

FARM TO SCHOOL GRANTEE REPORT (SUMMARY)

Background

Under Section 18 of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) competitively awards Farm to School Grants to schools, school food authorities (SFAs), State or local agencies, Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs), agricultural producers, and nonprofit organizations to plan, develop, and implement farm to school programs. Farm to school activities might include local and regional food procurement efforts; hands-on learning activities such as school gardening, farm visits, and culinary classes; or integration of food and agriculture-related education into the regular curriculum. Each year since 2013, USDA has provided between 68 and 126 Farm to School Grants, totaling \$5 to \$10 million per year. Each grant is awarded for 12 to 24 months.

The Farm to School Grantee Report is part of a larger USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) review of farm to school efforts since 2010. The report's objectives are to (1) describe the economic contribution of farm to school programs; (2) assess the impacts of farm to school efforts on food growing, serving, and purchasing at the SFA level; (3) describe how farm to school activities have affected changes in policy, systems, or structure; and (4) analyze the outcomes associated with the USDA Farm to School Grant Program.

Methods

This report analyzed responses to selected questions that are part of requirements in baseline, progress, and final reports submitted to USDA by 365 farm to school grantees who received awards in fiscal years (FY) 2013–2017. These grantees represent all 50 States, Washington D.C., Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, serving

approximately 13 million students at over 29,000 schools.

To analyze change over the grant period, we draw on data from 133 grantees (awarded in FY 2015–2017) that submitted both a baseline and a final report. To understand grantee experiences throughout the grant period, the study team analyzed responses to close-ended survey questions from all progress reports submitted by 218 grantees (awarded in FY 2014–2017). Additionally, the study team analyzed open-ended responses from select progress and final reports from 365 grantees (awarded in FY 2013–2017).

Changes to the grantee reporting template over the years and across grant types resulted in some questions not posed to all grantees, which is why some results are not presented as percentages. The study team examined change over the grant period using 133 grantees that submitted both a baseline and final report in the FY 2015–2017 cohorts. Additionally, because grantees may have implemented some activities even in absence of the grant, changes over time should not be directly attributed to the Farm to School Grants.

Findings

Among the FY 2015–2017 Farm to School grantees, almost all reported that their partner schools served local foods in their cafeterias.

Definitions of “local” varied among grantees; almost half of those grantees (47 percent) defined local foods as those produced within the State. Additionally, approximately one-fourth (27 percent) reported that schools or school districts define “local” food as produced within the region.¹ Grantees reported that the percent of spending on locally sourced foods, not including fluid milk, increased from 6 percent to 11 percent over the grant period ($p < .10$). Schools and SFAs

¹ The definition of *region* was left open to interpretation by grantees in the reporting templates.

worked with both direct and intermediary suppliers to source these local foods.

Grantees implemented a range of activities focused on local foods, including using school garden produce in school meals and cooking from scratch. Many grantees (115 grantees) reported working with at least one school or community garden. Nearly two-thirds of the FY 2015-2017 grantees (63 percent) reported that their schools and school districts incorporated products from their school-based garden or farm in cafeteria offerings by the end of the grant period. The proportion of grantees that reported that schools served meals prepared from scratch more than 25 percent of the time increased from 31 percent at the beginning of the grant period to 44 percent at the end ($p < .05$).

Grantees used a variety of strategies to promote local foods, including taste tests (110 grantees), field trips (90 grantees), farmer visits to schools (60 grantees), and participated in Farm to School Month (82 grantees). Ninety-seven of 133 grantees reported that they integrated farm to school concepts into their mathematics, science, and language arts curricula, and 99 grantees aligned their nutrition curriculum with national or State standards. About 80 percent of 57 grantees reported that students were enthusiastic about trying new foods.

FY 2015-2017 grantees reported an increase in school and school district policies supporting farm to school efforts and reported the activities would continue beyond the grant period. By the end of the grant period, more grantees noted that their partner schools or school districts had policies related to wellness, local procurement, and/or fundraising that supported farm to school. Almost all grantees (91 percent) reported that grant funds were sufficient for meeting the project goals; they also reported the most beneficial training to receive would be focused on additional resources to ensure sustainability (59 percent). Grantees frequently cited the importance of garnering the general community's support and

developing and nurturing relationships with food suppliers and school district stakeholders to sustain farm to school efforts beyond the grant period.

Grantees built relationships with stakeholders by engaging them in farm to school activities and providing training opportunities. By the end of the grant period, grantees reported increased engagement of key stakeholders from (1) schools and school districts; (2) the supply chain, including farmers and producers; and (3) community, higher education, nonprofit organizations, and local government. On average, the percentage of grantees reporting engagement with farmers and producers increased from 77 to 89 percent over the grant period, and the percentage of grantees reporting engagement with students increased from 73 to 92 percent. Grantees indicated the importance of coordination and communication with partners, consideration of staff and partner capacity and enthusiasm, flexibility and creativity, and setting reasonable expectations and goals. Grantees also provided training for food service staff, food suppliers, teachers, students, and/or community members, focusing on topics such as promotion of local foods, preparation of fresh fruits and vegetables, and food handling and safety.

Grantees recommended improving the Farm to School Grant Program by providing more guidance in key areas and additional opportunities to connect with one another. Grantees suggested that the USDA consider providing additional guidance on the following: financial reporting; how to secure funding to sustain program efforts; and divergent timelines when working with multiple schools or districts. Grantees also suggested that USDA extend the time allotted for projects, align the grant period with the school year, offer more opportunities for grantees to connect with one another; and provide access to pre-developed curriculum and activities.

For More Information

Bobronnikov, E. et al. (2021). Farm to School Grantee Report. Prepared by Abt Associates, Contract No. AG-3198-B-16-0015. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Ashley Chaifetz. Available online at: www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.