out of the 2023 legislative session is expanded eligibility for the grants: For FY2024, MDA included center-based early cares serving preschool-age children in addition to K-12 schools, previously the only eligible applicants.

**Table 1. Minnesota Department of Agriculture Farm to School Grant Funding and Awards, FY2013-FY2023.**

| Year    | Target funding amount | Amount requested | Amount awarded | Number of applications | Number of grantees |
|---------|-----------------------|------------------|----------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| FY2013  | \$250,000             | \$652,577        | \$250,000      | 31                     | 13                 |
| FY2014  | \$250,000             | \$387,638        | \$250,975      | 25                     | 15                 |
| FY2015  | \$500,000             | \$633,179        | \$476,942      | 32                     | 22                 |
| FY2016  | \$500,000             | \$682,595        | \$500,667      | 42                     | 33                 |
| FY2017  | \$500,000             | \$453,835        | \$364,505      | 23                     | 20                 |
| FY2018  | \$400,000             | \$648,553        | \$380,193      | 32                     | 23                 |
| FY2019  | \$377,500             | 531,983          | \$248,960      | 25                     | 15                 |
| FY2020  | \$400,000             | 368,000          | \$154, 612     | 18                     | 12                 |
| FY2021  | \$400,000             | \$400,000        | \$294,907      | 28                     | 27                 |
| FY2022  | \$800,000             | \$1,291,981      | \$742,450      | 68                     | 46                 |
| FY2023* | \$4,200,000           | \$5,342,142.21   | \$4,209,717    | 122                    | 114                |

\*Fiscal Year 2023 includes \$800,000 in state funding and \$3.45 million in federal funding through the USDA, administered through the MDA Farm to School grant program in Minnesota.

Nearly every year that MDA Farm to School grants have been awarded, requests for funding and the number of applications have exceeded available funding and the number of awards administered. As mentioned above, FY2023 data is an outlier due to the increase in federal funds for that year. It should be noted that the required matching funds for Full Tray grants were removed for FY2023 applications, which may have removed a barrier to apply for some schools. Across these 11 years, MDA awarded nearly \$8 million in response to requests for nearly \$11.5 million.

## Grant Intent and Implementation

As currently implemented, the MDA Farm to School and Early Care grant program supports Minnesota school districts and early care centers that want to begin or expand purchasing and serving Minnesota agricultural products in school meals. Public or private schools or school districts that participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and serve food to K-12 students, including school districts serving sovereign tribal nations, and early care centers that participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) are eligible to apply.

- Schools and early care centers are free to use grant funds to boost their purchases from Minnesota 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 and Early Care Month
- Adding Minnesota Thursdays as a monthly feature to the menu

All the purchases schools and early care centers make for reimbursement must be directly for food grown or raised in Minnesota that was served as part of the school district or early care center's meals for children. Grantees are allowed to purchase directly from farmers, through food hubs or distributors, from farmers markets, etc., as long as the food



MDA Harvest of the Month posters at a participating school promote local foods.

was grown and produced in Minnesota. Grantees are also encouraged to purchase Minnesota items for all components of the meal, including vegetables, fruits, meat, fish and poultry, eggs, grains and dairy products, excluding fluid milk. Since all milk served with school and early care meals is already local, reimbursing for fluid milk purchases would not meet the grant intent of increasing local Minnesota purchases and is not eligible for reimbursement. For FY23 grants, reimbursable items had to be unprocessed or minimally processed to meet USDA guidelines, while FY22 and FY24 grants allow for processed food items that are made in Minnesota and contain primarily Minnesota-grown or raised ingredients. For FY2023, MDA used the USDA definition of “unprocessed locally grown or locally raised agricultural products” as outlined by the federal government, which differed slightly from requirements from previous rounds of funding due to USDA requirements.

It is important for MDA to communicate the intent of the grant and outline eligible expenses to potential applicants to avoid common misunderstandings about allowable uses of funds. Ineligible uses of funds include purchases of items grown outside of Minnesota (for example, in neighboring states), purchases not meeting the definition of unprocessed or minimally processed, purchases related to gardening instead of buying food from Minnesota producers, and costs related to staff time or promotion and marketing of Farm to School and Early Care.

## Types of MDA Farm to School and Early Care Grants

MDA's Farm to School and Early Care grants are tiered into two levels, with an option to add on a request for kitchen equipment funding:

- **Farm to School and Early Care [First Bite Grants](#):** Designed for schools and early care centers with little or no experience with local food procurement as part of a Farm to School or Early Care program, MDA's Farm to School and Early Care First Bite Mini Grant offers smaller grants to help grantees test local procurement strategies and learn from their experiences. The application is simpler than the Full Tray Grant, with no requirement for letters of support or cash matching funds from the grantee. Grantees can only receive one First Bite Mini Grant before leveling up to the Full Tray Grant. First Bite grants for FY2023 were available for up to \$10,000.
- **Farm to School and Early Care [Full Tray Grants](#):** Designed for schools and early care centers with some Farm to School or Early Care experience, MDA's Full Tray grants offer a larger amount of money for grantees to build on their activities and expand their Farm to School and Early Care initiatives. The application asks for a more detailed work plan and requires at least one letter of support from a Minnesota producer who would benefit (with additional letters welcome from distributors, community members, etc.). Typically this grant level has also required a one-to-one cash match from the grantee; however, for FY2023, no match was required for Full Tray food funds, due to the larger amount of funding available through the USDA. The specific grant amount an applicant can apply for is calculated using the number of reimbursable meals served and a per-meal incentive of \$0.10, up to a maximum Full Tray grant amount of \$100,000 for FY2023. Full Tray applicants were also permitted to indicate interest in Second Helping funds if funding was not fully expended through the initial round of First Bite and Full Tray grants. Thirty-seven schools applied for Second Helping funds, requesting \$799,383, and MDA awarded funds to 36 of those schools, totaling \$608,885. (That amount is included in the \$4,209,717 of total funds awarded.)

- **Equipment Funds:** MDA has also offered equipment funding grants to support schools and early care centers in purchasing kitchen equipment that will allow them to prepare their locally purchased food items. Applicants can add an equipment grant request to their application. In FY2023, equipment grants were available for up to \$35,000, and a one-to-one cash match was required.



At a Halloween Farm to School Month event, kitchen staff at Hutchinson Middle School show MDA Commissioner Thom Petersen and Lt. Governor Peggy Flanagan kitchen equipment purchased with a Farm to School grant.

## Grantee Selection

MDA's practice is to convene a review committee to select the grantees from the pool of applicants. Each reviewer scores the applications individually using a defined rubric of selection criteria covering whether the proposed project would increase access to local foods, enhance the applicant's Farm to School or Early Care 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 include letters of support and more detail on their budget plans. Reviewers' numeric scores are combined by MDA, and the evaluation group meets in person or virtually to come to a consensus on funding recommendations to pass on to the MDA Commissioner for approval.

## Emerging Farmers

In the selection process, MDA prioritizes applicants that purchase Minnesota-grown and raised foods from “emerging farmers.” More detail on MDA’s definition of emerging farmers can be found [here](#). Recent application processes include a question on whether and how applicants plan to purchase from emerging farmers, and applications can receive additional points for demonstrating ability to accomplish that plan. MDA has produced [legislative reports](#) documenting the Minnesota landscape for emerging farmers and recently developed additional guidance to support applicants with connecting to emerging farmers near them.

## Snapshot of FY2023 MDA Farm to School Grantees

In the FY2023 round of grants, MDA awarded 60 First Bite and 56 Full Tray Food Grants to schools throughout the state, with 45 of the 114 grantees adding on Farm to School Equipment Grants. (See Appendix A for the full list of FY2023 grantees and Appendix B for an interim economic impact and product mix purchase analysis from our partners at U of MN Extension.)

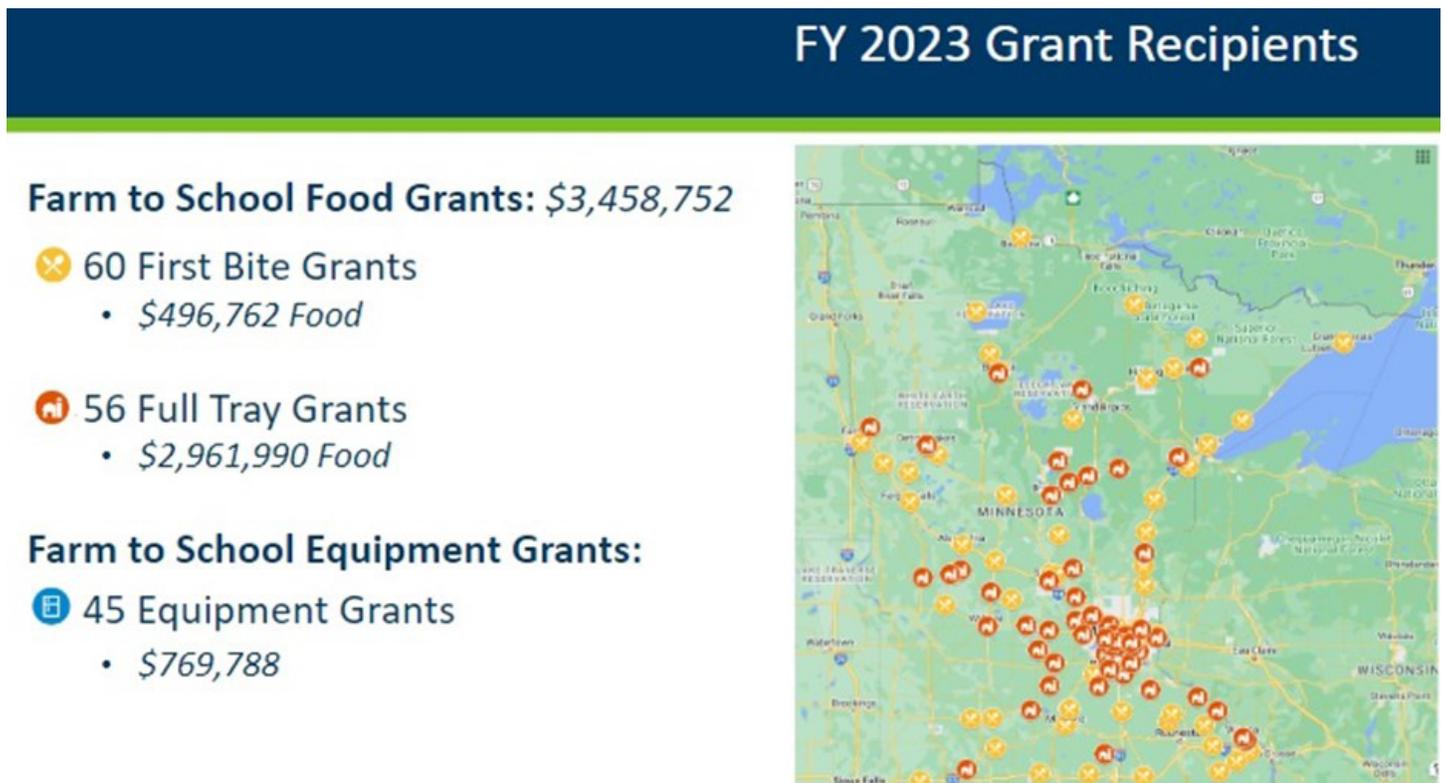
## 2023 Farm to School Survey: FY2023 Grantee School Feedback

### About this Survey

From 2008-11, IATP conducted [four annual statewide Farm to School surveys of Minnesota school districts](#), collecting key data on activities being implemented, challenges, opportunities for growth and feedback on needed support. IATP shared our survey tool with USDA as they developed the national USDA Farm to School Census, which they began conducting on a biannual basis in 2013. Though the USDA Farm to School Census provides high-level information for each state, IATP and Leadership Team partners identified a need for more detailed information about the activities happening on the ground. In 2023, with a goal to better understand Farm to School activities in Minnesota and help inform future efforts, IATP worked with support from partners on the Leadership Team to conduct the first statewide Minnesota Farm to School survey of school districts in 12 years.

This survey was created in collaboration with Leadership Team partners and administered online by the University of Minnesota Extension and IATP. The survey was promoted directly via email to the entire

**Figure 1. Fiscal Year 2023 Grant Recipients**





Cheryl Pick and Lori Landowski lead the Child Nutrition Services team at Foley Public Schools.

list of Minnesota school food service contacts and to previous MDA Farm to School grantees, with iterative reminders to those who had not yet filled it out. It was also shared through state departments, including the MN Farm to School Leadership Team newsletter and Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) bulletin for food service, to participants in the Minnesota Harvest of the Month program and to other Leadership Team members' networks. Participation was voluntary, and we incentivized participation in the form of a gift card awarded through a random drawing of respondents. We conducted the survey in the spring of 2023 and received responses from 264 participants representing 204 Minnesota schools or districts. The majority of respondents were food service directors, though some administrators (20% of respondents) and a small number of teachers (7%) replied.

Though all Minnesota schools were invited to participate in the statewide survey, as part of our work evaluating the MDA Farm to School Grant Program and the experiences of its grantees, this report will focus on the subset of 97 survey respondents who

were MDA Farm to School grantees in FY2023. Our partners from U of MN Extension have also prepared an [overview summary examining Minnesota's Farm to School market](#), analyzing survey responses from all 264 participants representing 204 schools or districts, including grantees and those who have not received MDA Farm to School grants (Appendix C). Additionally, IATP published a separate parallel [report on results of a statewide survey examining Farm to Early Care in Minnesota](#).

Of the 114 grantee districts who received a grant in FY2023, respondents from 77 districts responded, for a response rate of 67% of FY2023 MDA Farm to School Grantees. This analysis includes 97 responses, as several districts submitted responses from multiple staff. The survey included specific questions only asked to school nutrition staff from schools that receive MDA Farm to School grants. One-on-one and group conversations were conducted with engaged school food service staff to collect additional detail and feedback.

This report provides a summary of findings, as well as key takeaways and opportunities for further support and expansion of Farm to School efforts in Minnesota. Throughout the report, figures are based on the number of respondents to each question.

## Survey Responses

### Motivations

The top grantee motivations for participating in Farm to School remained similar to past evaluation findings: supporting the local economy and a dedication to quality food. The top three motivations mentioned by school food service staff were:

- Support the local economy
- Fresher food
- Higher quality food

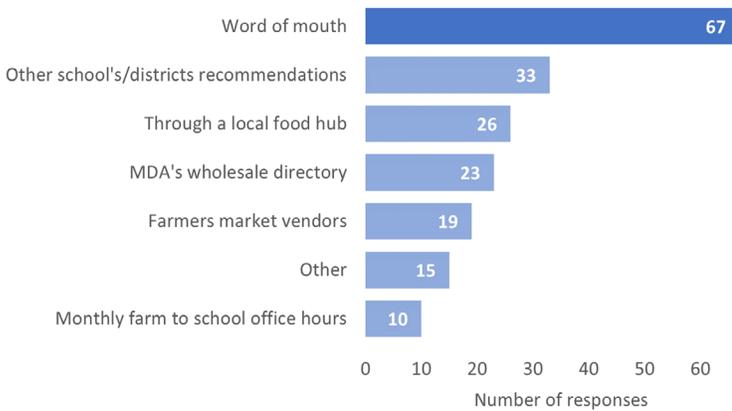
Increased consumption of fruits and vegetables and knowing the source of the food were the next most common motivations.

## Connections with Local Growers and Local Food Purchases

Schools found farmers through a variety of means. By far the largest connection point was word of mouth, with 67 responses highlighting this method. The second most common response was “other schools/districts’ recommendation,” again highlighting the importance of word of mouth for building connections with farmers.

There were also a variety of responses highlighting connections made through a local food hub, through the Minnesota Department of Agriculture’s Minnesota Grown Wholesale Directory and through farmers’ markets.

**Figure 2. Connections with local growers: “How did you find or establish connection with your local growers? Check all that apply.”**



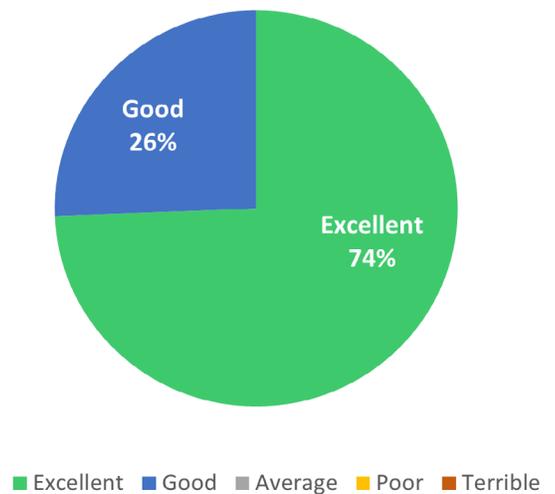
Schools are sourcing their local products in a variety of ways, with purchasing directly from the farmer being the most popular method.

**Table 2. Sourcing local products: “Where have you purchased or sourced locally-grown or raised foods? Check all that apply.”**

| Source                          | Number of responses |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| Individual Farm or ranch        | 74                  |
| Distributor                     | 55                  |
| School garden, community garden | 31                  |
| Food hub                        | 29                  |
| Farmers’ market                 | 13                  |
| Grocery store                   | 13                  |
| CSA                             | 7                   |
| Catered meals                   | 5                   |
| Other                           | 2                   |

Schools are positive about the quality of the local products they purchase. Approximately three-fourths of respondents rated the local food they had purchased as excellent quality, with the remaining quarter indicating good quality.

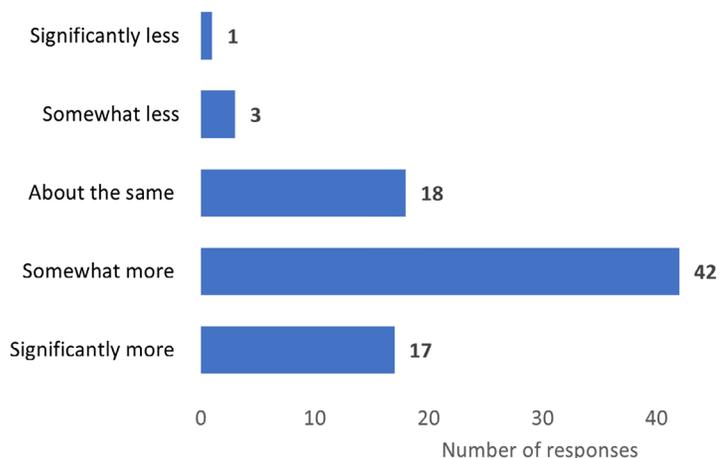
**Figure 3. Local food quality: “Overall, how would you rate the quality of local foods you have used?”**



School staff tour Loon Organics Farm in Hutchinson.

When comparing local product purchases to non-local items, a little over half of schools perceive them as costing “somewhat more” per serving than non-local items, with 22% of respondents perceiving them as “about the same” and 21% as “significantly more.”

**Figure 4. Local food cost perception. “On a cost-per-serving basis, how do local foods compare in comparison to non-local items?”**



### Perceived Grant Impacts

Nearly all (98%, or 71 of 72 of respondents) school staff responses indicated the MDA Farm to School grant program allowed them to purchase more local products for school meals and snacks than they would have purchased without the grant.

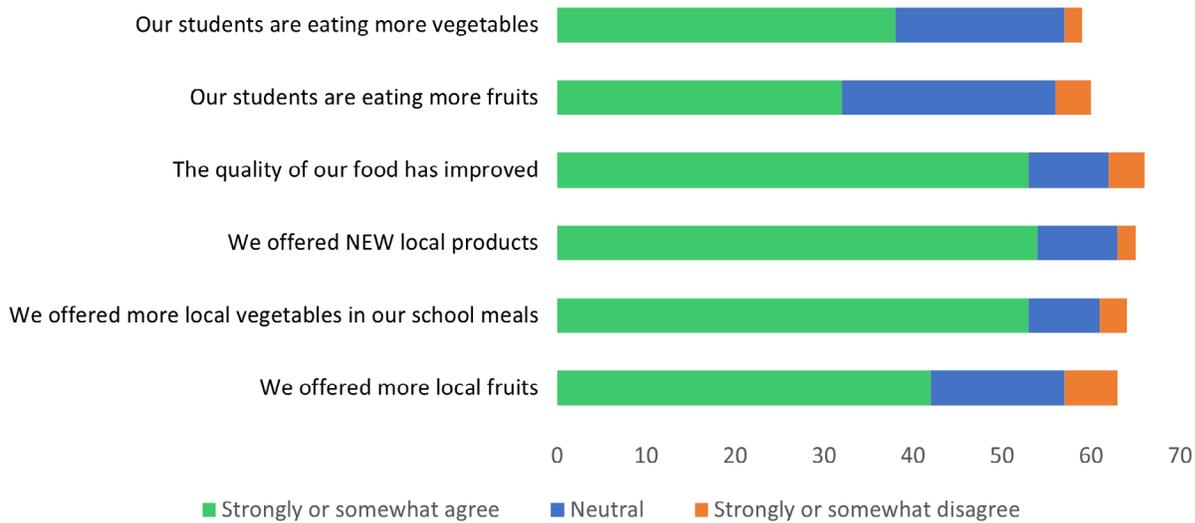
Increasing the variety of products served was another top impact: Increased variety of produce served in school meals was the top outcome enabled by the MDA Farm to School grants as noted by respondents. Respondents also noted that the grants enabled recipients to plan the purchasing of local products with greater certainty and increased their purchasing budgets. (Table 3)

**Table 3. Perceived food service operation impacts: “Related to your food service operation, which of the following outcomes has the MDA Farm to School grant helped you to achieve/do you anticipate achieving? Select all that apply.”**

| Perceived impact   | Number of responses |
|--|---------------------|
| Increased variety of produce served in school meals                          | 46                  |
| We can plan local product purchasing with greater certainty                  | 40                  |
| Food vendors and farmers are more willing to supply our food service program | 23                  |
| We have better support from our farm and food vendors/partners               | 25                  |
| We have better support for school meals from the community                   | 21                  |
| Our purchasing power is enhanced   | 26                  |
| Our food purchasing budget has increased                                     | 32                  |
| Challenges to purchasing local foods are reduced                             | 23                  |
| The cooking skills of food service staff have improved                       | 18                  |
| Food waste has decreased   | 12                  |
| Participation in school meals has increased                                  | 15                  |
| Marketing menus is easier  | 14                  |
| Our food service budget is more stable                                       | 18                  |
| We are better able to meet school meal requirements                          | 13                  |
| Other  | 2                   |

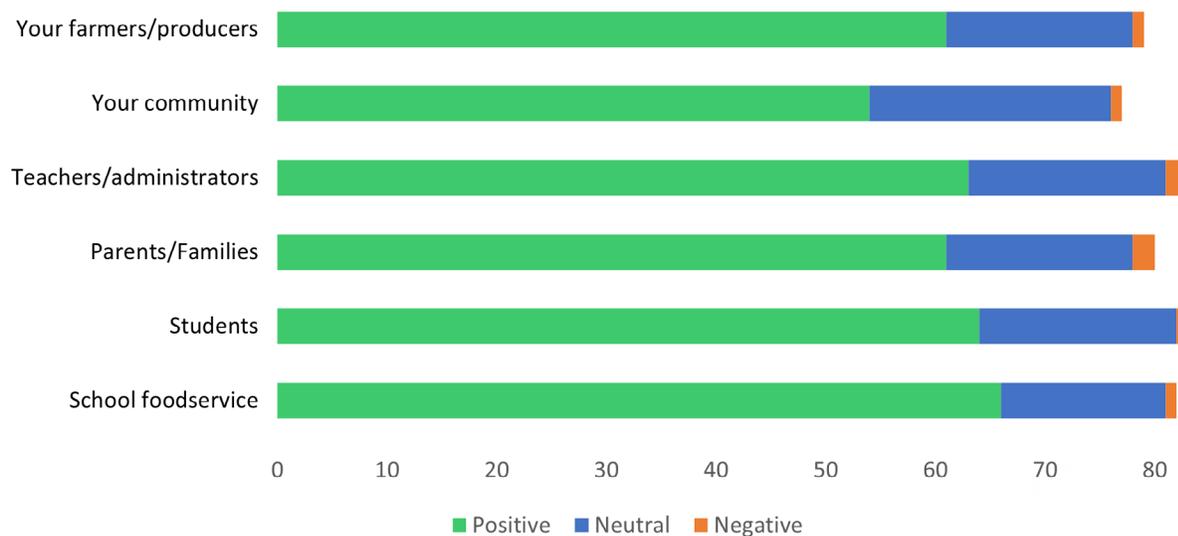
Staff were also asked to respond to what extent they perceived certain impacts to be true for their school food service operation since receiving their MDA Farm to School grant. The most common responses with which schools “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” were regarding products and quality. Eighty percent or more of respondents agreed that since receiving their MDA grant, the quality of their food has improved, and they began offering new local products and more local vegetables. (Figure 5)

**Figure 5. Perceived impacts: “To what extent are each of the following impacts true for your school food service operation since receiving your MDA Farm to School grant?”**



Schools are receiving positive feedback from their communities on their Farm to School activities.

**Figure 6. Farm to school feedback: “How would you describe the feedback you have received from the following people about your Farm to School activities?”**



When asked for open feedback, schools had enthusiastic support for MDA's Farm to School grant program overall. This is a selection of quotes from respondents:

- *Without the MDA Farm to School Grant, we would not be able to serve our locally-grown bison, which is a much healthier meat for our students to experience eating. Because of its expense, this grant has enabled us to serve this to our students. THANK YOU! It is great for the local producer, as well as our school community.*
- *Everyone has been AMAZING to work with! Our students' eyes LIGHT UP when they see fresh foods on the serving lines. THANK YOU for everything. We are so so grateful!*
- *Love the program and know it is imperative to improving everyone's health.*
- *The Grants have been so helpful!*
- *Farm to School has been a great experience all around for myself, students, staff and school.*
- *It is a great program. ALL levels of food service are excited about our program and the meals are terrific.*
- *We love Farm to School.*
- *We love the fact that with the help of the F2S Grants we have expanded our farmers and are able to buy fruit and veggies varieties that we have not been able to buy, due to cost, in the past. This allows us to educate students and staff while giving students the chance to try a wide variety of products that they normally would not get the chance to eat.*
- *It has overall been a great experience. I love supporting our farmers!*
- *It is great to be able to support family farms that reside within our School District.*
- *Being a farm kid raised on eating what we grew, I believe it is important that people know where their food comes from. It is exciting to see kids eating local products, knowing where it came from and loving the taste of it.*
- *I have had a wonderful experience dealing with my farmers and producers.*
- *I have been very lucky with my local farmers as they really work with me to get a quality product delivered to me.*
- *We purchase wonderful ground beef and are happy to receive extra funds for help with that.*
- *Love the program. It just takes a bit to get it up and running!*
- *There is a lot of interest and momentum for growing food on site and for teaching kids about where food comes from!*



Students in line for local foods in Prior Lake.



Pumpkin carving activity in Hutchinson.

## Promotional Activities

Schools noted a variety of promotional activities tied to their Farm to School efforts. Serving and promoting local foods topped the list. However, celebrating Farm to School Month and educating students about locally-grown foods were also common activities, highlighting that schools often tie local foods into a larger effort that goes beyond grant-related activities. Other promotional activities, such as the Minnesota Grown program and Minnesota Harvest of the Month, were popular.

**Table 4. Promotional activities: “Which of the following activities has your school participated in during the past two years? Check all that apply.”**

| Promotional activity  | Number of responses |
|---|---------------------|
| Served local foods in meals, snacks, taste tests            | 79                  |
| Promoted local foods in schools                             | 73                  |
| Hosted a special event or day related to food and farms     | 34                  |
| Conducted field trips to farms, gardens, or farmers markets | 27                  |
| Held taste tests or cooking demonstrations                  | 25                  |
| Celebrated farm to school month                             | 40                  |
| Educated students about locally-grown foods                 | 42                  |
| Had a school garden   | 35                  |
| Other/none/not applicable                                   | 13                  |

## Farm to School Challenges

While respondents noted a variety of benefits and motivations, Farm to School efforts are not without challenges. Top barriers selected from a list of options by school staff included:

- Availability of products
- Budget constraints
- Finding farmers to purchase from

Inconvenience and procurement regulations or policies were the next most common barriers listed. In addition to the listed barriers, there were several write-in responses regarding time and kitchen staff training needs. Time barriers reflected a variety of tasks: time to gather bids, prep and process local foods, and coordinate additional orders and deliveries.

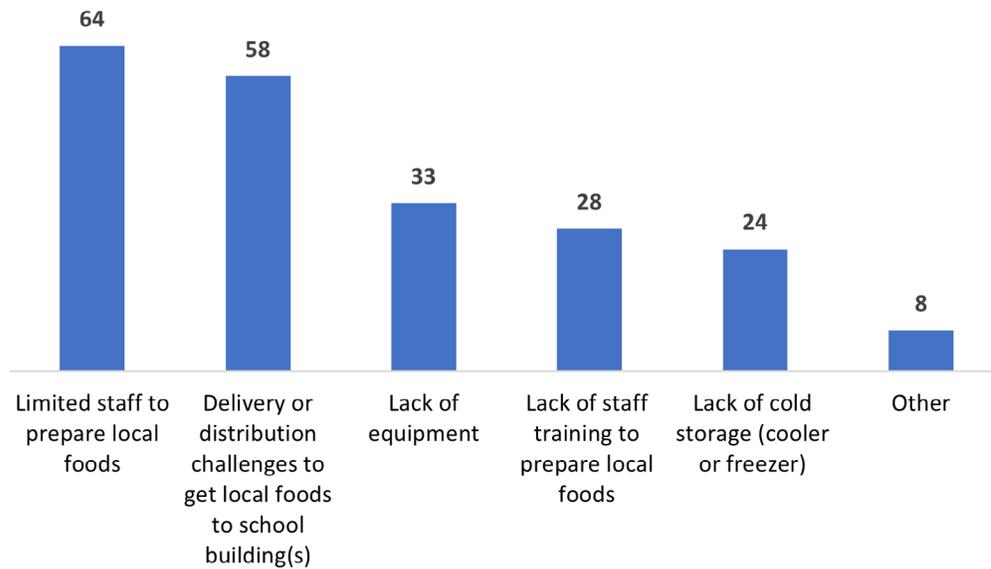
Schools were asked what logistical challenges they face in serving local foods in their meals. By far the most common challenges indicated were related to staff time and delivery and distribution. Over half of respondents indicated these three challenges as one of their top challenges. One-third of respondents named lack of equipment, lack of staff training and lack of cold storage as barriers. Written responses also indicated the challenges regarding lead time and lack of flexibility with timing.

Logistical Challenges:

- Limited staff time to prepare local foods
- Delivery/distribution challenges to get local foods to school buildings

Respondents noted the short growing season as a challenge in procuring food for meals. They indicated a desire for increased processing support, which would support schools with limited processing capacity and allow schools with available cold storage to freeze and store items for later use. For example, items such as corn, broccoli, cauliflower and carrots could be processed during the summer and stored in freezers to use during the school year. Some schools are already doing this, but without processing support, other schools have limited capacity to implement this strategy.

**Figure 7. Challenges: “What logistical challenges do you face in serving local foods in your food service program? Select all that apply.”**



This is a selection of open feedback quotes about the challenges of Farm to School from respondents:

- *Overall, we have been very successful. We do have the need for staff food prep and need to figure out how to capture produce and preserve it when it is in season.*
- *It's a good opportunity and has many bonuses, but nothing is without challenges, and they've yet to be worked out of the system. Meeting guidelines but having to rely on inconsistent or inexact delivery schedules is cumbersome.*
- *It's a good program, but a tedious application process for grants.*
- *With the growing season ending at the start of the school year, I have found it a challenge to find local food items throughout the school year.*
- *In our community, there was not much availability of fresh produce before school closed for the summer. Hoping to get a lot more when we start school in the fall. We did get local ground beef and sausage patties to serve at our school that were very good.*

### Resources needed

Schools were asked what resources would be most helpful in starting or expanding their Farm to School program. Respondents noted help connecting with farmers as the most desired support. They also expressed desire for Farm to School recipes and strategies for engaging students, the school and overall community.

#### Top resources needed:

- Help connecting with farmers
- Farm to School recipes
- Strategies for engaging students, teachers, parents and community

Hands-on and introductory training, additional promotional resources and connections with other schools were also noted as top-desired resources. Respondents wrote in support for writing grant applications, the need for additional storage (including cold storage) and continued funding, as well as regional coordinator positions to support connecting with farmers in the area, as other needed areas of assistance.

**Table 5. Desired supports: “What support or training would be most helpful in starting or expanding your Farm to School program? Check all that apply.”**

| Desired support   | Number of responses |
|---|---------------------|
| Help connecting with farmers  | 51                  |
| Farm to School recipes  | 47                  |
| Strategies for engaging students, teacher, parents and community                    | 45                  |
| Introductory Farm to School 101 training for my staff                               | 39                  |
| Additional Farm to School promotional resources                                     | 36                  |
| Hands-on food prep training for cooks (e.g., knife skills)                          | 33                  |
| Help connecting with other schools who are doing Farm to School to share strategies | 30                  |
| Farm to School webinars   | 28                  |
| Support for schools to apply for the MDA Farm to School Grant                       | 21                  |
| Help connecting with the media  | 11                  |
| Other   | 6                   |

- *Our farmers want stable, reliable funding for the food reimbursement grants. Many are unsettled right now to know we will not have access to as much money to purchase local foods for the FY2024 cycle. Stable funding will encourage more farmers to lean into institutional sales as a model but until then, we have to beg and plead for their extras.*



A locally-sourced lunch at Fond du Lac Ojibwe School.

This is a selection of open feedback quotes on needed Farm to School supports from respondents:

- *A hub where growers can market and connect with school consumers would be excellent. Make the entry to the market simple and don't require too much time from growers. Make it something they can do from their smartphone.*
- *It's a wonderful program. Please make it possible to spend the grant money during summer months since that's the peak season in MN.*
- *Easier grant paperwork. We need more grants as local produce is much more expensive.*
- *Great support for this. Would like to see commodity dollars be allocated to local.*
- *It would be great if a portion of our commodity entitlement could be utilized towards purchasing local products.*

## Conclusion

Since its inception in 2013, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) has awarded over \$9.5 million through its Farm to School grant program, providing statewide support to boost school purchases from Minnesota farmers. Interest in and implementation of local purchasing for school meals has continued to increase over the last decade. Last year, MDA received a \$3.5 million infusion of federal funding to support the Farm to School grant program, for a total of \$4.25 million available to award in FY2023. Yet, demand from school districts still surpassed available funding, with applicants requesting \$5.43 million. MDA's program has grown from supporting just 13 grantees in FY2013 to its largest cohort ever of 114 grantees in FY2023. The one-year infusion of funding from USDA made this impressive grant round possible, but even without additional federal funding, MDA is on track to support its second largest cohort for FY2024,

with 62 new incoming grantees and nearly \$1 million in awards. FY2024 is also the first year that MDA has included early care settings serving children 0-5 years old, increasing the pool of eligible applicants for the grant opportunity.

The positive impact of MDA's grant support is clear, with nearly all grantees reporting that it provides support to purchase more and an increased variety of local products than they would have been able to purchase without the grant as well as allowing them to plan ahead. Grantees reported that community response to their Farm to School activities has been positive. Lastly, the grant has helped to improve the quality of foods that schools serve and enabled students to eat more vegetables.

Grantees had suggestions for improvements to MDA's Farm to School grant program, with several respondents requesting a simplified application process and expanded ability to use the grant funding when serving meals outside the school year during the summer months when Minnesota's growing season is at its peak.

Grantees appreciated MDA's grant program for helping address the challenge of food budget constraints, which limit what they can purchase. Grantees highlighted other challenges, including the identification of farmers from whom to source, figuring out purchasing and delivery logistics and determining the availability of local products, especially if weather or other factors make local products more unpredictable to source. Grantees appreciated the kitchen equipment component of MDA's grant program, which addresses the potential extra time it can take to prepare whole

products from the farm compared to pre-processed items purchased through a distributor. These challenges are connected to the overarching barrier reported by grantees: limited staff time. Staff have limited time available for additional tasks, such as researching farmers, sourcing specific local items, managing delivery logistics, integrating local products into the menu and preparing local items in the kitchen. Strikingly, the top barriers identified by schools today echo the very same barriers reported in our first statewide Farm to School survey of schools in 2010, when schools identified the top barriers to using more local foods as extra labor/prep time, pricing/fitting local food into budgets and difficulty finding farmers to purchase from directly.

Schools gave concrete suggestions for resources that would best support the growth of Farm to School initiatives, highlighting the need for facilitated connections to farmers, recipes that incorporate local ingredients, and strategies for engaging students, teachers, parents and community as top priorities. Additionally, respondents identified hands-on and introductory training, additional promotional resources, connections with other schools, support for writing grant applications, additional storage (including cold storage) and continued funding, as well as regional coordinator positions to support connecting with farmers in the area, as other necessary supports to help schools start or expand Farm to School programs. As Farm to School initiatives continue to grow across the state, efforts to provide the resources that schools identified as needs and dismantle identified barriers will bolster this momentum.



Students enjoy a local lunch in Northfield.

## APPENDIX A

### Fiscal Year 2023 MDA Farm to School First Bite and Full Tray Grantee list

- Adrian Public Schools (ISD 511), Adrian
- Aitkin Public Schools (ISD 1), Aitkin
- Alexandria Public Schools (ISD 206), Glenwood/Alexandria
- All Saints Catholic School, Lakeville
- Austin Public Schools (ISD 492), Austin
- Barnesville Public School (ISD 146), Barnesville
- Becker Public Schools (ISD 726), Becker
- Belgrade-Brooten-Elrosa Public (ISD 2364), Belgrade
- Benson Public School (ISD 777), Benson
- Bloomington Public Schools (ISD 271), Bloomington
- Bluffview Montessori (Dist 4001), Winona
- Brainerd Public Schools (ISD 181), Brainerd
- Buffalo-Hanover-Montrose (ISD 877), Buffalo
- Burnsville Eagan Savage (ISD 191), Burnsville
- Cannon Falls Public Schools (ISD 252), Cannon Falls
- Cook County (ISD 166), Grand Marais
- Cornerstone Montessori Elementary School, St Paul
- Crosby-Ironton Public Schools (ISD 182), Crosby
- Crosslake Community School (CSD 4059), Crosslake
- Dassel Cokato Public Schools (ISD 466), Cokato
- Deer River Public Schools (ISD 317), Deer River
- Delano Public Schools (ISD 879), Delano
- Detroit Lakes Schools (ISD 22), Detroit Lakes
- Dilworth-Glyndon-Felton Public Schools (ISD 2164), Dilworth
- Duluth Public Schools (ISD 0709), Duluth
- East Range Academy of Technology and Science, Mountain Iron
- Eden Prairie Public Schools (ISD 272), Eden Prairie
- Fergus Falls Public Schools (ISD 544), Fergus Falls
- First Evangelical Lutheran School, Glencoe
- Foley Public Schools (ISD 51), Foley
- Fond du Lac Reservation Ojibwe School, Cloquet
- Frazee Vergas Public Schools (ISD 23), Frazee
- Fridley Public Schools (ISD 14), Fridley
- Glacial Hills Elementary (CSD 4168), Starbuck
- Granada Huntley East Chain School (ISD 2536), Granada
- Heron Lake Okabena Public Schools (ISD 330), Okabena/Heron Lake
- Hibbing Public Schools (ISD 701), Hibbing
- Hinckley-Finlayson Public Schools (ISD 2165), Hinckley
- Holy Rosary School, Detroit Lakes
- Holy Trinity Catholic School, Pierz
- Holy Trinity Catholic School, South Saint Paul
- Hopkins Public Schools (ISD 270), Hopkins
- Hutchinson Public Schools (ISD 423), Hutchinson
- Immanuel Lutheran School, Gaylord
- Intermediate District 287, Plymouth
- Jordan Public Schools (ISD 717), Jordan
- Lake City Schools (ISD 813), Lake City
- Lake of the Woods (ISD 390), Baudette
- Lake Superior School District (ISD 381), Two Harbors
- Lanesboro Public Schools (ISD 229), Lanesboro
- Litchfield Public Schools (ISD 465), Litchfield
- Mankato Area Public Schools (ISD 77), Mankato
- McGregor Public School (ISD 4), McGregor
- Mesabi East Schools (ISD 2711), Aurora
- Minneapolis Public Schools (Special School Dist No. 1), Minneapolis
- Minnewaska Area Schools (ISD 2149), Glenwood

- Moorhead Area Public Schools (ISD 152), Moorhead
- Morris Area Public Schools (ISD 2769), Morris
- Mountain Lake Christian School, Mountain Lake
- Nativity of Our Lord School, St. Paul
- Nett Lake Public Schools (ISD 707), Nett Lake
- New Millennium Academy (CSD 4143), Brooklyn Center
- New Richland-Hartland-Ellendale-Geneva (ISD 2168), New Richland
- New Ulm Area Catholic Schools, New Ulm
- North Branch Area Public Schools (ISD 138), North Branch
- Northland Community Schools (ISD 118), Remer
- Northwestern MN Juvenile Center, Bemidji
- Osseo Area Public Schools (ISD 279), Maple Grove
- Paynesville Public Schools (ISD 741), Paynesville
- Pelican Rapids Public Schools (ISD 548), Pelican Rapids
- Pine City Public Schools (ISD 578), Pine City
- Pine Island Public Schools (ISD 255), Pine Island
- Plainview-Elgin-Millville Schools (ISD 2899), Plainview
- Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools (ISD 719), Prior Lake
- Red Lake School District (ISD 38), Red Lake
- Red Rock Central (ISD 2884), Lamberton
- Richfield Public Schools (ISD 280), Richfield
- Ridgeway Community School (CSD 4083), Houston
- Riverway Learning Community, Winona
- Robbinsdale Area Schools (ISD 281), New Hope
- Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan Schools (ISD 196), Rosemount
- Roseville Public Schools (ISD 623), Roseville
- Rush City School (ISD 139), Rush City
- Rushford-Peterson Public Schools (ISD 239), Rushford
- SAGE Academy (CSD 4087), Brooklyn Park
- Saint Anthony New Brighton Schools (ISD 282), St. Anthony
- Saint Charles Public Schools (ISD 858), Saint Charles
- Saint Paul Public Schools (ISD 625), St. Paul
- Salem Lutheran School, Stillwater
- Sartell-St. Stephen Public Schools (ISD 748), Sartell
- Sauk Rapids-Rice Public Schools (ISD 47), Sauk Rapids
- Schoolcraft Learning Community (CSD 4058), Bemidji
- Springfield Public Schools (ISD 85), Springfield
- St Louis Park Public Schools (ISD 283), St Louis Park
- St Peter Public Schools (ISD 508), St. Peter
- St. Cloud Public Schools (ISD 742), Waite Park
- St. Croix Preparatory Academy (CSD 4120), Stillwater
- St. Michael-Albertville Schools (ISD 885), Albertville
- St. Peter Lutheran School, St. Peter
- St. Wenceslaus School, New Prague
- Staples-Motley School District (ISD 2170), Staples
- The Journey School, Saint Paul
- United South Central Public Schools (ISD 2134), Wells
- Vermilion Country School, Tower
- Voyageurs Expeditionary School (CSD 4107), Bemidji
- Wabasha-Kellogg Schools (ISD 811), Wabasha
- Wayzata Public Schools (ISD 284), Plymouth/Wayzata
- White Bear Lake Public Schools (ISD 624), White Bear Lake
- Willmar Public Schools (ISD 347), Willmar
- Willow River Public Schools (ISD 577), Willow River
- Winona Area Public Schools (ISD 861), Winona
- Wrenshall Public Schools (ISD 100), Wrenshall
- Zion Lutheran Church and School, Alexandria
- Zumbrota-Mazeppa Public Schools (ISD 2805), Zumbrota

## **APPENDIX B**

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UMN Extension Survey Results Summary document: *Minnesota's Farm to School Market* (see attached).

## **APPENDIX C**

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UMN Extension Interim Economic Impact and Product Mix Analysis (see attached.)



# Minnesota's Farm to School Market

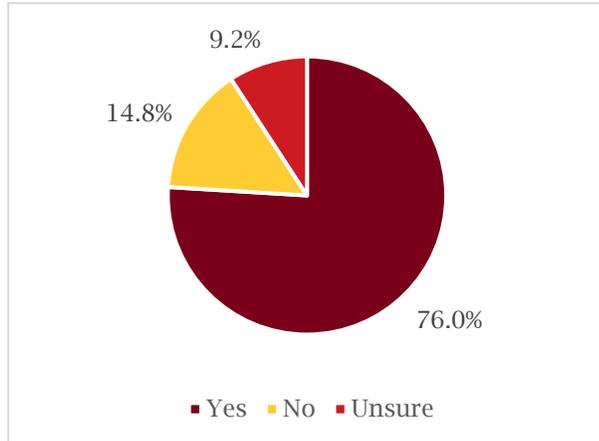
Ryan Pesch, Extension Educator

## Survey of Schools

In spring, 2023 Extension and its partner, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), asked schools to participate in a web-based survey about their experience with farm-to-school efforts. This factsheet presents the responses from 264 participants representing 204 schools or districts. Although a good sample, survey respondents represent less than 10% of the schools in the state and should not be taken as statistically representative. According to the Department of Education, Minnesota has 2,252 public schools (in 325 districts) and 464 non-public schools operating in the 2023-24 school year.

The majority of respondents were food service directors, although some administrators replied (20% of respondents) and a small number of teachers (7%).

## Purchasing Experience of Schools



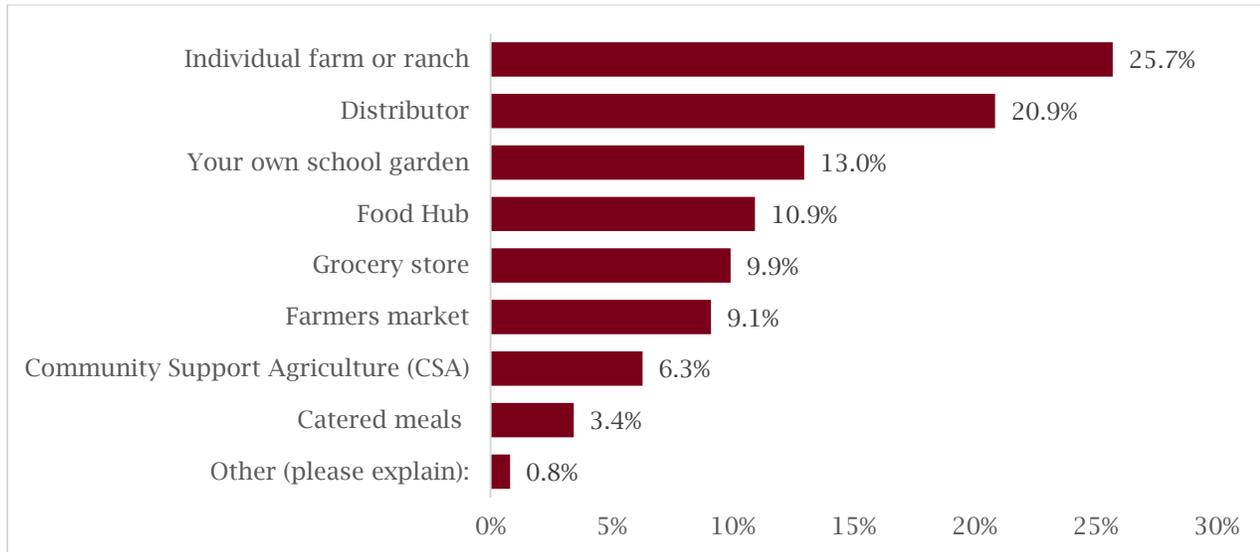
Three-quarters of respondents reported that their school or district has experience purchasing local foods for their schools.

*Being a farm kid raised on eating what we grew, I believe it is important that people know where their food comes from. It is exciting to see kids eating local products, know where it came from, and loving the taste of it.*

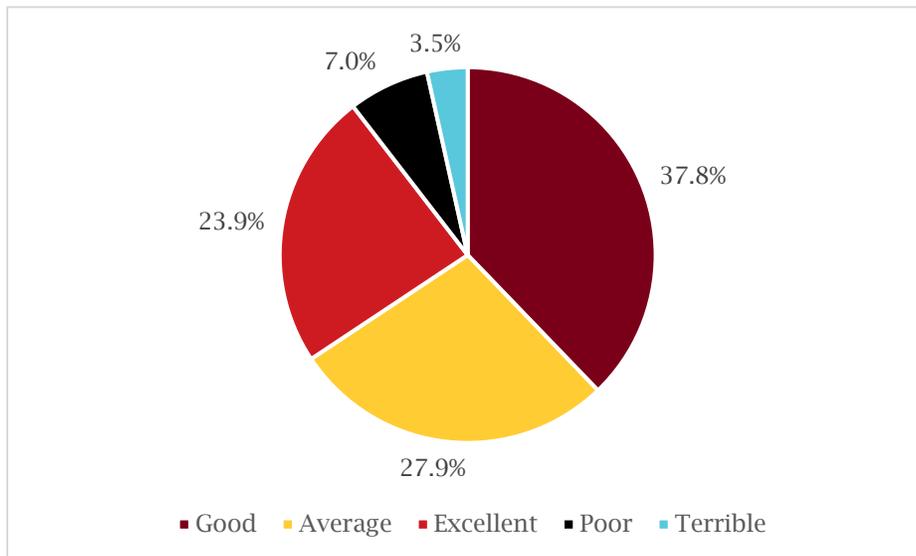
*-Survey Respondent*

Although the procurement of food is a primary activity in farm to school efforts, it's not the only one. Respondents also reported that their schools 'educated students about locally-grown foods' (11% of respondents) and 9.6% reported that their schools operated a school garden.

Schools are buying from a mix of sources, but directly from farm operators is the top mode of procurement, followed by distributors (21%), garden (13%), and food hub (11%).



Some of the respondents have been purchasing for farm to school for years, while others are new to the process as well as their farm suppliers. As with any new endeavor, this creates some challenges.



Over 10% of respondents ranked the ease of sourcing local foods as either poor or terrible, while 28% ranked the ease of buying as average. In contrast, 62% of respondents ranked sourcing either good or excellent.

### About Farm to School Buyers and the Buying Process

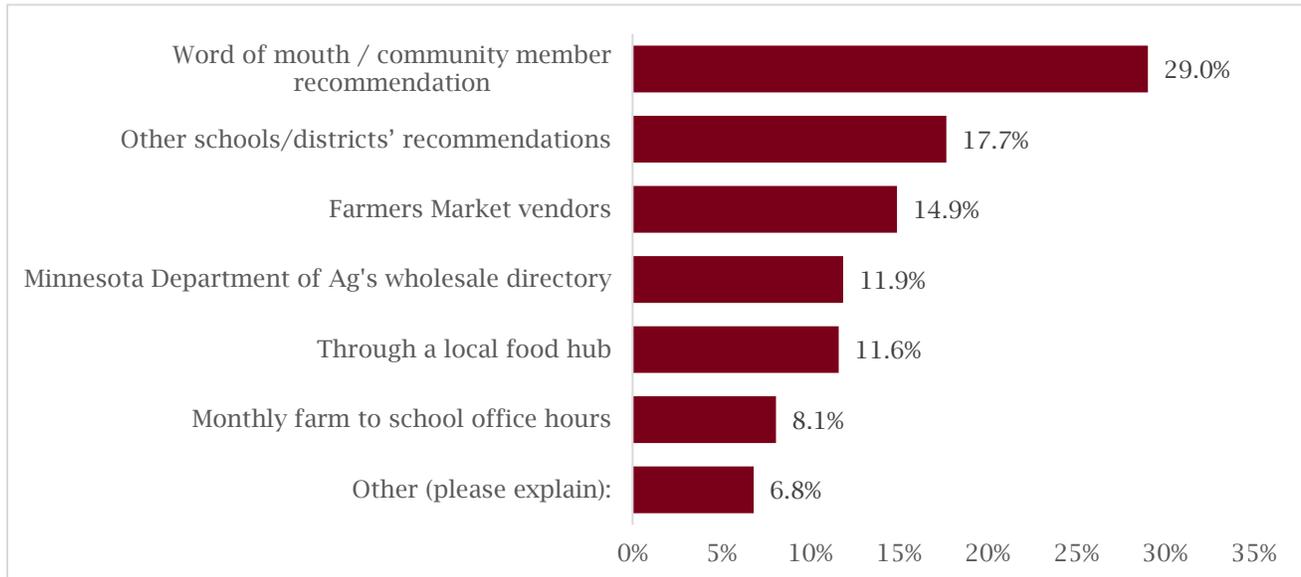
For any operator interested in selling to an outlet, an understanding of the buyer cannot be overstated. Few farmers have first-hand experience operating a food service kitchen and all the many competing interests on the time and attention of food service directors.

Employing these survey results can help to communicate with and provide quality customer service to school food service buyers. The first step to meeting the needs of a customer is understanding their needs.

### Buyers learned about farmers through word of mouth

A positive word of mouth travels and sourcing local foods is no different. Nearly one-third of respondents reported finding farm suppliers through this avenue, whereas 18% also reported using the recommendations of other schools. The wholesale directory from MDA (<https://minnesotagrown.com/wholesaler/>) was called out as a resource by 12% of respondents.

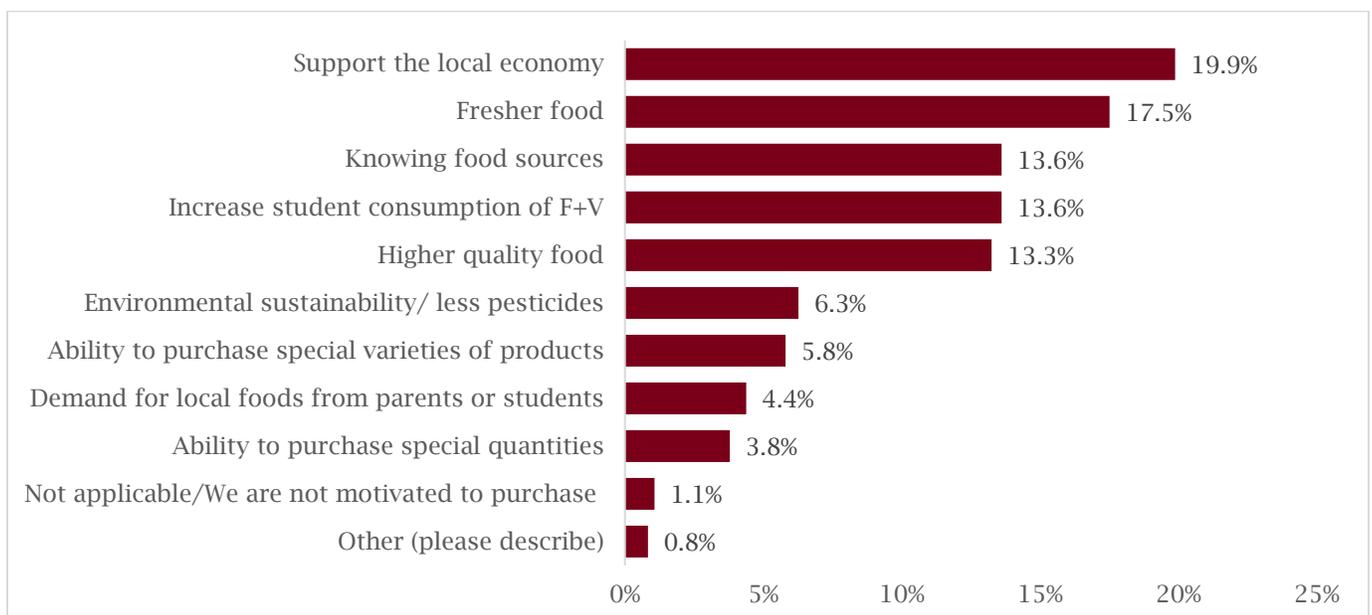
*How did you find or establish connections with your local growers? Check all that apply.*



### Freshness and supporting local economy lead the motivations of schools

Motivation is an important component to understanding a customer and the reasons given by respondents were not different from motivations of non-school customers in buying local or direct from a farmer: freshness and support of the local economy.

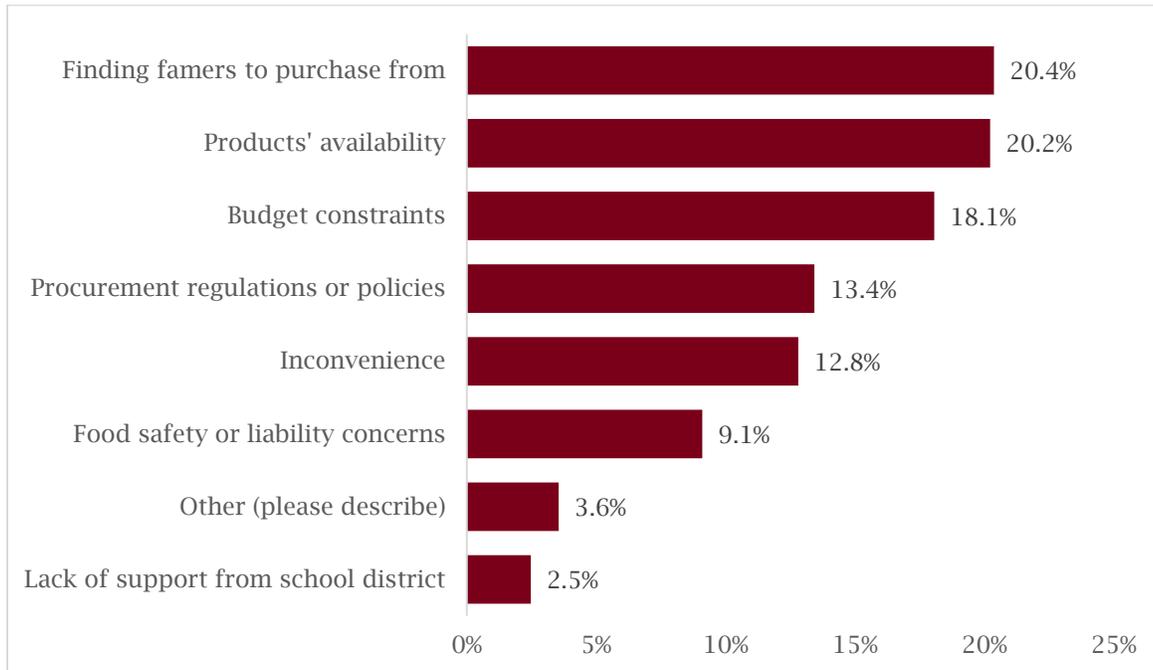
*What motivates you to purchase and serve local foods in your school food service program?*



### Making connections with farmers top all challenges

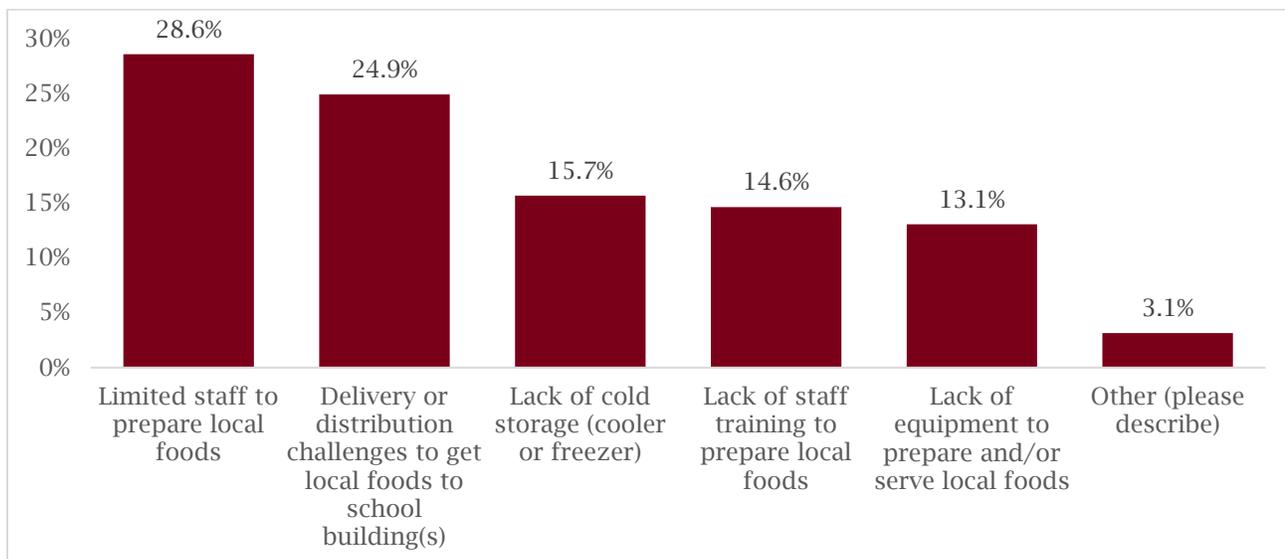
Find farmers to purchase from top the list of challenges ranked by survey participants.

*What barriers do you face in purchasing local foods? By percent of responses*



But the challenges of servicing local foods are different from simply purchasing product and these issue are an important consideration for any producer looking to meet the needs of this market.

*What challenges do you face in servicing local foods? By percent of responses*



### **Takeaways for farmers looking to market to schools**

- Lots of schools across the state have access to funds through the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's procurement grant, so the opportunity exists for operators.
- Conduct a market channel analysis of your current outlets to understand your marketing mix and how other outlets can fit. See <https://extension.umn.edu/managing-farm-business/marketing-mix-analysis-farm-operators> for details.
- Look for efficiency by selling to schools on or near existing distribution routes and use the same sales sheets and ordering system to streamline logistics.
- Be patient. If you are new to selling wholesale, it may take time to learn the standards expected of suppliers. In addition, it takes time to build a solid buying-selling relationship with wholesale buyers. Put your best foot forward and be ready to adjust to meet their needs.

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### **For more information about Farm to School efforts in Minnesota:**

- University of Minnesota Extension with resources for schools and farmers: <https://extension.umn.edu/school-and-child-care-nutrition/farm-school>
- Minnesota Department of Agriculture for information about its farm to school procurement grant: <https://www.mda.state.mn.us/farm-school-grants>
- Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy for resources to assist in building farm to school programs across the state: <https://farmtoschoolmn.org>

# Minnesota Department of Agriculture Farm to School Grant Fiscal Year 2023 Evaluation

Interim economic impact, product mix analysis, and producer feedback

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



Aimee Haag, Farm to School Coordinator for Hutchinson, Litchfield and  
Dassel-Cokato School Districts, with Laura Frerichs of Loon Organics Farm.

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*University of Minnesota Extension makes a difference by connecting community needs and University resources to address critical issues in Minnesota.*

*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.*

Prepared April 2024



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## Executive Summary

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) Farm to School Grants allocated over \$3.5 million to Minnesota schools for local food purchases in the Fiscal Year 2023 (FY2023) round of grants, awarding 60 First Bite and 56 Full Tray Food Grants to schools throughout the state.

With forty six percent of funds expended to date, these local purchases, combined with economic ripple effects, have created an estimated nearly \$3.1 million in economic impact on Minnesota's economy. Most purchases were made directly through producers, with food hubs and distributors also providing products for some districts. School districts purchased a range of products. Of note, nearly half of sales (48%) were for local proteins, 18% were local vegetables and 20% were for fruits, including the Farm to School standby, apples.

Feedback from farmers who provided products through this funding indicated a variety of benefits, challenges, and opportunities for growth. Farmers noted a number of Farm to School benefits, ranging from business-related benefits surrounding sales volume or type, to values-aligned sales supporting local kids and community members. Farmers also reported challenges with pricing, delivery, and size of orders when selling to schools. They would appreciate support with finding school contacts. They indicated interest and ability to increase production to schools.

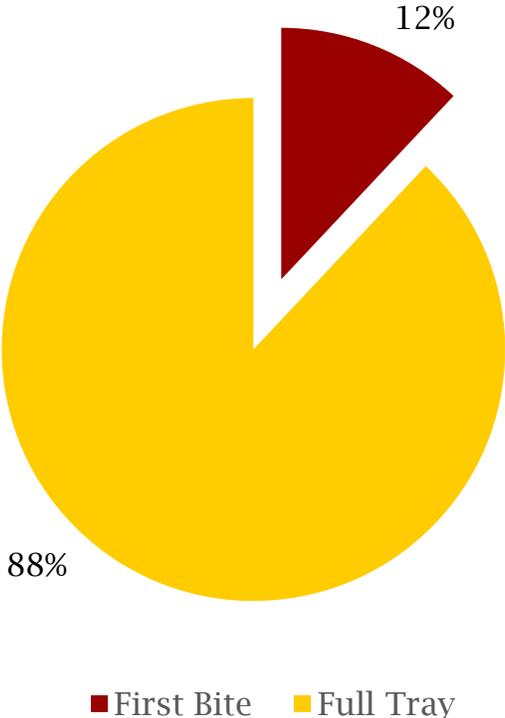
## MDA's FY2023 Farm to School Grant Round

The FY2023 round of MDA Farm to School grants received requests for more than \$5.3 million and awarded \$4,209,717, with \$3,458,752 for Farm to School local food purchase reimbursement grants and \$769,788 in Farm to School kitchen equipment grants. FY2023 grant funding was significantly increased compared to previous grant rounds due to a [one-time infusion of federal funding to MDA through the United States Department of Agriculture \(USDA\) Local Food for School \(LFS\) Program](#). This report represents an interim analysis of spending to date. Grantees have until January 31, 2025, to fully expend funds for food contracts and until August 31, 2025, for equipment contracts.

## 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 drafting this report, MDA had received evidence of purchases and reimbursed \$1.6 million to grantees.

Figure 1: Total spending by grantee type

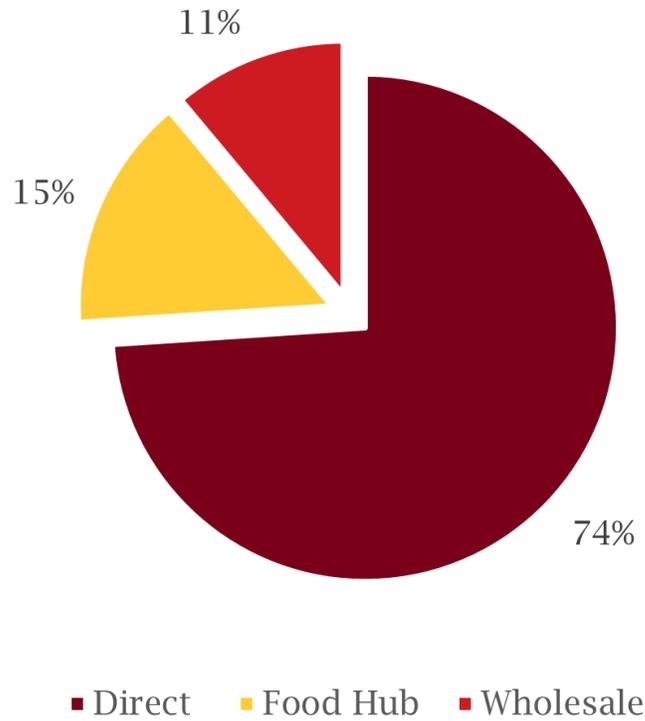


**Purchasing Methods**

Three quarters of the purchases of local foods spurred by the grant were direct from Minnesota farmers or food businesses who billed the schools directly. Examining all entities listed on invoices, Extension found a total of 435 vendors, a significant increase from our last analysis of FY2021 purchases when only 58 vendors were identified. Nearly all vendors were farm owner-operators. The number of food aggregation hubs involved in MDA’s Farm to School procurement grant also increased since our report on FY2021 spending. Some define themselves explicitly as “food hubs,” while others are farm operators aggregating and selling food on behalf of a group of operators, fitting better into the category of a food hub than a wholesaler. The Good Acre Food Hub remained an important source of local food serving the Metro area school districts, and a total of seventeen food hubs were identified through the analysis. Purchasing local foods through traditional wholesalers was most often done by large school districts, though the sales through the twelve wholesalers we identified accounted for only 11% of total sales.



**Figure 2: Total sales by source**

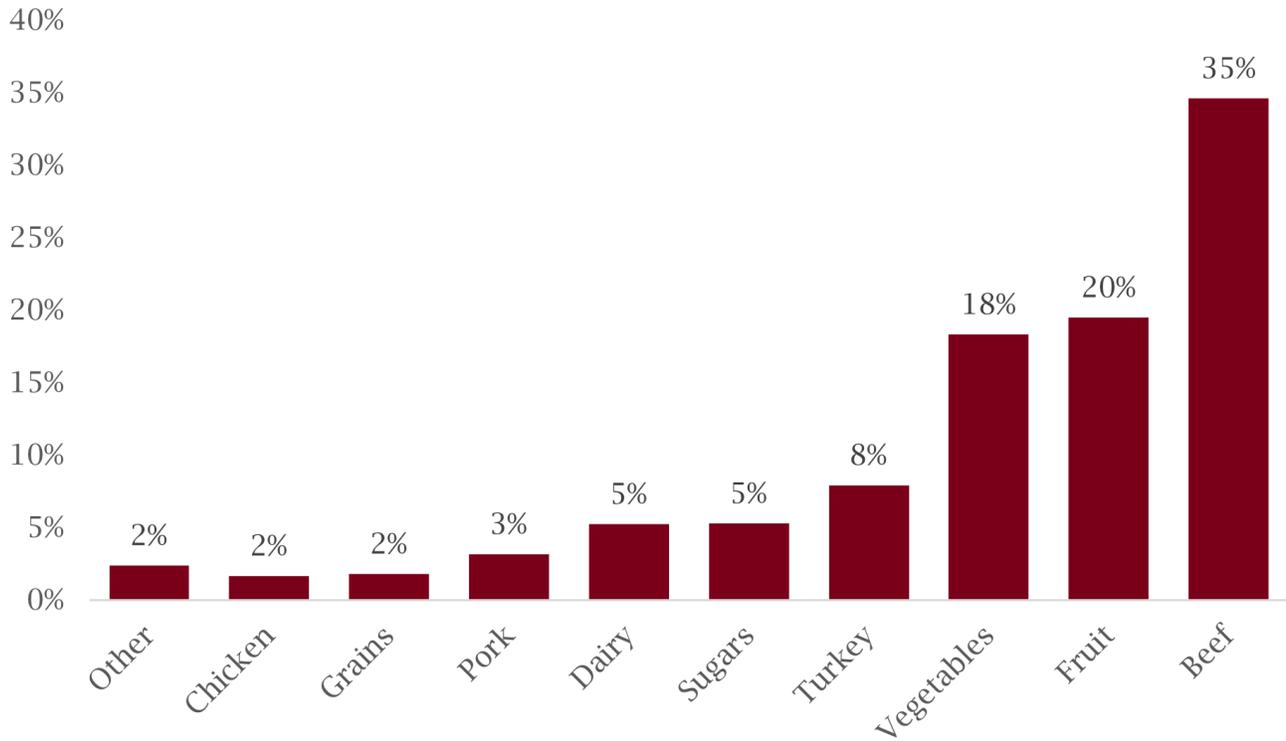


### Product Mix

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

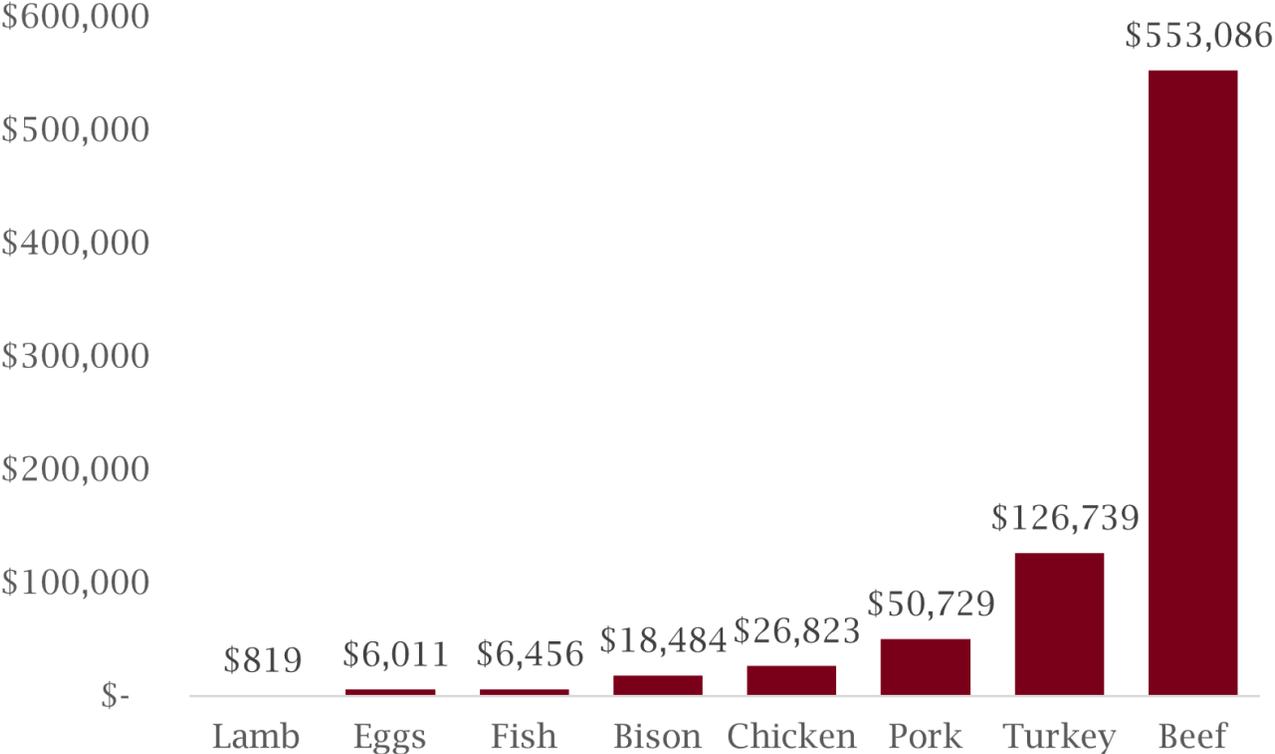
Meat was a large component of total school purchases from this grant round (48%). The largest protein category was beef which accounted for 35% of all sales. These products are more expensive than produce purchases, and it is possible schools may have only chosen to purchase them with the direct support of the procurement grant.

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



Accounting for just under half of total sales, the proteins category consisted of turkey, beef, pork, chicken, and eggs. Beef was the most popular meat purchase, accounting for 70% of all protein sales, followed by turkey, which accounted for 16% of protein sales. The significantly increased Farm to School grant funding may have made beef, traditionally a higher cost item than other proteins, more accessible to schools. In contrast to our previous FY2021 analysis, schools did spend on a wider mix of protein items, including lamb, bison, chicken, and eggs. These purchases were small in comparison to beef and turkey but showed a willingness from schools to branch out to some less traditional proteins when given the opportunity.

**Figure 4: Total protein purchases by type**

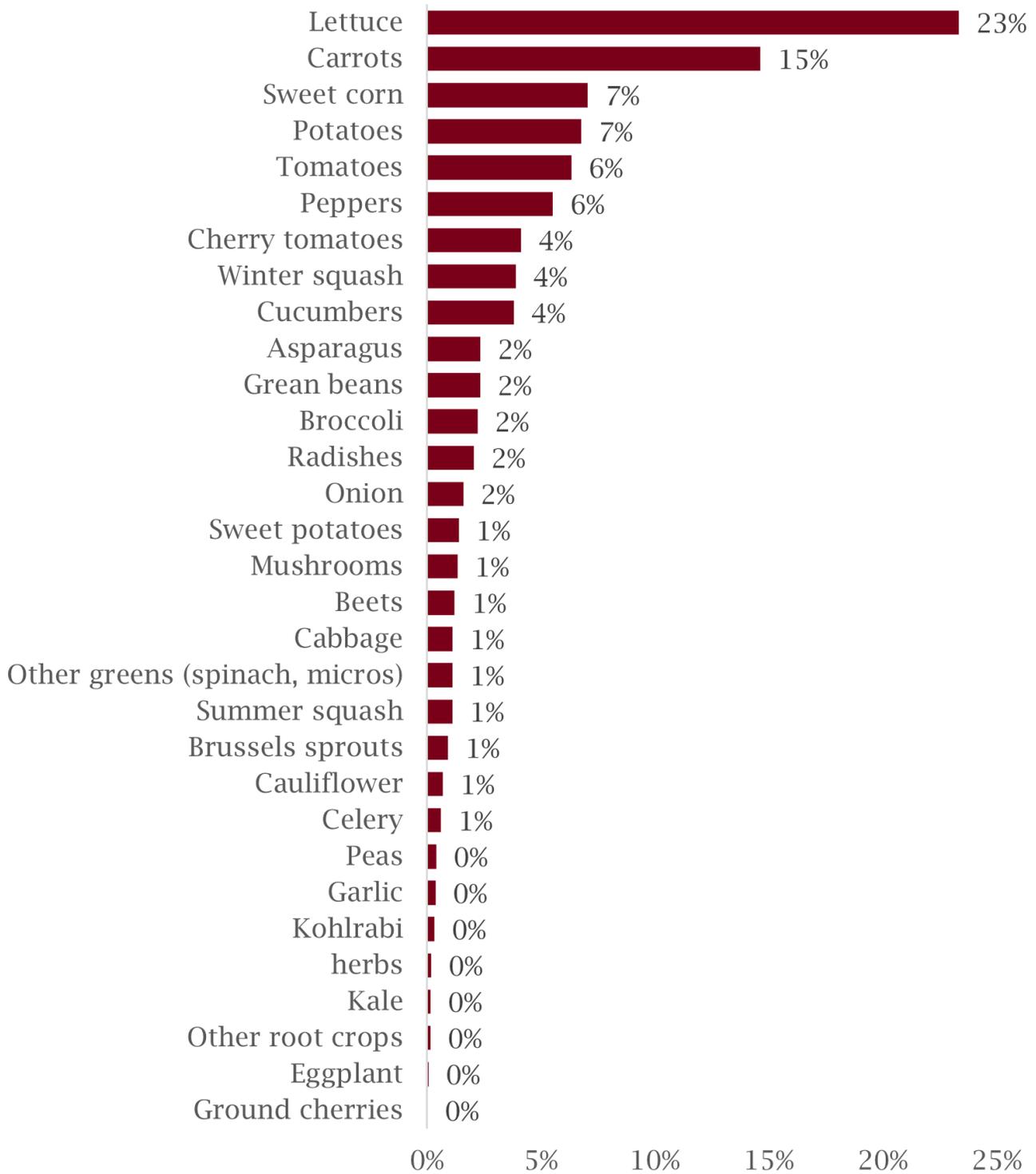


Vegetables and fruits, which have traditionally been a focus of Farm to School efforts, were 19.5% and 18.3% of total spending, respectively. Together, fruits and vegetables accounted for 37.8% of total school spending for the FY2023 data analyzed.

In the vegetable category, schools purchased over thirty-five different products, with the most popular vegetables by percentage of sales being lettuce (23%), carrots (15%) and sweet corn (7%). The least commonly purchased vegetables include such crops as ground cherries, eggplant, and minor root crops such as parsnips and turnips, all of which were found in single purchases. Some crops are favored by schools due to their availability during the school year, such as sweet corn at the beginning of the fall, whereas others are favored for their storage ability, like carrots, radishes, cabbage, and winter squash.

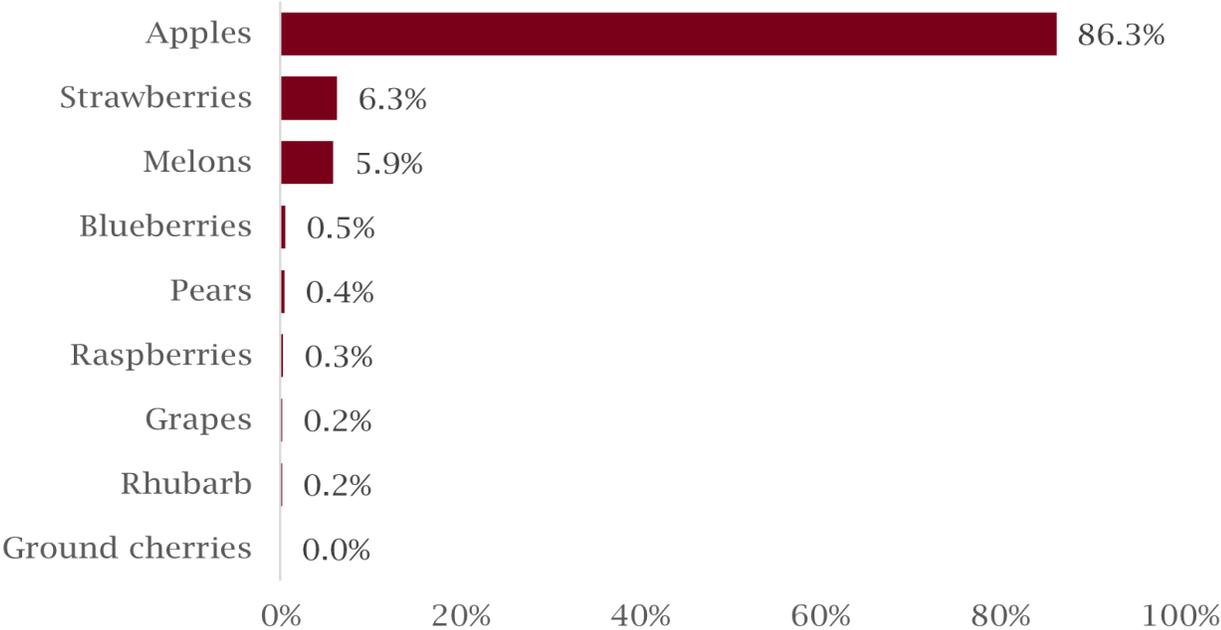


**Figure 5: Vegetables by percent of sales**



Fruit accounted for more sales than vegetables. Fruits reflected a smaller range of products, and the popularity of apples in Farm to School efforts won out as the most common choice, accounting for over 86% of all fruit sales in the dataset, followed by strawberries and melons (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: 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.

The analysis is based on the data provided through the fourth quarter of 2023. As of the time of this report, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture has reimbursed \$1.6 million of the total \$3.5 million awarded to MDA Farm to School grantees (46%), including both the Full Tray and First Bite awards. Grantees have through August of 2025 to fully expend funds. Extension generated the economic impact on the state of Minnesota based on both the amount reimbursed and the total allotment.

**Table 1: Allocated and reimbursed awards for grant by type**

| Awardee      | Reimbursed   |              | Percent |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------|
| First Bite   | \$55,900.00  | \$55,900.00  | 10%     |
| Full Tray    | \$239,006.65 | \$478,013.30 | 90%     |
| <b>Total</b> | \$294,906.65 | \$533,913.30 | 100%    |

Considering fifty four percent of the allocation is not yet reimbursed, we provide two scenarios of economic impact:

1. **Impact to Date Scenario.** This is based on a direct effect of \$1.6 million already reimbursed to schools through quarter 4 of 2023.
2. **Full Allocation Scenario.** This is based on the direct effect of \$3.5 million allocated to Farm to School. For this scenario, Extension assumes that schools’ future Farm to School spending follows the same purchasing patterns as the spending already submitted for reimbursement in 2023.

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 MDA 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 2, the MDA Farm to School grants have had a total impact of \$3.1 million on the state of Minnesota so far when adding the induced and indirect effects together with the grant spending. Overall, the direct impact of the Farm to School procurement (\$1,591,013) grant generates nearly an equal additional amount of indirect and induced impact in the Minnesota economy (\$1,556,903) 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 MDA Farm to School procurement grant, an additional 0.99 cents of impact is generated in economic activity in the state.**

**Economic impact terms**

**Direct effect:** initial change

**Indirect effect:** business-to-business impacts

**Induced effect:** consumer-to-business impacts

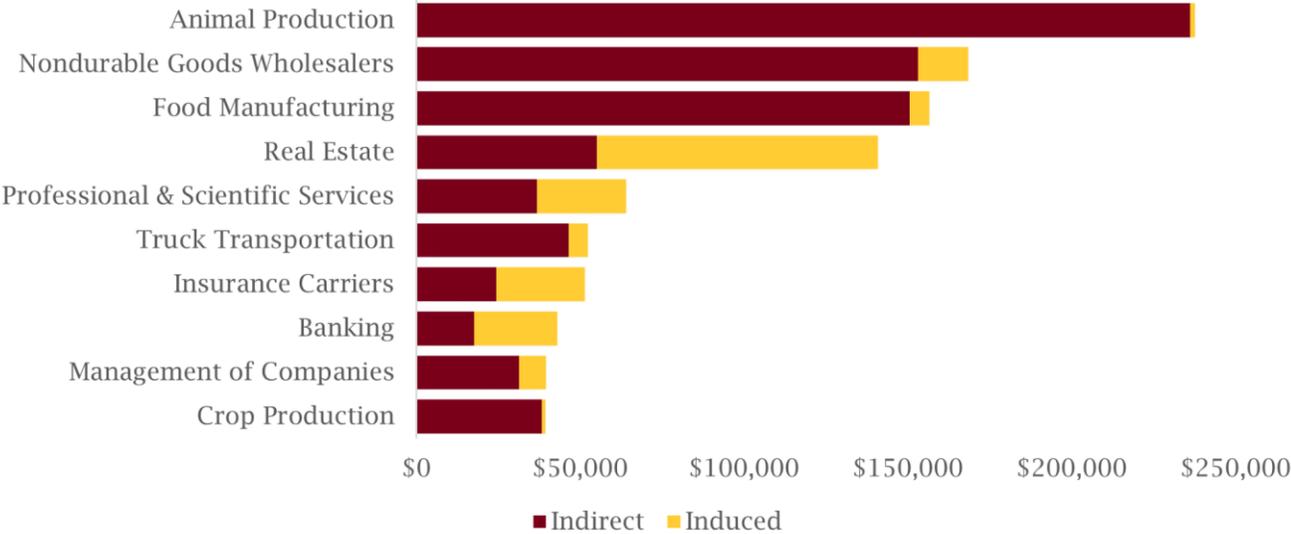
**Table 2: Total economic impact in Minnesota generated by Farm to School procurement grant to date**

|                     | <b>Proprietor and Labor Income</b> | <b>Output (Sales)</b> |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>1 - Direct</b>   | \$314,432                          | \$1,591,013           |
| <b>2 - Indirect</b> | \$250,323                          | \$1,023,770           |
| <b>3 - Induced</b>  | \$175,996                          | \$533,133             |
| <b>Total</b>        | \$740,752                          | \$3,147,916           |



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 7).

**Figure 7: Top ten industries impacted by output (does not include direct impact)**



In the second scenario in which the total MDA Farm to School grant allotment is spent, we essentially see a doubling of impact. The input-output model is linear, and, if one doubles the direct effect, the overall effect will also double (Table 3).

**Table 3: Total economic impact in Minnesota generated by Farm to School procurement for total allocation**

|                     | Proprietor and Labor Income | Output (Sales) |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|
| <b>1 - Direct</b>   | \$682,822                   | \$3,455,048    |
| <b>2 - Indirect</b> | \$543,603                   | \$2,223,222    |
| <b>3 - Induced</b>  | \$382,194                   | \$1,157,753    |
| <b>Total</b>        | \$1,608,619                 | \$6,836,023    |

**Survey of Producers**

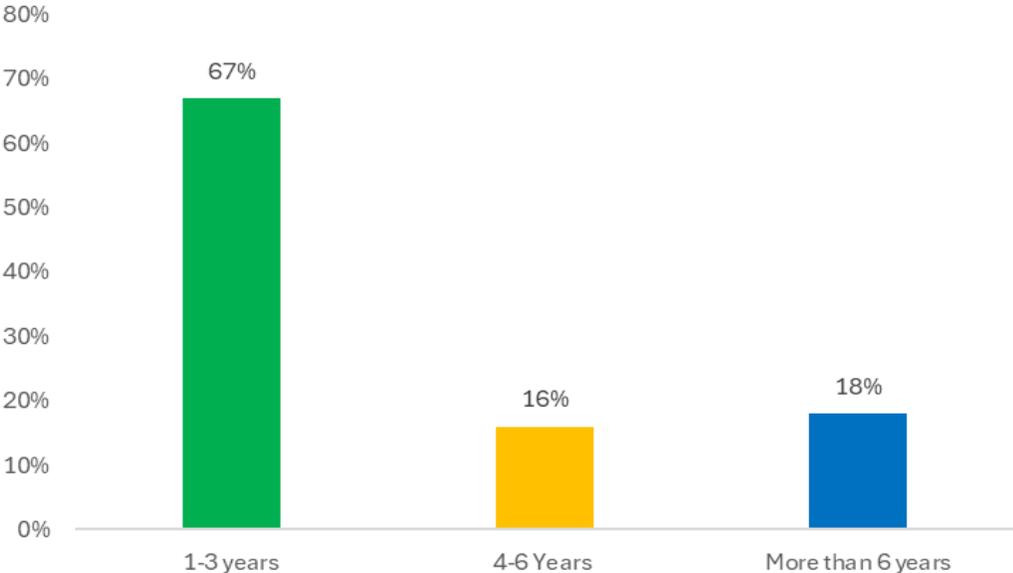
Extension sent a short 5-minute pulse survey by email to 206 emails for growers who sold to MDA Farm to School grantees, and whose emails the team could identify. Fifty-nine of the 206 responded, for a 29% response rate.

The brief survey asked for limited information about their operations, challenges, and benefits of selling to schools, and interest and ability in scaling up school sales.



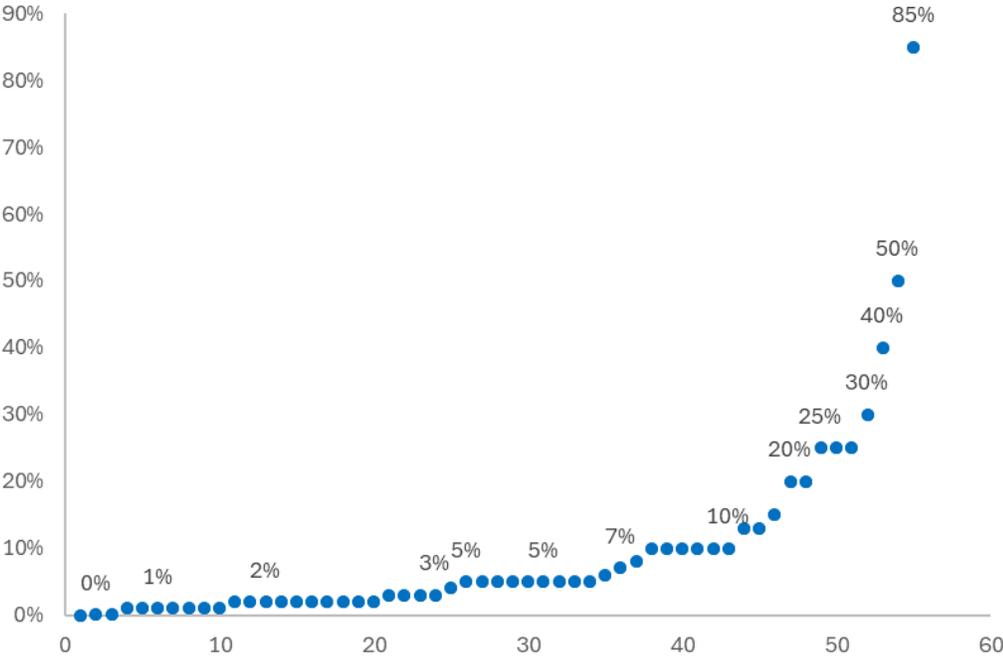
As in the previous round of the survey with FY2021 vendors, two-thirds of producer respondents had been selling to schools for less than three years.

**Figure 8: Respondents by number of years selling to schools**



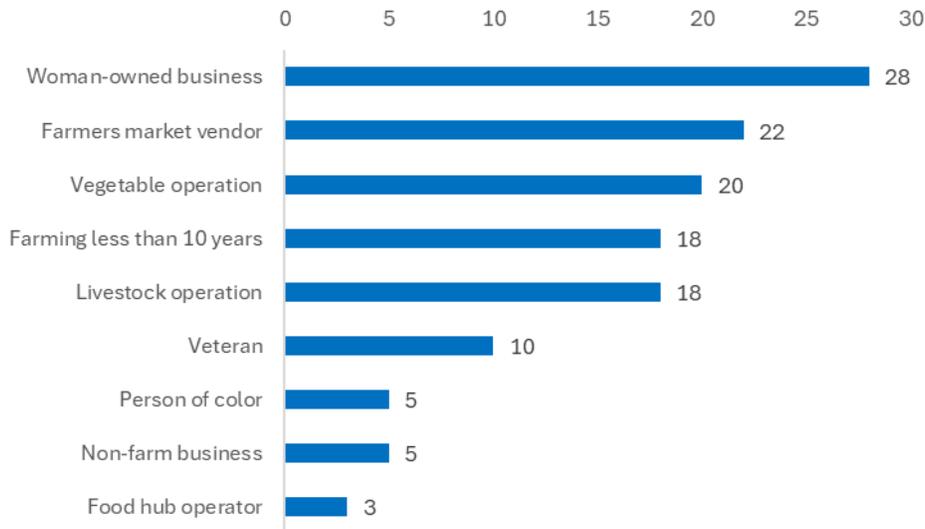
For most vendors who replied to the survey, sales to schools remain a limited part of their marketing mix, with some notable exceptions. The median percentage of estimated sales to schools was 5%, with a range from 0.001% to 85%. It should also be noted that not all vendors were aware of the total percentage of sales to schools, as their school sales were through a distributor or food hub.

**Figure 9: Respondents by percent of sales to schools in past 12 months**



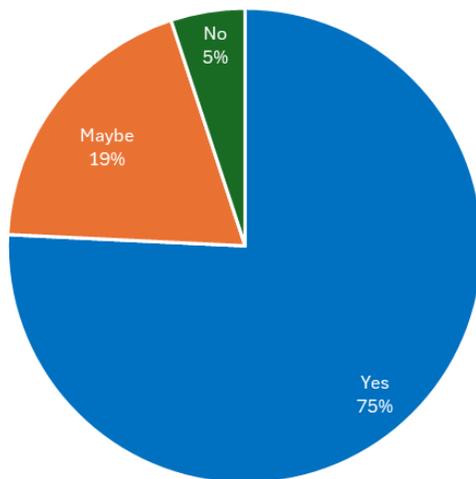
Looking at self-identifications of the producer respondents, a sizable percentage described their businesses as woman-owned, selling at farmers markets, and as vegetable operations. Eighteen of the respondents were livestock operators (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Number of respondents by identification**



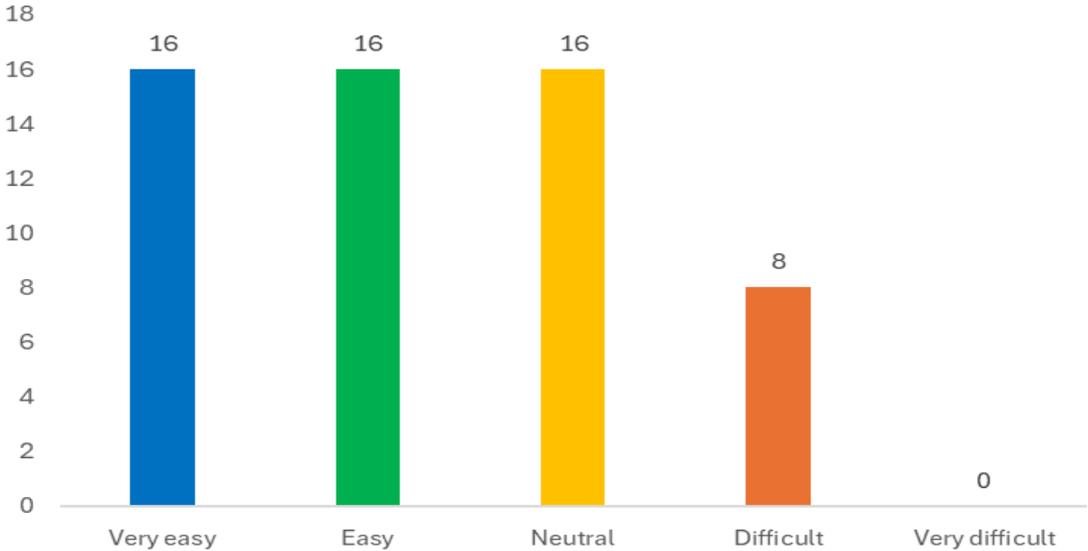
Most respondents are interested in increasing sales to schools, with three-quarters of respondents indicating they would be interested in increasing sales to schools in the next 12 months (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Interest in increasing sales to schools**



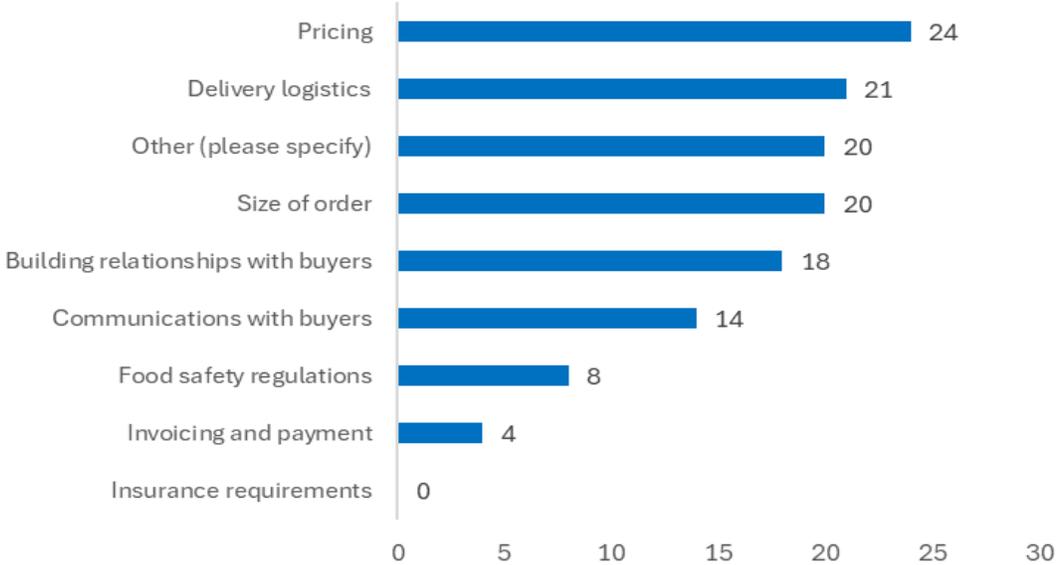
Many respondents indicated the ability to increase supply of products to schools, with 85% of responses indicating increasing supply of product to schools would be very easy, easy, or neutral. Eight respondents indicated scaling up would be difficult (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Number of respondents by level of difficulty to increase products**



The survey asked participants to select their top three challenges selling to schools from a list of options. Responses mirrored the previous round of producer surveys, with respondents indicating their biggest challenges were pricing, logistics, and size of order. Write-ins referenced seasonality, flexibility, cost, and communication, as well as labor challenges on both sides: growers and schools. These points were echoed in the open-ended comments about how to make selling to schools more attractive. Comments addressed cost and funding, logistics and delivery, communication and building relationships with buyers.

**Figure 13: Number of respondents by top three challenges of selling to schools**



The survey also asked what changes would make selling to schools more attractive. Responses spanned a range of areas, including many addressing the barriers above: cost, communication, and logistics. Several growers noted the challenge of timelines and lack of flexibility: schools can have limited storage space and are often not able to change menus to accommodate changing dates of when products are ready. The need for labor and storage support were also noted: “Proper storage facilities for produce. If a crop is early and the school cannot menu right away, the cost of finding/paying for storage is all on the grower. If the crop spoils before the school can use it, the loss is all on the farmer.” Others noted the need for increased storage and processing: “...there need to be 4 players involved; grower, storage, processor, school.”

Connections and communication were another key theme. Support building connections and communicating about available products was noted: “an easier way for buyers to communicate directly with farms to find out what is currently available” and “connections with the right people.” Comments noted the complexity of both finding connections and building relationships. The realities of seasonality and planning were also mentioned, as growers plan what they are growing far in advance and some expressed desire to plant specifically for schools. “Having an understanding of things [schools] are looking for” and “communication long before the season begins” would help respondents plan for school sales.

## Positive Impacts

Respondents were asked in an open-ended format what positive impacts they have had selling to schools. The most common comments surrounded values alignment, community, and quality. There were also a variety of comments regarding profitability, logistics, and preferred product sales.

*Values alignment* was referenced in a variety of ways, with growers indicating they appreciated providing quality products to kids in their community.

*Profitability* was also mentioned, with order sizes and wholesale sales noted as supporting their businesses bottom line: “A wholesale purchase is more lucrative for our farm than selling directly to consumers. Selling locally to schools is very rewarding - knowing the children in our community are getting more nutritional meals.”

*Community and Relationship* was an important positive impact for respondents. Respondents noted how they appreciated positive feedback and relationships within the schools. “We love the connection with the amazing, creative kitchen teams in each school. They’re so committed and innovative. Our asparagus ended up in the kindergarten math lesson, with bar graph results of a survey about whether kids liked the asparagus or even tried it. Positive reviews from the under-6 set!”

*Other business support:* A variety of other supports to their business were mentioned as positive impacts. Four responses noted moving a lot of product at one time, while others noted the impact of either trying out growing new things or moving distinct types of items through the school market than other markets (for example, schools purchasing smaller apples).

## Conclusion

To date, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture’s Farm to School grant has reimbursed nearly \$1.6 million to local schools and had over \$3.1 million impact on the state economy from fiscal year 2023 grants. Schools purchased a wide range of products; in this round of funding, local protein was particularly popular. Both growers and school foodservice staff noted they would appreciate further support building connections between schools and producers. While farmers indicated a variety of challenges, from delivery and pricing to communication and relationship building, growers also see a variety of benefits to selling to schools and are interested in increasing sales to this market.