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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Bringing Local Foods to Students: Achievements and Learnings from Farm to School Grantees



**FY 2018–FY 2019
Farm to School
Grantee Report**
October 2024

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Bringing Local Foods to Students: Achievements and Learnings from Farm to School Grantees

October 2024

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Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program awards grants annually to support schools, non-profits, Indian Tribal Organizations, State agencies, producers, and other entities who are planning, developing, and implementing farm to school programs. Since 2013, the Farm to School Grant Program has awarded a total of \$98 million to over 1,200 projects across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.¹ The focus of this report is fiscal year (FY) 2018 and FY 2019 grantees.² In FY 2018 and FY 2019, 199 organizations from across the U.S. received one- or two- year grants ranging from \$18,750 to \$100,000, totaling over \$14 million. Their achievements, activities, and challenges, as well as the sustainability of their work moving forward, are highlighted below.

Methods

This report includes data from grant applications and mandatory reports submitted to USDA FNS by 73 FY 2018 grantees and 126 FY 2019 grantees. Collectively, grantees submitted 185 baseline reports, 185 progress reports, and 186 final reports. Most of the data presented comes from grantees' final reports.

Key findings

Achievements

Farm to School grants reached students and communities across the U.S. FY 2018 and FY 2019 grantees provided programming in 1,000 districts and close to 9,000 schools nationwide. Their projects included a wide range of activities and populations with whom grantees worked, including students and families with low incomes; students in juvenile detention settings; students with special needs; rural communities; and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (that is, BIPOC) communities.

Farm to School grants facilitated greater community support for school meals and higher student participation. Over half of grantees reported greater community support for school meals as a result of their Farm to School grant activities (56 percent, n=92). Thirty-nine percent (n=64) reported increased participation in school meals, and 34

Highlights

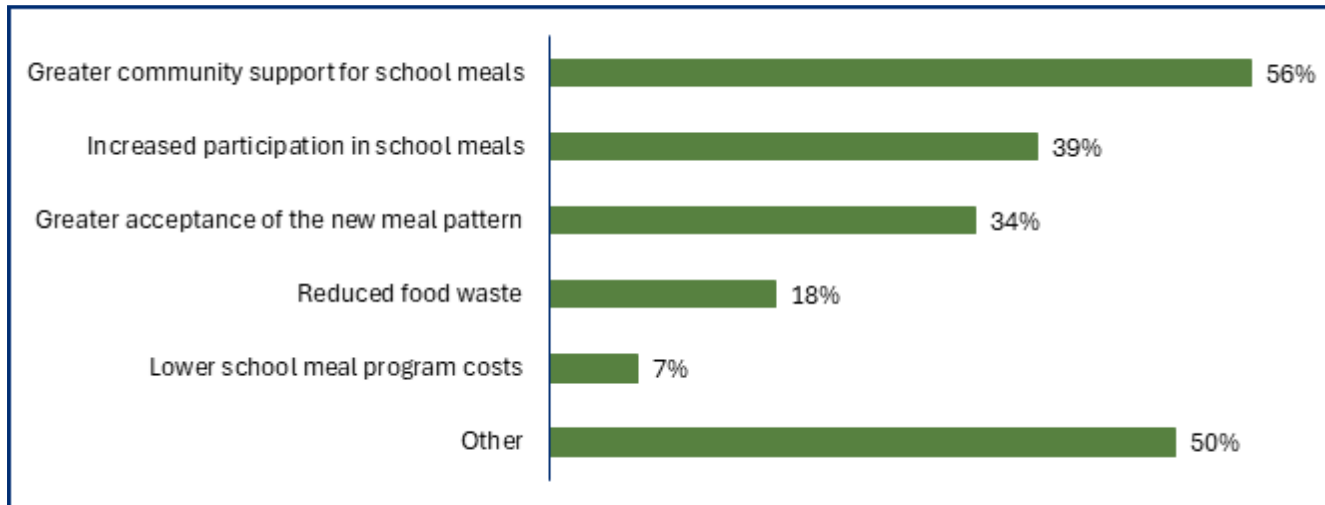
- Over 1,000 school districts and close to 9,000 schools across the U.S. benefited from the 2018 and 2019 grants awarded by USDA FNS.
- At least 179,500 students benefited from taste tests; 145,000 from edible school gardening or orchard activities; 42,600 from farmer visits; and 28,300 from field trips to farms.
- Over 4,700 teachers, 4,500 food service staff, and 1,100 farmers were trained as part of farm to school efforts.
- Grantees created over 1,100 new recipes as part of farm to school efforts.
- Grantees found new sources for local foods and made more local purchases. They saw changes in staff attitudes toward incorporating fresh, local foods.
- Grantees attributed success to collaboration with schools and school districts, supply chain partners, the community, and the government.

¹ For more on the Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program, please visit <https://www.fns.usda.gov/f2s/farm-school-grant-program>.

² The FY 2013–FY 2017 Farm to School Grantee Report can be found at <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/Farm-to-School-GranteeReport-Summary.pdf>.

percent (n=55) reported greater acceptance of the new meal pattern (Figure 1).³ In the “other” category, grantees reported that their projects evoked support and enthusiasm for local foods from teachers, students, staff, and community members.

Figure 1. Results of Farm to School Grant Program activities (n=164)



When asked which changes took place in school food service operations because of their project, grantees were most likely to report finding **new sources of local foods** (60 percent, n=99), **changes in nutrition service staff’s attitudes toward incorporating fresh, local foods** (49 percent, n=80), and **buying more local foods** (48 percent, n=79). Additionally, several grantees highlighted positive changes to their menus and cooking practices. Grantees created at least **1,100 new recipes** as part of farm to school efforts, and 58 percent of grantees worked with schools that created at least one new recipe emphasizing seasonal ingredients sourced from local or regional producers.

“Both the Asian pears and cantaloupe were BIG hits! Almost all students chose at least a full serving of the local fruit offering at the salad bar, returned for extra samples, and asked more questions about them.”

Furthermore, grantees reported that students were excited about integrating their voices and experiences into meal choices, which led to an increased uptake of menu options. Grantees also mentioned promoting better understanding of the agricultural system (such as recycling and composting), and discussing food sovereignty in schools and communities (such as exploring how farm to school efforts could align with Native community values and initiatives).

Collaboration on project activities was instrumental for project success. Grantees collaborated with a range of partners, including schools and school districts, supply chain businesses, local chefs, food banks, nonprofit organizations, and government entities (local, State, and federal). Over half of grantees reported receiving support and collaboration weekly or every other week from nutrition services, teachers, and students. Close to 80 percent of grantees worked with

“Working with local farmers, food hubs, and distributors in this way has led to identifying and developing procurement and delivery expansion opportunities such as expanding the list of farmers who want to work with districts giving them the ability to fill the needs of their menus.”

³ Percentages in this report were calculated based on FY 2018 and FY 2019 grantees who completed the question in their reports. For most questions, data were available from about 150 to 180 of the 199 grantees.

farmers and producers, kitchen staff, USDA FNS, district or school administrators, and nonprofits on a monthly or quarterly basis.

According to grantees, the **partners most important to reaching project objectives were: (1) nutrition services management and administrative staff, (2) teachers, (3) farmers and producers, (4) nonprofit organizations, and (5) students.**



Collaborations increased participants’ technical expertise through sharing of best practices and information on what could be locally procured with more ease. Working with partners also facilitated greater staff and student buy-in for farm to school and allowed grantees to advance their farm to school programming.

Grantees networked with each other through opportunities and resources provided by USDA FNS, such as the annual in-person training for new Farm to School Grant Program awardees and regular webinars. Grantees were able to see successful examples of other grantees’

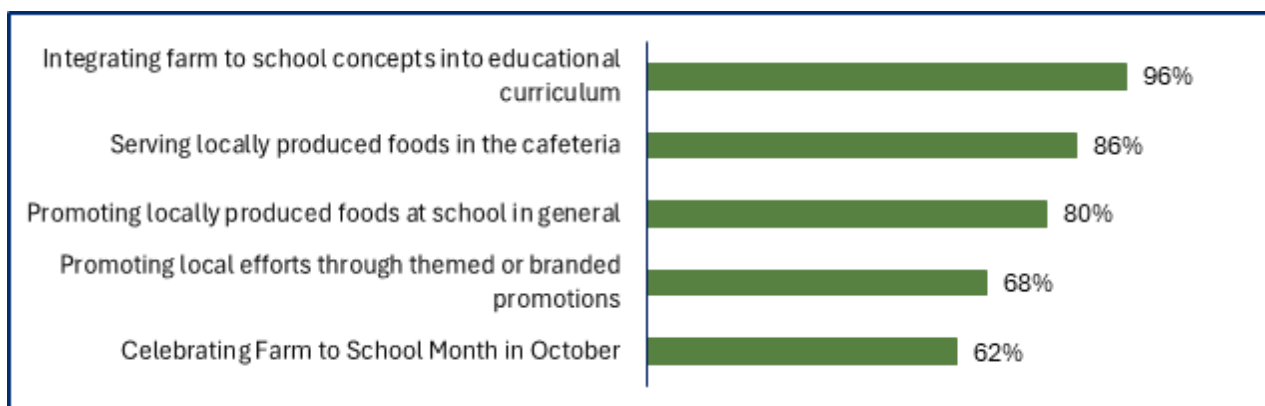
projects and use what they learned to design and improve their own programming, solve problems, and connect with grantees doing similar work. Grantees leveraged these relationships to support their grant projects and to network for future opportunities.

Most grantees succeeded in achieving their project goals, many adapting to the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Grantees designed their projects and were awarded their funding prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and they were allowed to shift their goals in response to the widespread disruption caused by the pandemic. They found creative ways to implement their new goals despite the challenges they faced. Even under the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, 61 percent (n=113) said they completed all their project goals.

Activities

The most common activities grantees employed to reach their goals were integrating farm to school concepts into the educational curriculum (96 percent, n=133), serving locally produced foods at school (86 percent, n=149), and promoting locally produced foods at school (80 percent, n=146; Figure 2). Topics incorporated into curriculum included where our food comes from, plant and animal production, nutrition education and healthy eating, and environmental sustainability (such as composting, recycling, and resource use). Promoting locally produced foods at school included using USDA branded promotions (for example, Harvest of the Month) and creating their own digital or physical materials (such as photos, logos, videos, handouts, posters, or table tents) for social media postings or school display.

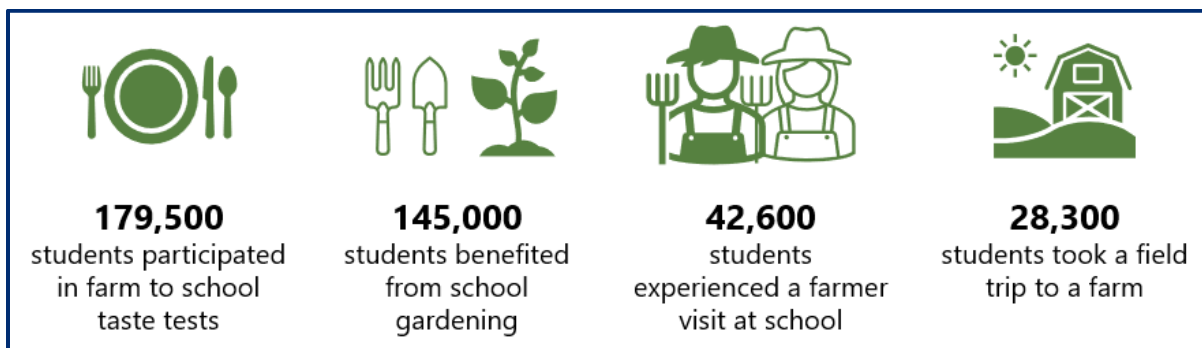
Figure 2. Most common grantee activities (n=133–149)



Almost all grantees incorporated local foods into school lunches (94 percent). In addition, schools served local foods to students for breakfast (81 percent) and in summer meals (70 percent). The local foods were most likely to be procured directly from local farms and producers rather than through an intermediary, such as a distributor or food service management company.

Grantees also created or expanded school gardens or farms, which included building gardens and greenhouses to grow and distribute produce to other schools, partners, and community members. At least **145,000 students benefitted from conducting edible school gardening or orchard activities as part of a school curriculum or after school program** (n=147; Figure 3). Gardens were used to source cafeteria food as well as for classroom lessons. For example, one grantee shared how students grew beets and sweet potatoes in their school garden. They learned how to grow and prepare these foods and about their nutritional value. Students were also able to taste test fries made from beets and sweet potatoes. Many grantees planned field trips to farms, hosted family events, and developed logos and other branded items for school menus and cafeterias. Grantees were asked to report how many students at their site participated in these particular activities as a result of the ir projects. In total, grantees reported that at least **179,500 students experienced taste tests** (n=149); **42,600 experienced a farmer visit to their school** (n=139); and **28,300 took a field trip to a farm** (n=142) because of their projects (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Estimated minimum number of students benefiting from various farm to school activities (n=139–149)



Many grantees achieved their goals for local food procurement, often by (1) finding sources of local products through farmers and supply chain operators; (2) educating school staff on using local foods; and (3) connecting schools and partners with local farms and producers. In response to COVID-19 school closures, some grantees shifted to providing boxes and kits with fresh local food produce for families.

Farm to school projects frequently focused on training: **at least 4,700 teachers** (n=160), **4,500 food service staff** (n=164), and **1,100 farmers** (n=168) **were trained as part of the grant projects**. Training was common among all grantees, including but not limited to those focused on planning and implementation. The most common training topics for teachers were **agriculture education** (65 percent, n=84), **gardening skills** (65 percent, n=84), and **nutrition education** (60 percent, n=77). Training areas for food service staff included **promoting local foods** (68 percent, n=93), participating in **farm to school curricular activities** (57 percent, n=78), **preparing whole fruits and vegetables** (55 percent, n=75), and **food handling and safety** (53 percent, n=72). For example, one grantee organized a one-day farm to school training for producers, school food service professionals, administrators, government officials, and other interested organizations — more than 100 farm to school stakeholders attended and learned about wholesale readiness and culinary education.

Challenges

Grantees used various strategies to address the challenges they faced. The COVID-19 pandemic posed problems for grantees whose grants covered school year (SY) 2019–2020 and 2020–2021. Most grantees had to either conduct activities in another format (such as virtual programming or training) or postpone their activities because of social distancing, school closures, and supplier delays. For some grantees, switching activities or postponing them had ripple effects on their budgets and already tight timelines. Similarly, some grants relied on corporate and community volunteers—grantees experienced a loss of key staff coverage both when sites and schools

closed during the pandemic and could no longer accommodate in-person volunteers, as well as when people who normally would have volunteered with their companies began to work from home.

Grantees also faced procurement challenges, largely related to supply chain issues and finding local vendors with enough supply. For instance, some grantees experienced delivery delays or encountered procurement issues related to extreme weather. Other grantees found that their traditional vendors did not offer many options for locally sourced produce or found it difficult to find local or regional farms that were willing and able to sell produce to school districts. Of note, some schools' demand for local produce was much greater than their gardens could produce and that smaller local farms could provide. Relatively few grantees reported that their procurement challenges were related to policies and processes around purchasing (such as rules about approved vendors or policies set by food service directors).



Many grantees had difficulties securing support for the project across staff (such as administrators, teachers, and food service employees), students, and the community. For example, some grantees had to remove sites because of staff turnover and lack of interest, others struggled to get food service staff to try new recipes, and a few experienced staff challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic (such as hiring freezes). However, while it was challenging to get staff to support and participate in grant activities, grantees often found that students were generally receptive. Though some students were less interested in project activities than others, and the COVID-19 pandemic hampered the ability of students to participate in-person and as intended, students largely seemed receptive to local foods when repeatedly exposed to them, and they were excited about new recipes, garden days, and other farm to school activities.

Although some grantees faced challenges related to partnerships, far more **leveraged their partnerships** to address challenges they encountered. Grantees used feedback from partners and stakeholders to rapidly pivot and develop **alternative approaches for activities** to meet the needs of their project when the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuing public health guidelines, or other circumstances affected their plans. For example, they found partners and staff to help provide home food deliveries.

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“COVID-19 was a massive and unprecedented disruptor to nearly every component of this work. Flexibility, fortitude, and good working relationships enabled ongoing farm to school activities. Because of the profound impact on school food service, local procurement took a backburner to the adaptation required to feed a student body that was no longer housed in the school.”

Program sustainability

Program sustainability is an important consideration for Farm to School grantees. Ensuring that programming continues beyond the grant period is a key concern of Farm to School grantees, as well as USDA FNS. Several grantees said they used funding from their school district, community partners, State partners, and other funding streams beyond their grant funds to support their farm to school efforts. For example, one grantee noted that the successes of their grant project inspired major outside donations and increased investment from school districts to support future farm to school activities. Another grantee noted that they built infrastructure (such as curricula, building upgrades, and outdoor kitchen spaces) through their grant that will allow them to continue these activities in the future. Grantees also described how the partnerships they developed could be used to support project sustainability and longevity.

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“As a result of the investment from this Farm to School grant, [our school district] is continuing this model by scaling it up to 10 schools in the [upcoming] school year and directing a portion of its Food and Nutrition Services budget [...] to fund scratch-cooking support in 10 elementary schools in collaboration with [local partners].”

In addition to leveraging partnerships to support sustainability, grantees shared that their experiences in the Farm to School Grant Program encouraged them to establish new policies, processes, and infrastructure within their organizations to further integrate farm to school activities. While it is unclear if the grant directly influenced these outcomes, nearly half (41 percent) of grantees’ schools or districts reported having procurement policies that supported their acquisition of local food at the end of the grant, which could indicate a commitment from the school or district to maintain these efforts.

Conclusion

Findings from the 2018 and 2019 grantee reports show that Farm to School grants are important resources that supported a wide range of farm to school activities, bringing local foods and knowledge to schools and communities across the country. Students benefited from hands-on education on nutrition and healthy foods, gardening, plant and animal production, recycling, composting, and sourcing local foods. Schools and local producers developed the infrastructure to bring local foods to cafeterias, and nutrition and cooking staff learned new ways to incorporate these foods into school meals. Parents and community members were also engaged in events, evoking support and enthusiasm beyond the school setting. Grantees were largely able to accomplish their project objectives, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Fostering and building new partnerships (for example, with community organizations and local food producers and distributors) were central to this success. Grantees used Farm to School Grant Program resources and technical assistance materials to achieve project goals and learn about different components of farm to school, such as procurement methods. In addition, grantee gatherings and webinars offered an opportunity for networking and sharing best practices. Grantees expressed enthusiasm about continuing to build on the infrastructure put into place during their farm to school projects and their accomplishments, and exploring partnerships, adopting policies, and securing funding streams that will enable them to grow and sustain their impacts moving forward.

