



United States Department of Agriculture

# THE FARM *to* SCHOOL PROGRAM

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2012-2015: Four Years in Review

# INTRODUCTION

While USDA has been engaged in farm to school efforts for a number of years, the Department's Farm to School Program was formally established with the passage of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which directed the Secretary to "carry out a program to assist eligible schools, State and local agencies, Indian tribal organizations, agricultural producers or groups of agricultural producers, and non-profit entities through grants and technical assistance to implement farm to school programs that improve access to local foods in eligible schools." This report records the Program's major activities over the past several years in four different areas: Staffing; Training and Technical Assistance; Research; and Grant Making.

At its inception, the USDA Farm to School Program (referred to in this document as "the Program") focused primarily on incorporating local foods into the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs. Four years later, our portfolio is expanding to include the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and an emphasis on helping tribal communities incorporate traditional foods into child nutrition programs. Within USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), work under this broader purview will be conducted from a new Office of Community Food Systems (OCFS), announced at the beginning of fiscal year (FY) 2016.

As we settle into this new office, the timing seems appropriate to document our early accomplishments and invite feedback from our colleagues at USDA, other federal partners, and the many external stakeholders impacted by our work.

We welcome your input at  
[farmtoschool@fns.usda.gov](mailto:farmtoschool@fns.usda.gov).

YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE

Simply put, “farm to school” refers to efforts that bring locally or regionally produced foods into school cafeterias; hands-on learning activities such as school gardening, farm visits, and culinary classes; and the integration of food-related education into the regular, standards-based classroom curriculum.

**FOLLOWING IS A RECORD OF THE PROGRAM'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN FOUR DIFFERENT AREAS:**



**Staffing**



**Training and Technical Assistance**



**Research**



**Grant Making**



# STAFFING

Permanent, full time staff were first hired for the Farm to School Program in January 2012. The Program relies on these individuals to plan, sequence and implement a large portfolio of activities, outlined in detail throughout this document. The accomplishments described on the following pages, however, would not have been possible without the support and involvement of numerous FNS and USDA staff and external partners. This support and investment has come from all levels, from Program Analysts to the Secretary of Agriculture. Similarly, investment in this work has spanned agencies within USDA, from the Economic Research Service to Rural Development, to the Agricultural Marketing Service and National Institute of Food and Agriculture. While our dedicated team is small, our support network is large.

7

regional  
leads

1

office of community  
food systems

6

national  
staff

countless USDA colleagues and external  
partners who enthusiastically support this work  
– Thank You!



## National staffing

The Program is staffed by six employees of FNS's national office, who focus on training, technical assistance, grant program administration and research at the national level. Other USDA staff also actively support efforts to bring more local foods into USDA's child nutrition programs. As such, Program staff collaborate regularly with FNS colleagues to discuss policy issues, clarify guidance and develop technical assistance materials and trainings for program operators and state agencies, and with a host of other colleagues throughout USDA.

## Regional staffing

Prior to 2014, the Program was supported by seven .25 to .5 Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) in each regional office. As FNS's engagement with farm to school deepened, more regional support became necessary. Beginning in January 2014, each of the seven FNS regional offices hired a full time farm to school regional lead. The leads are resident experts who are deeply engaged in farm to school activities taking place in their respective regions; each also pursues

an area of expertise (such as school gardens, farm to preschool, or tribal programs) with a national scope. The regional leads are often seen as the face of the Program as they develop relationships with state agencies, regional partners, school districts and even producers.

In addition to expanding FNS's reach with outside partners, the regional leads help educate FNS staff and provide opportunities to discuss community food systems within their offices. For example, four regional offices now have Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food workgroups, three of which are co-led by farm to school regional leads. The work of these groups varies; some are focused on professional development and have invited guest speakers, and others have jumped into more programmatic work like exploring connections between SNAP-Ed and farm to school. All seven regional leads have organized "Out and About" events to share farm to school experiences with their colleagues. Through regional office engagement, the Program has been able to reach an incredibly broad audience, influence change at state and local levels, and further engage USDA colleagues.



## Cross Program Alignment in the Northeast

FNS Regional Offices house staff across each of the Agency's 15 federal nutrition programs. Just as USDA's Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative connects various USDA agencies, regional workgroups connect staff and align priorities across the various FNS programs that each regional office oversees. The Northeast Region was the first to create a regional Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food workgroup, with members representing the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and SNAP-Ed, WIC, School Nutrition Programs, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). This group fosters awareness of the role that FNS programs play in community food systems through staff education, professional development, and routine internal communication, ensuring that access to local foods is considered in the development of goals and priorities for all FNS regional staff in the Northeast.

## **Exploring Connections between Farm to School and SNAP-Ed**

The Western regional lead has worked closely with SNAP-Ed colleagues to identify opportunities to collaborate and align promotion and technical assistance efforts. SNAP-Ed is an FNS funded program that aims to increase the likelihood that people eligible for SNAP will make healthy food choices within a limited budget and lead physically active lives through nutrition education, social marketing and public health strategies in community settings. From curriculum integration in school gardens to procurement policy changes in the cafeteria, farm to school strategies undoubtedly complement SNAP-Ed efforts and SNAP-Ed funding can assist with farm to school goals. Thus, the Western Region is working to increase communication between state and local SNAP-Ed and farm to school stakeholders to reduce duplication and amplify results.

# TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Providing technical assistance is a key part of USDA's congressional mandate to support access to local foods. To this end, the Program has developed fact sheets, guides, and policy memos, and regional and national staff members have given countless trainings and presentations on topics that range from the very basic to the highly technical. Following is a catalog of this work.

12

fact sheets

7

policy memos

43

USDA blog posts

97%

of participants gained new knowledge

32

webinars conducted



24,834

subsequent online views

157

conferences attended



99

procurement trainings

304

presentations given



6

best practice videos

set up the tradeshow booth

45 times

20,259

e-letter subscribers



104

e-letters sent





## Fact Sheets

Over the past three years, we have published 12 fact sheets on topics ranging from using the Department of Defense Fresh Program (DoD Fresh) to purchase local foods to how Cooperative Extension professionals can support farm to school. These materials are distributed digitally on our website and in print at conferences and other events. The fact sheets are representative of the broad portfolio of the Program and illustrate the diverse stakeholders engaged in farm to school. These fact sheets are relatively unique in that many offer regulatory information alongside real life examples in a friendly format.

- **Farm to Preschool: Local Food and Learning in Early Childcare and Education Settings**
- **Farm to Summer: Why Summer Meal Programs are Ripe for Local Foods and Agriculture Based Activities**
- **Decision Tree: How Will You Bring Local Foods into the Cafeteria with Your Next School Food Purchase?**
- **Geographic Preference: What It Is and How To Use It**
- **USDA Farm to School Grant Program**
- **10 Facts About Local Food in Schools**
- **USDA Foods: A Resource for Buying Local**
- **Using DoD Fresh to Buy Local**
- **Selling Local Food to Schools: A Resource for Producers**
- **Local Meat in Schools: Increasing Opportunities for Small and Mid-Sized Livestock Ranchers and Fishermen**
- **How Cooperative Extension Professionals Can Support Farm to School Programs**
- **USDA Grants and Loans that Support Farm to School Activities**



## Policy Guidance

The Program has helped to author and release a number of policy memos aimed at clarifying regulations and allowable costs related to farm to school activities. Memoranda are the avenue FNS uses to establish policies and answer detailed regulatory questions. These memos have a long shelf-life and once one is published it remains program policy until a new regulation or memo supersedes it.

While writing and publishing these documents is a team effort, below is a list of the policy memos that the Program has spearheaded:

- ***Procuring local meat, poultry, game and eggs for Child Nutrition Programs (SP01-2016, CACFP01-2016, SFSP01-2016)*** – outlines the federal inspection requirements for livestock, poultry, game and produce served in CNPs.
- ***Traditional Foods in the Child Nutrition Programs (TA 01-2015)*** – clarifies that FNS supports serving traditional foods in CNPs.
- ***Use of State Administrative Expense (SAE) Funds and State Administrative Funds (SAF) for Farm to School Related Expenses (SP 28-2015)*** – highlights how SAE and SAF funds can be used to support farm to school expenses.
- ***Local Foods in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP 11-2015)*** – outlines FNS support for farm to preschool efforts.
- ***Farm to School and School Garden Expenses (SP 06 -2015)*** – underscores the opportunities that program operators have to use funds for farm to school and school garden costs.
- ***Procurement Geographic Preference Q&As Part II (SP 03-2013, CACFP 02-2013, SFSP 02-2013)*** – further explains nuances related to using geographic preference when purchasing local foods.



For all of us who care about school wellness, this memo is about more than the specifics of funding rules. It represents an important milestone in the effort to support healthy school food and nutrition education, and a culture shift – both in the federal government and in our society as a whole – in valuing knowledge and education about where and how our food is grown. It’s about recognizing the power and joy of planting, pulling, preparing and devouring your very own carrot. – Healthy Schools Campaign, about the School Garden Memo

# Making an Impact in Midwest Tribal Communities

The Midwest farm to school lead represented FNS at a meeting hosted by the Wisconsin Secretary of Agriculture about incorporating traditional foods donated into the child nutrition programs. Following the meeting, FNS issued a memo clarifying the allowability of serving traditional foods in child nutrition programs (CNPs). The memo was sent to the Wisconsin Secretary of Agriculture and was received with gratitude; it is now being used to enhance the number and types of traditional foods served in federal feeding programs within tribal lands of Wisconsin.





## Integration Throughout Child Nutrition Program Guidance

As important as policy memos are to the operation of child nutrition programs, FNS also influences and directs child nutrition program practices through other vehicles. As such, the Program seeks to support Agency priorities by embedding farm to school principles and practices in as many resources as possible. For example, farm to school criteria are now included in the [Healthier US School Challenge](#) application. Feedback related to farm to school content was also provided on the 5th and 6th grade curriculum [Dig In](#) and the 3rd and 4th grade curriculum [The Garden Detective](#). Local food systems themes are included in the [Team Nutrition Popular Events Idea Booklet](#); farm to school programming information was added to the [SNAP-Ed Intervention Toolkit](#); and farm to school questions have been added to guidance for management evaluations of state agency operations for NSLP and SBP.

## E-letter and Website

The bi-weekly USDA Farm to School E-letter shares news, resources, and stories relevant to food service professionals and other farm to school practitioners. **Over the past four years, our subscriber list has grown from 5,000 to more than 20,000.** The Program also maintains a host of pages on the FNS website, including those for the USDA Farm to School Census. In the first half of 2015, our pages received about 75,000 visits and 200,000 page views. We also make regular contributions to USDA's blog and have published 43 posts over the past four years.







## Guides

### USDA Farm to School Toolkit

Our 11-part Farm to School Toolkit was developed to help the first class of planning grantees create a strategic plan; it has since been released publicly. The Toolkit consists of distinct chapters that school districts can work through when designing a new program or refining existing efforts to buy local foods, build school gardens, train staff, market healthy choices, etc. Each of the modules presents a series of questions and resources; users move at their own pace and pick and choose the modules most appropriate for them.

### Guide to Buying Local

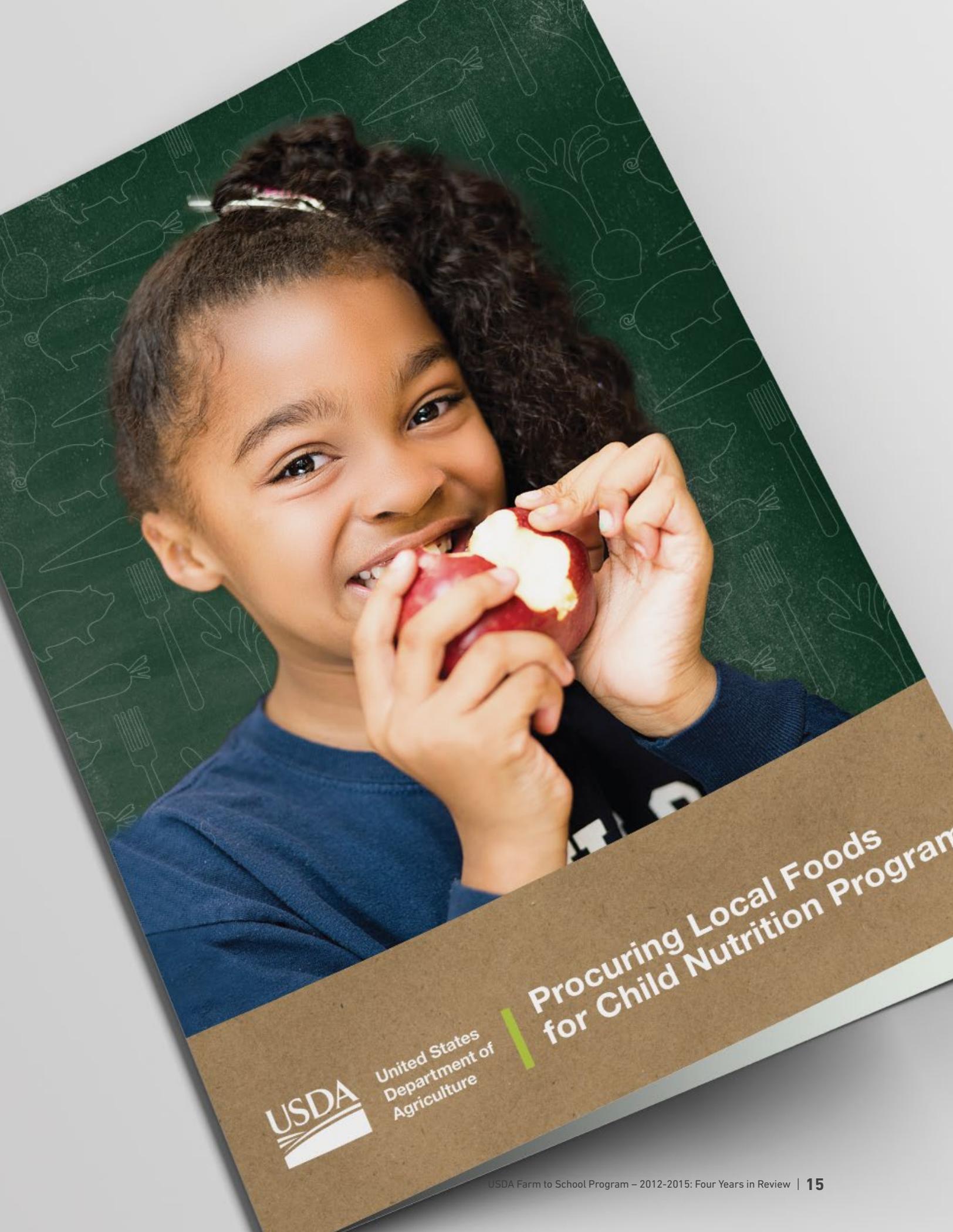
*Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Programs* represents the first-ever comprehensive documentation of the different ways schools can buy local foods in accordance with federal regulations. The guide was first released in March 2014 and was revised in August 2015 to incorporate lessons learned and highlight best practices. Throughout the guide, examples illustrate the many mechanisms available for districts to procure local food. The appendices include a comprehensive resource list and sample solicitations.



### The Farm to School Planning Toolkit

The toolkit Guides users through questions to consider and helpful resources to reference when starting or growing a farm to school program.





United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

## Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Programs



## Food Distribution Projects

### Increasing Transparency in USDA Foods

In November 2012, the Program collaborated with Food Distribution staff to hold a USDA Foods Stakeholder Meeting and supported the development of the resulting action plan. The need for this meeting stemmed from several congressional and advocate inquiries about alternatives to USDA Foods, such as receiving cash in lieu of commodities. Many of the stakeholders asking for increased transparency and local options through USDA Foods were organizations and congressional leaders supportive of farm to school. The meeting gathered a group of advocates from various organizations such as the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) and School Food FOCUS, state agencies and school districts to discuss opportunities for improvements in USDA Foods and clarify how and when geographic preference can be used. The resulting action plan included commitments to explore more opportunities to source local foods through DoD Fresh and provide more information on where USDA Foods are produced.

As a result of the stakeholder meeting, Program staff worked with Food Distribution, the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and the Farm Service Agency (FSA) to compile a comprehensive list of purchases made for USDA Foods that shows the state of origin for each product. These state of origin reports are cataloged by fiscal year, along with contact information for all qualified vendors, and are available on the [Food Distribution website](#).

### Coordination with DoD Fresh

The Program continues to work with our Food Distribution colleagues to make sure all DoD

Fresh vendors are providing schools with as much local produce as possible. To this end, FNS is in the process of updating the Interagency Agreement between USDA and DoD to reflect USDA's interest in local sourcing. In the future, all DoD Fresh vendors will be asked to submit a local foods buying plan, and farm to school personnel will provide training and technical assistance to vendors regarding local purchasing. In addition, a column for the state of origin of products was added to the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Order and Receipt System (FFAVORS) in July 2014 and vendors are asked to list the state of origin for all products in the catalog, enabling schools to know where produce is coming from when they are placing orders. At this time, listing the state of origin is optional, however, as new contracts are solicited, vendors will be required to list the state of origin for all products in the FFAVORS catalog. The Program was also able to post DoD Fresh contract information on the [Food Distribution website](#) to provide more transparency and better connect interested parties.

### Pilot Project for Procurement of Unprocessed Fruits and Vegetables

The 2014 Farm Bill authorized the Pilot Project for Procurement of Unprocessed Fruits and Vegetables, which offers a new avenue for participating states to use USDA Foods entitlement dollars. Program staff have worked closely with Food Distribution and Agricultural Marketing Service staff to develop all aspects of the pilot, from the request for applications from state agencies to webinars and calls for participating states. As of June 2015, five of the eight participating states have received over \$600,000 in deliveries, much of this coming from local producers.

## Loving Local in the Midwest

The Midwest regional lead initiated a meeting with the DoD vendor that serves schools in Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin that had been struggling to meet the local food desires and quality standards of school clients. By providing technical assistance, resources and connections, the regional lead was able to help the vendor improve its level of service and food quality for participating school districts.





## Videos and Webinars

Videos and webinars are an engaging way for the Program to deliver information to a large audience. Over the past several years, we have hosted numerous well-attended webinar series and created a host of videos highlighting tips and best practices from USDA Farm to School Grantees.

### **Webinar Series: Partnering with Cooperative Extension to Support Farm to School**

From September 2013 to March 2014, the Program held a four-part webinar series highlighting the ways in which Cooperative Extension professionals can support farm to school activities and evaluation. Each of the webinars showcased Cooperative Extension professionals from across the country that are engaged in farm to school work. This series dug deep into the role Cooperative Extension can and does play in farm to school efforts, enjoyed robust attendance, and has received nearly 1,000 after-the-fact views online.

### **Webinar Series: Finding, Buying, and Serving Local Foods**

From January through June 2014, the Program hosted two webinars each month to showcase the variety of ways school districts can purchase local foods. More than 1,000 state agency, school district and non-profit colleagues tuned in for the series, and feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with nearly 100% of respondents noting they learned something

new and ~95% reporting the webinars were useful to their work on procurement. Since posting online, the recordings have received more than 5,500 additional views. The series covered everything from procurement basics to geographic preference and buying local through a distributor.

### **Webinar Series: Growing Roots in Farm to School**

From January through June 2015, the Program hosted an 11-part webinar series to help participants build farm to school skills and develop new strategies for bringing local foods into child nutrition programs. This compilation brought the Farm to School Toolkit to life, following the Toolkit modules as a frame and offering context and examples. For this series, the Program partnered with the School Nutrition Association (SNA) to offer Continuing Education Units for webinar attendance. Listeners were appreciative of the series, which showed in the feedback; 94% reported gaining new knowledge and 95% noted the webinars were useful to their



**After the very first webinar in this series, I was so excited about it I had to go around my office and talk about it to everyone who would listen. Actually, that happened on multiple occasions. I feel like these webinars were strong partly because of a combination of their specificity and broad applicability. I will definitely be using the knowledge I gained for a long time to come.**

work. The live webinars were attended by more than 1,000 participants, and the recordings have received more than 2,000 views since posting.

### Healthy Habits Take Root Video Series

In 2014, the Program developed a series of videos on five different topics that featured USDA Farm to School Grantees sharing tips, stories, and best practices. The videos have collectively received nearly 11,000 online views, and have also been used in numerous presentations by farm to school staff.



**This call was great! I am so glad USDA is so engaged. It is so important to have this kind of leadership on a federal level, and also be able to have a great regional team!**

### In-Person Trainings

National and regional staff provide trainings on a variety of topics, in settings and to audiences that vary widely. Regional staff reach diverse audiences such as Future Farmers of America cohorts, producer organizations and native communities. Described below are a few of the larger events the Program has organized and participated in.

#### Buying Local Train-the-Trainers

Recognizing that there was considerable confusion regarding proper local procurement protocols, since 2013 the Program has invested resources both in training internal staff and

in training other trainers working at state agencies, non-profit organizations, Extension and the Institute for Child Nutrition (ICN).

This work culminated with the release of the guide, *Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Programs*, completion of the Finding, Buying, and Serving Local Foods webinar series, and two in-person train-the-trainer events in March 2014. The two trainings, one in Chicago and one in San Francisco, helped over 100 participants better understand how schools can buy locally in accordance with regulations. Participant

feedback at these sessions was overwhelmingly positive.



**I never thought spending two days in the basement of a federal building learning about procurement regulations could be so satisfying. But thanks to the dynamic USDA Farm to School team, it was that and so much more.**



## Procurement Training in the Northeast

The Northeast regional lead has conducted 14 procurement trainings since the launch of our Local Procurement Train-the-Trainer session. Trainings have ranged from one-one-one consulting, to small group discussions that address issues within a specific context, to formal presentations at large statewide and regional conferences. Participants have included food service directors, state agency program staff and directors, USDA staff, non-profit partners and advocates, Cooperative Extension, producers, distributors, food service management companies, administrators, and educators. Through this training and technical assistance, farm to school stakeholders in the Northeast have developed a fluency in the foundational principles of procurement, and have been introduced to several strategies and best practices in targeting local foods.

### Major Cities Symposium

In April 2015, the Program partnered with the Institute for Child Nutrition (ICN) to bring representatives from large districts (including New York City, Dallas, Chicago, Philadelphia, East Baton Rouge, Minneapolis, Detroit, San Diego, and many places in between) together to share how they are successfully using farm to school strategies to encourage increased consumption of healthy options during ICN's annual Major Cities Symposium. The gathering, called *Local Strategies for Healthy School Meals*, was held in San Diego, CA and stories of innovation flowed for two days as 34 major school districts compared notes and learned from one another. In addition to formal sessions, San Diego Unified School District, the second largest school district in California, hosted a very inspiring half day tour that included an overview of their local procurement practices,

menu testing, kitchen renovations, school gardens and efforts to integrate agriculture and nutrition education into the district's daily rhythm. Cindy Long, Associate Administrator of FNS' child nutrition programs, summed up the meeting nicely when she said, *"It is just so nice to be in a room full of people with positive stories to share."* Feedback from attendees indicates that 95% of respondents agree or strongly agree that the symposium was worth their time and 93% said they gained new knowledge about buying local foods.



**This symposium made buying local seem much more feasible & possible than it has appeared before.**





### **School Nutrition Association Conferences**

The Farm to School Program debuted a new tradeshow booth at the 2013 School Nutrition Association's Annual National Conference and has remained a part of USDA Lane for the 2014 and 2015 events. The booth brought a fun new element to the row of federal partners by hosting a photo opportunity, asking school nutrition professionals and other stakeholders how they are bringing the farm to school. Over the past three years, the Program has gathered countless great examples of innovation and commitment of school nutrition directors making this work a reality. Photos on the following page represent just a sample of the several hundred stories we heard about how school nutrition directors across the country are "bringing the farm to school." In addition to the annual tradeshow booth, the Program has presented several workshop sessions during SNA's annual event.

Regional leads also speak at many state-level SNA conferences, reaching food service directors and frontline staff who may have had little to no exposure to farm to school. For example, the Mountain Plains regional lead attended both Kansas's and Missouri's SNA conferences to provide a "Farm to School 101" session that addressed how farm to school can boost local economies, support farmers, enrich students' educational experiences, and improve school food service.

### **National Farm to Cafeteria Conferences**

The National Farm to School Network hosts a national conference every other year for a wide range of stakeholders engaged in farm to institution activities. The meeting presents an

opportunity for USDA to show high-level support for this work, network with regional counterparts, and deliver presentations with schools and states implementing farm to school strategies.

### **Institute for Child Nutrition's (ICN) Orientation to School Nutrition Management**

To support adoption of farm to school practices in general, the Program took advantage of FNS's relationship with ICN to permanently incorporate an introduction to farm to school into ICN's orientation for new food service managers, which is held many times each year.

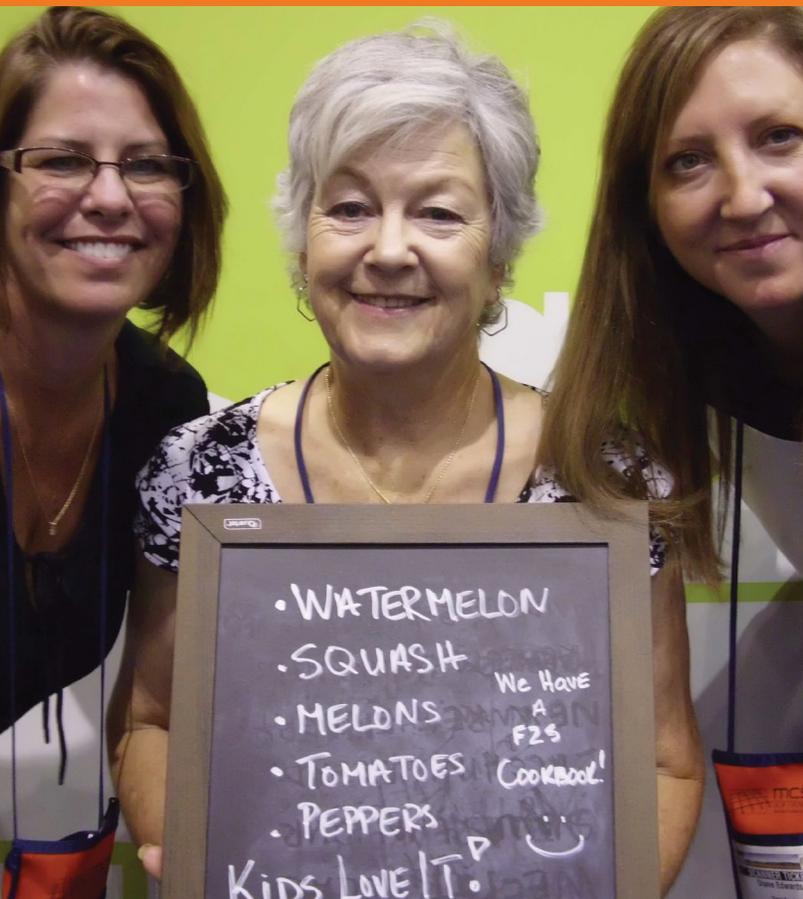
## **Farm to School in the Summer Food Service and Child and Adult Care Food Programs**

While not part of the farm to school team's initial focus, in order to encourage greater use of local foods in Summer Food Service Program and the Child and Adult Care Food Program, in October of 2014, FNS created a new working group comprising representatives from each of the seven regional offices to provide technical assistance and training regarding buying local food for SFSP and CACFP.

The [Summer Food Service Program Handbook](#) and the [CACFP Financial Management Instruction](#) provide the necessary guidance to program operators on how to run these programs and now included in these documents is specific information about farm to school and buying local foods. Program staff have also updated the [Summer Meals Toolkit](#) to include information on farm to school programming.

# Serving Up California Food to California Kids

As part of the Western Region's support for farm to summer efforts, staff assisted the Center for Ecoliteracy, a Berkeley-based non-profit and a Farm to School Support Service grantee, with coordinating a statewide California Thursdays Summer Meals day on July 23, 2015. Seven school districts, spanning 34 summer sites, committed to serving a California Thursdays meal comprised of locally grown, freshly prepared foods. Several of the districts also hosted successful events which helped spike participation numbers and remind families of the availability of free and tasty summer meals for youth 18 years old and younger throughout the summer. One school offered cooking demonstrations, an heirloom tomato "zoo" and served over 500 meals featuring local sausage, scratch-cooked salads, and fresh fruits.





## Partnerships

In addition to the more local partnerships forged by our regional leads (outlined in the following section), the Program collaborates extensively with other agencies, departments, and organizations at the national level. We work in partnership with staff from nearly every USDA agency as part of the national Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative run out of the Office of the Secretary, consult regularly with USDA's Office of Tribal Relations, and support initiatives like [StrikeForce](#), [Local Food](#), [Local Places](#), and the National Nutrition Council. Outside of government, we collaborate with groups like FoodCorps, the National Farm to School Network, School Food Focus, Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders, the Edible Schoolyard Project, the National School Garden Network, and Future Farmers of America, among others.

## GROWING LOCAL ROOTS

A key function of the Program is to communicate, coordinate, and collaborate with internal and external partners. Our regional leads ensure farm to school topics are integrated into state agency operations, offer technical assistance to partner organizations, and are integral in showing USDA's support for local programs. The summaries that follow illustrate just a handful of the ways that the regional leads have sown the seeds for farm to school to grow and thrive in their regions.



## Institutionalizing the Network in the Northeast

Farm to school grew over time in the Northeast region through a grassroots movement led by strong non-profit partnering organizations and pioneering school districts. The breadth of this network is a tremendous asset, and is the driving force behind the success of farm to school in the Northeast. However, formal state agency involvement in farm to school is limited, due to small agencies and limited staffing capacity. The Northeast regional lead continues to encourage state agency awareness and support of farm to school as well as strengthen relationships and communication channels between federal, state, and non-profit stakeholders. This has culminated in a burgeoning sub-network of identified state agency staff, and in school year 2015-16 will involve periodic inclusion in routine Northeast Regional Steering Committee communications. Expanded state agency participation is critical as the Northeast moves from several model school districts to widespread, habitual farm to school implementation and integration.



## **Constant Communication in the Southwest**

Over the past three years, the Southwest regional lead has formed strong connections with farm to school stakeholders in each of the five states in the region. Bi-monthly state calls take place in Arkansas, Louisiana, and New Mexico, while regular check-in calls are setup with Texas's and Oklahoma's farm to school coordinators housed within the Department of Agriculture. These calls are used as time for each organization to provide an update on what farm to school activities they have participated in troubleshoot state-based issues, and develop action plans that need collaborative support.

## **Farm-to-Fork Collaboration in California**

In collaboration with the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA), the Western Region co-hosted a federal-state Farm-to-Fork collaboration meeting in Sacramento, California for California State agencies and non-profit partners. Held in July 2015, this was the first meeting of its kind to help inform the development of statewide priorities for the CDFA Office of Farm-to-Fork. Over 50 representatives participated in a strategic asset mapping process to identify activities, resources, and gaps to better support access to local and regional foods, food policy, farmers market promotion, support for farmers, and farm to school. The group left with initial action steps to better coordinate efforts at the federal and state levels across multiple funding streams. The cross-program collaboration work continues under the auspices of the Region's newly formed cross-program Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food taskforce.



## Connecting with Federal Partners in the Southeast

Local Foods, Local Places is an interdepartmental initiative that works with communities to create walkable, healthy, economically vibrant neighborhoods through the development of local food systems. The program is supported by USDA Environmental Protection Agency, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Department of Transportation, the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Delta Regional Authority, and the White House Rural Council. The Southeast regional lead led the Local Foods, Local Places FNS technical assistance team in Kentucky, Alabama, and Tennessee, which culminated in a two-day workshop in a rural community in each state that brought together federal and state agencies with local stakeholders to identify strategies for enhancing livability through local foods. Each workshop resulted in an action plan laying out specific steps the community could take to achieve its goals.

## Impacting State Agencies in the Mountain Plains

In a region where farm to school adoption is relatively new, the Mountain Plains regional lead has focused on the basics – teaching about the advantages of farm to school practices and connecting partners at the state and regional level. The regional lead meets with the region’s state directors and FNS leadership on a monthly basis ensuring state agencies see support for farm to school at a high level and have access to all the resources they may need. Prior to 2014 only two states in the Mountain Plains (Colorado and Kansas) had farm to school coordinators at state agencies. Since the start of 2015, Nebraska, Utah, Wyoming and Missouri have hired a full- or part-time staff person dedicated to farm to school efforts!

# RESEARCH

Section 243 of the HHFKA instructs USDA to “collect and share information on best practices” and to “disseminate research and data on existing farm to school programs.” In its role as a researcher, the Program collects information via the Farm to School Census and documents outcomes and impacts through evaluation of the Farm to School Grant Program.

**42,173**

school districts  
bringing the farm  
to school in SY  
2013-2014

**\$598M**

dollars spent on  
local foods in SY  
2013-2014



**75%**

of school districts  
responded to the  
SY 2011-2012  
census

**2**

farm to school  
censuses  
conducted

**18,134**

school districts  
surveyed in 2015





## The USDA Farm to School Census

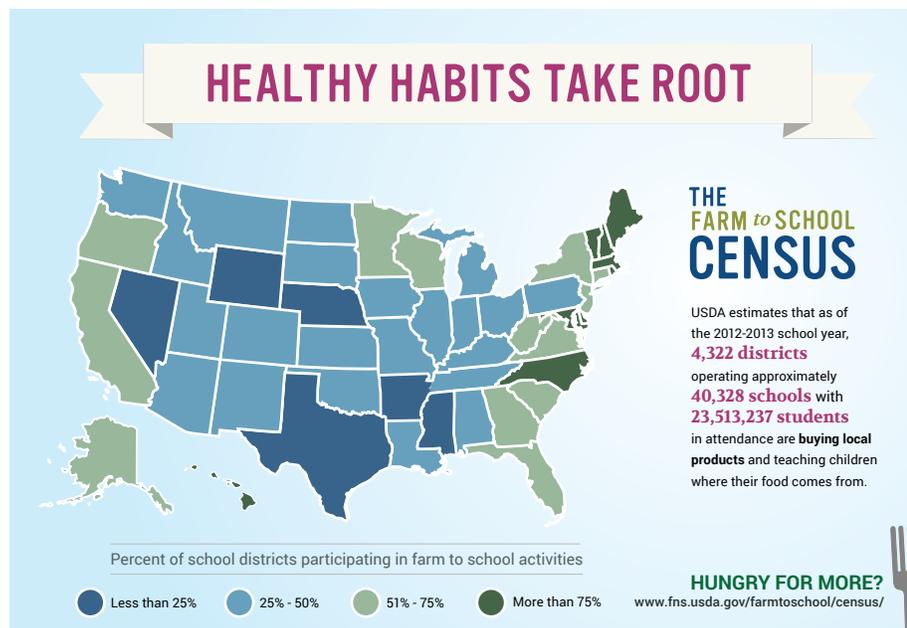
In order to establish realistic goals with regard to increasing the availability of local foods in schools and better understand the overall farm to school landscape, in 2013, USDA conducted the first nationwide Farm to School Census (the Census). Past studies about schools and school districts purchasing local food, developing and maintaining school gardens, and coordinating other farm to school activities have been mostly completed at the local, state or regional level. Until the execution of the Census in FY 2013, no comprehensive, uniform, national farm to school survey had been administered to schools in the U.S. The Census captures baseline information about the degree to which school districts are participating in farm to school activities, with an emphasis on gathering procurement data related to local sourcing, including the types and frequency of local products purchased, the percentage of overall food budget spent on local foods, and the degree to which local purchasing is expected to increase, stay the same, or decrease. The Census also documents the prevalence of other farm to school activities such as school gardens.

The overall participation rate for the 2013 Census was approximately 75% and included more than 9,800 responses from public school districts across the U.S. Results from the first Census were displayed through an engaging website that included national

and state-level data visualizations, three long-form infographics, a data explorer function, and two downloadable data files. The 2013 Census established a baseline by which changes in future Censuses can be measured.

In 2015, the Census survey instrument was revised to improve data collection. In addition to surveying public school districts, the 2015 Census was also sent to private and charter schools participating in the National School Lunch Program. Final results will be released in early 2016.

State and national results of the Census are routinely cited as evidence that farm to school programs are working to improve the nutrition and health of children and strengthen local and regional economies.





## Grantee Evaluation

The Program actively collects information about best practices and effective strategies for incorporating local food into the school cafeteria from the growing roster of USDA Farm to School Grantees. With assistance from an evaluation contractor, in FY 2014 USDA launched a multi-year evaluation plan to measure and describe outputs, outcomes and impacts of the Farm to School Grant Program.

In FY 2014, USDA also supported the development of a national farm to school evaluation framework by participating in an interdisciplinary group of prominent farm to school evaluation experts convened by the National Farm to School Network. This national framework, outlined in *Evaluation for Transformation*, focuses on summarizing priority farm to school outcomes, indicators and measures needing further investigation. To connect this group's work to USDA, this framework is being used as a conceptual model for USDA's evaluation of its grant projects. Adoption of this framework by USDA helps document and share impacts of farm to school in key areas including community economic development, public health, education, and the environment. Key outcome areas for USDA's evaluation include:

- Local and regional economic impact,
- Social capital built in school districts and the community,
- Institutional support for local and regional foods,
- Students and families access locally produced, healthy food through schools,
- Farm to school activities are aligned to Early Learning Framework, the Common Core, or state content standards to support student engagement and learning,
- Increase food literacy in students and adults in schools,
- Education policy and programs support farm to school activities, and
- Schools support environmentally friendly practices.

To help guide all evaluation activities, the Program established an evaluation advisory board made up of twelve experts from diverse disciplines that specialize in farm to school evaluation. The purpose of this advisory board is to represent external stakeholder interests, enhance coordination with related farm to school efforts, maximize credibility of the evaluation, promote methodological integrity, and encourage the use of findings. Advisors will play a key role in helping to summarize and disseminate outcomes and impacts.

An on-going goal of grant program evaluation efforts is to summarize outcomes and impacts through the use of standardized or common measures. To date, the Program has implemented the collection of common measures in progress reporting and in final reports. Additionally, in FY 2015, the Program implemented an initial baseline survey report that collects standardized information across all grantees, enabling USDA to document changes as a result of the grant project. Standardized measures track with the key areas identified in *Evaluation for Transformation*.



# GRANT MAKING



In accordance with its authorizing legislation, the USDA Farm to School Grant Program supports an array of activities and funds many types of stakeholders, with a particular emphasis on projects that demonstrate innovation in the area of local foods supply chain development and procurement.

Eligible applicants include school districts, state and local agencies, non-profit organizations, Indian tribal organizations, and agricultural producers. Offering grants directly to program operators allows the Program to have direct contact with those implementing farm to school activities and to provide more hands-on technical assistance. In its three year history, the Farm to School Grant Program has awarded \$15.1 million in funds to 221 applicants. Fifty-three percent of awards were made to schools and school districts and grants have been given in 49 States, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Funded projects are estimated to reach approximately 12,300 schools and involve an estimated 6.9 million students in farm to school activities.

An overview of the grant program and detailed information about the first three years of grant-making can be found in the [FY 2013-15 Summary of Grant Awards](#).



102

grantee site visits

3

grantee gatherings hosted

6.9M

students are reached through activities funded by USDA's farm to school grant program



221

projects in 49 states + DC, VI

126

to schools or school districts

5

to indian tribal organizations

2

to agricultural producers

20

to local or state agencies

6

to universities, colleges or cooperative extension

62

to non-profits



\$78.4

in requested funding

\$15.1M

in grants awarded



1067

applications received



## Administration

The Program has implemented a number of innovative practices in the area of program administration that have both improved the grantee experience and also streamlined the Program's process. We have also solicited feedback from applicants and grantees often and adjusted our operations to ensure the best experience possible. Below is a list of changes and successes in the realm of grant administration:

- The RFA is released in the late winter or early spring in advance of the next fiscal year, enabling the Program to award grants at the beginning of the fiscal year as soon as funding is available.
- The Farm to School Grant Program was the first at FNS to implement a paperless review system, which was first used during the FY 2014 grant reviews.
- In order to engage more qualified reviewers with farm to school experience and improve the integrity of the review process, the Program reached out to outside experts to review FY 2015 grant applications.
- Starting in October 2014, the Program launched a new online progress reporting system that enables staff to more easily collect and collate responses, identify trends, and monitor grantee progress.
- Grantees are invited to participate in anonymous online surveys both in the middle and at the end of each grant year. In general, survey findings reveal that grantees are satisfied with the level of support from the USDA Farm to School Program, regardless of funding year or grant type.
- Each year, after the application period closes, applicants are given the opportunity to complete an anonymous, voluntary survey to provide feedback on the RFA and application process. This feedback has resulted in changes that have improved the applicant experience.



United States Department of Agriculture

# THE FARM *to* SCHOOL PROGRAM



FY 2013-15

## Summary of Grant Awards



## Increasing Grant Program Participation in the Southwest

When the Farm to School Grant Program began, the number of grants submitted by states in the Southwest region has been the lowest when compared to the number of applications submitted by states in the other six FNS regions. In an attempt to encourage more regional participation, the Southwest regional lead hosted an individual webinar for each state in the region, focusing on the USDA Farm to School Grant Program and other federal and state-based funding to support farm to school activities. These webinars led to the creation of the **USDA Grants and Loans that Support Farm to School Activities** resource and a 16 percent increase in the number of farm to school grant applications submitted by states in the Southwest region in FY 2016.

## Grantee Training and Technical Assistance

The depth of technical assistance provided to grantees is unique among grant programs and speaks to the interconnectedness of the Program's grant making and technical assistance work.

### Webinars and Resources

The first cohort of planning grantees in FY 2013 was led through a comprehensive farm to school planning process by USDA staff that culminated in each grantee submitting a farm to school implementation plan. A series of planning modules (which contained resources and questions to consider) on a host of farm to school topics were accompanied by monthly webinars featuring advanced farm to school practitioners and fellow grantees. In subsequent years, this technical assistance program has been opened to all grantees.



**The webinar you just coordinated on procurement was the best I have attended in months. It was 90 minutes of great, useful information and was a fantastic use of time. It is truly appreciated.**

### Hands-On Technical Assistance

Farm to school regional leads are responsible for connecting with each of the grantees in

their region at the beginning of the grant term; staying up to date on grantee progress reports; and ensuring every grantee has the resources it needs to be successful. Grantees are encouraged to reach out with any questions or needs throughout their grant period and leads receive regular calls and emails in search of specific resources on a wide variety of topics, ranging from producer outreach to cafeteria staff training. Depending on the nature of technical assistance needed, phone calls or emails can turn into site visits and trainings. For example, for the past two years both the Mid-Atlantic as well as the Northeast leads have visited all of their grantee sites and provided a variety of trainings based upon the grantees' needs.

Remote technical assistance has also been a successful means of helping with program challenges. In the Southwest, the regional lead hosted a call for all FY 2015 grantees to allow

for peer-to-peer networking, troubleshooting and to allow grantees to hear about one other's project goals and objectives. Regional leads also support grantees in promoting farm to school expansion across the nation by recommending project coordinators to speak at national conferences or sit on panels and by sitting on planning committees,

facilitating conference pre-meetings, and providing local procurement trainings for USDA-funded trainings projects in their regions.



At these conferences, regional leads also joined in on round tables, setup the USDA farm to school booth, and distributed resources to participants.

### **In-Person Gatherings**

The Program has held three in-person gatherings for grantees to facilitate peer sharing and provide information about key farm to school topics. The gatherings provide ample opportunities to share experiences, network and build relationships with fellow grantees. These meetings emphasize peer learning and highlight best practices of past and current grantees.



Honestly, I am not sure if could plan a robust Farm to School Program without the monthly webinars and modules... The conference was also an inspirational experience for me. There is nothing better than learning from other Farm to School Programs throughout the nation. I have so much gratitude...



Excellent conference!! Networking and USDA staff support was a tremendous asset. Hearing from past grantees was very useful, as was being able to network with projects further along in their work about lessons learned and best practices.





## Helping Farm to School Blossom in the Virgin Islands

The Mid-Atlantic Region includes Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands which offer unique opportunities and challenges related to farm to school. As islands that currently import a large majority of food, farm to school efforts are nascent. Though a farm to school program was legislated a number of years ago in the Virgin Islands, the state agencies had yet to organize, publicize farm to school or make any local purchases. Over a period of 10 months, Mid-Atlantic lead hosted a series of technical assistance calls and visits with all Virgin Islands farm to school stakeholders and in September 2014 the first contract for local produce was awarded. The Virgin Islands received a USDA Farm to School Training grant the same year, and the regional lead actively participated in organizing and implementing the first farm to school conference on the islands, which was attended by every major state agency and many farmers.



# LOOKING FORWARD

When USDA's Farm to School Program was first established by the HHFKA, the Program established a vision that one day every child who participates in our nutrition assistance programs would have daily access to local foods. With the creation of a new Office of Community Food Systems, and thanks to the work of countless community partners with whom we collaborate, we are closer than ever to making that vision a reality.

Often used interchangeably with the term "local food system," a "community food system" is one in which food production, processing, distribution and consumption are integrated and proximal, benefiting the environment, economy, and social and nutritional health of a particular community.

The adoption of a community food systems approach allows the Food and Nutrition Service to accomplish the broad USDA goals to create new market opportunities for farmers, ranchers and rural communities while increasing healthy food options for consumers. As noted by Cornell University, "the appeal of a community food system is that it offers farmers an opportunity to reclaim a larger portion of the food dollar through innovative direct marketing, local processing and

other value-added activities; consumers develop opportunities to reconnect with their food supply and in the process often have access to healthier food options; and communities gain opportunities to strengthen their social and economic health by creating meaningful jobs and recirculating social and financial capital locally." This is precisely why USDA has emphasized the support of local foods as a strategic goal whose fulfillment is coordinated through the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative. Each agency is developing innovative ways to engage with this effort, and FNS is pleased to be expanding its contribution.

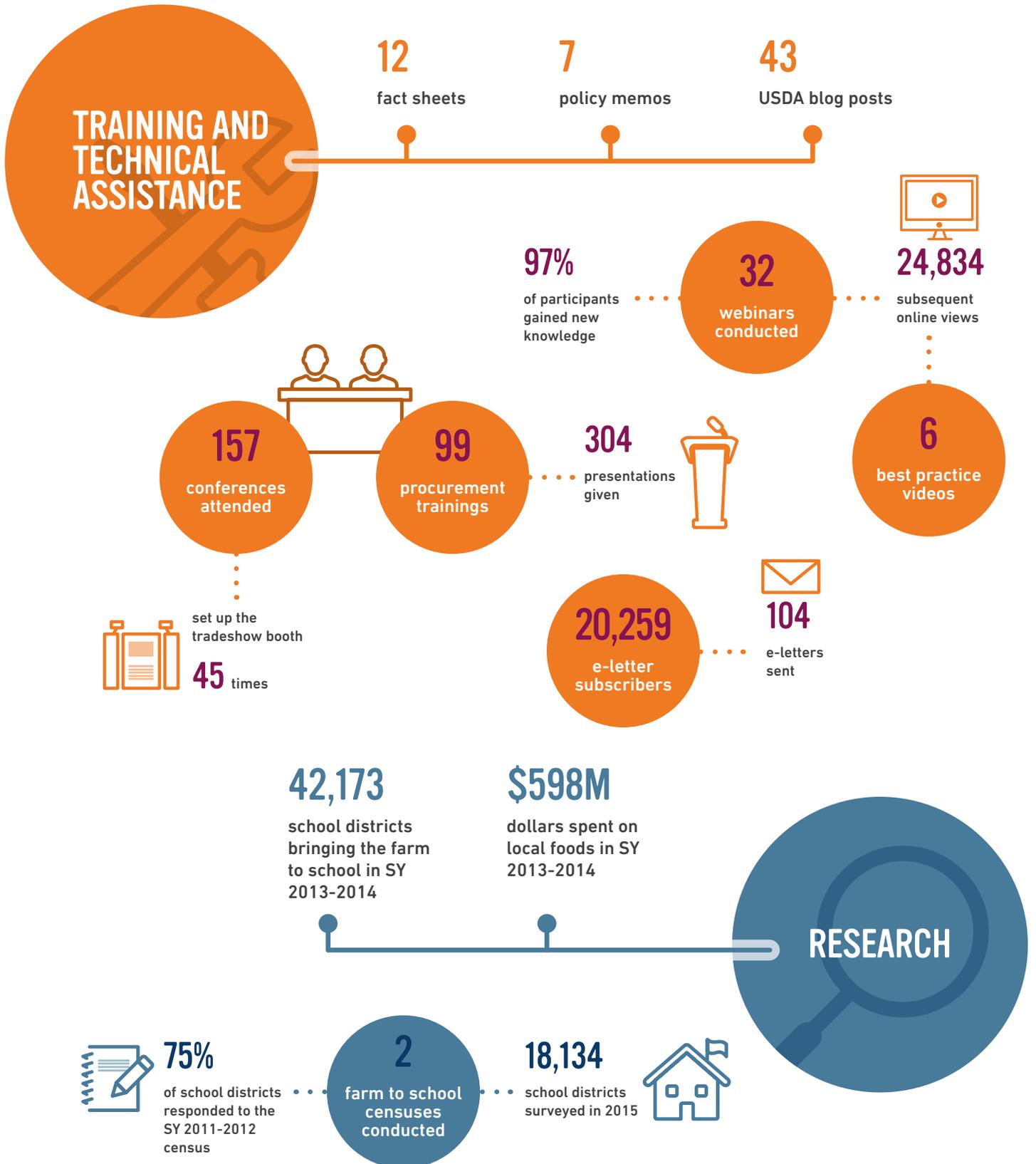
As an initial priority for 2016, the Program is working closely with both national office and regional office colleagues to develop an action plan to meet FNS' strategic objective (1.1b) to increase local food purchases in all child nutrition programs by 15%. As we stand up this new office and chart a course for continued development of local and regional food systems within the child nutrition programs, we welcome your feedback.

Please send your reflections and ideas to [farmtoschool@fns.usda.gov](mailto:farmtoschool@fns.usda.gov).



# FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAM

## 2012-2015: Four Years in Review



# GRANT MAKING

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national staff

# STAFFING

countless USDA colleagues and external partners who enthusiastically support this work – **Thank You!**



United States Department of Agriculture