



**VERMONT
FARM TO SCHOOL &
EARLY CHILDHOOD
NETWORK**



REPORT SUMMARY

Vermont Schools & Early Childhood Centers Local Food Purchasing Evaluation 2024

**Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood
Network and Green Mountain Evaluation**

Purpose of Evaluation

This mixed-methods evaluation examined local food purchasing in Vermont K-12 schools and early childhood education (ECE) programs to track progress toward the Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network's goal of 30% local purchasing by 2030. It combined quantitative tracking with qualitative insights to understand trends, successes, and barriers.

Evaluation Methods

- Measured local food purchasing using state and USDA K-12 tracking data.
- Conducted an ECE survey (n=122) and interviews (n=9) on local food use in early childhood settings.
- Gathered qualitative data on successes and challenges from K-12 school food service leaders (n=8).

Key Findings

1 Vermont SFAs' spending on local foods was approximately 14% in 2023–24, a 150% increase from 5.6% in 2014. This translates to \$3.5 million per year.

If Vermont School Food Authorities (SFAs) continued to spend approximately \$25 million per year on food, and the state reached its goal of 30% local purchasing by 2030, this would translate to approximately \$7.5 million per year spent on local food. Research indicates that every \$1.00 spent on local food for school meals contributes \$1.60 to Vermont's economy.¹ If the 30% local purchasing goal were achieved, this would equate to approximately \$12 million in total economic impact annually within the Vermont food system.

Local Food Incentive (LFI) awardees who reached 15% or higher in local purchasing reported an average of 18% of their program food costs going towards local foods. Non-LFI SFAs' spent 11% of food cost on local foods.



¹ Erin Roche, Florence Becot, Jane Kolodinsky, PhD and David Conner, PhD, Economic Contribution and Potential Impact of Local Food Purchases Made by Vermont Schools, University of Vermont Center for Rural Studies (May 2016).

2 Food hubs, farmer partnerships, and Universal School Meals enable local purchasing. Cost, administrative burden, and seasonality remain persistent barriers.

Based on interviews with food service directors in K-12 schools, successful strategies that promoted local purchasing included leveraging food hubs, direct relationships with farmers and food producers, strong staff and administrative buy-in, and integration with school gardens and educational activities.

Challenges

Seasonal availability and limited product variety: “There’s a reason why we don’t have strawberries right now. It’s because they don’t grow right now.”

Labor and processing demands: “Processing [fresh local produce] is hard... it’s another ask on the staff.”

Higher costs, especially proteins and dairy: “It was just crazy to buy local eggs...pay a \$100 for 15 dozen eggs, when you could buy them for \$49.”

Complex procurement logistics: “You’re just running all over the place [to multiple local producers] and it doesn’t make sense.”

Administrative burden with tracking and reimbursement: “The [administrative burden] feels like \$5 worth of work for \$1 in grant money.”

Successes

Food hubs simplify procurement and delivery: “Food Connects is kind of saving my life right now and making [our local purchasing efforts] a lot more worthwhile.”

Strong relationships with local farmers: “We have at least three producers delivering directly to us... it’s really nice to see them every couple of weeks.”

Buy-in from staff, administration, and families: “My kitchen managers are all about local and want the local products in there, so that’s huge.”

Integration with school gardens and educational activities: “In each of our schools we have school gardens... that’s where we usually do taste testing.”

Kid-friendly menus using local ingredients: “Kids love the homemade macaroni and cheese and the other scratch-cooked options we’re able to offer by using fresh, local ingredients.”

Challenges included higher food costs, seasonal availability, labor and food processing demands, and procurement logistics.

Interviewees felt that Universal School Meals policy had positive impacts including increased participation, reduced stigma and administrative burden, and increased local purchasing.

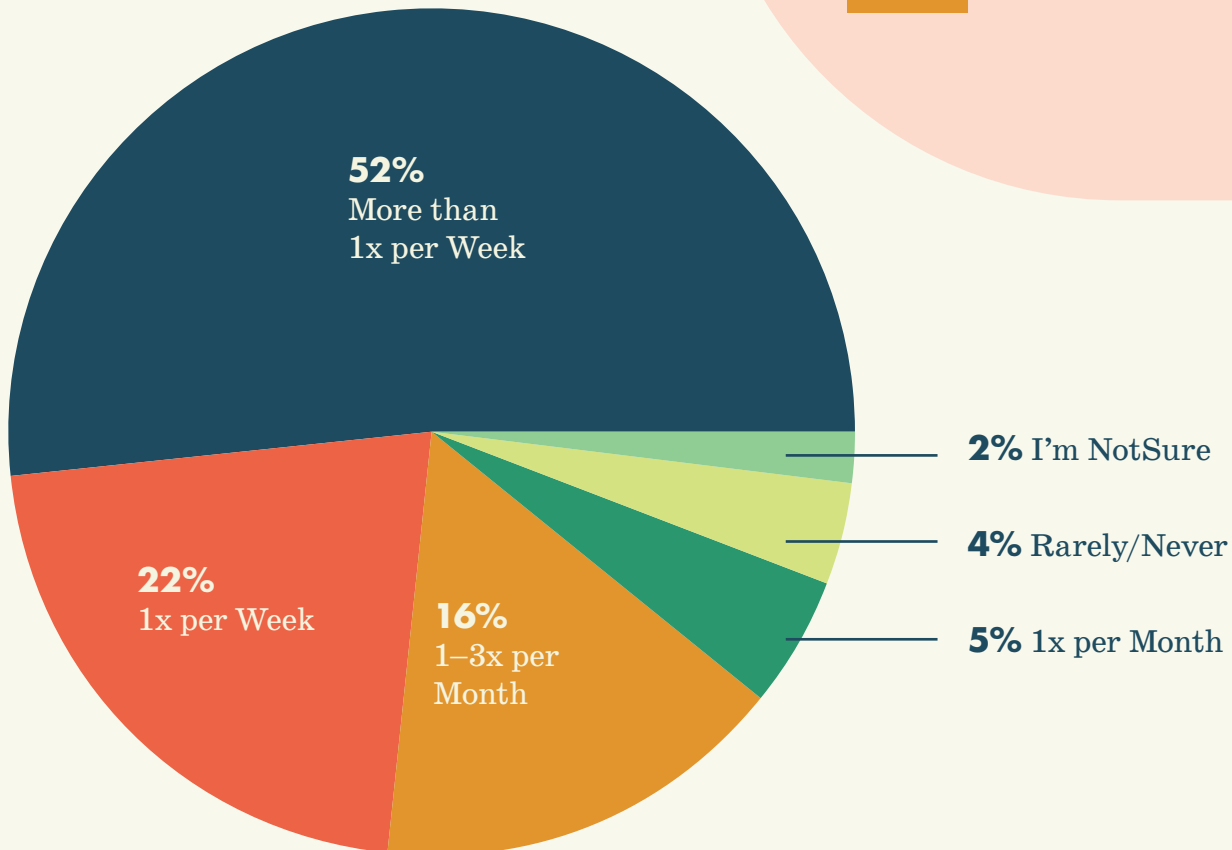
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71% of early childhood education (ECE) programs serve local food; almost all ECEs integrate food education into programming.

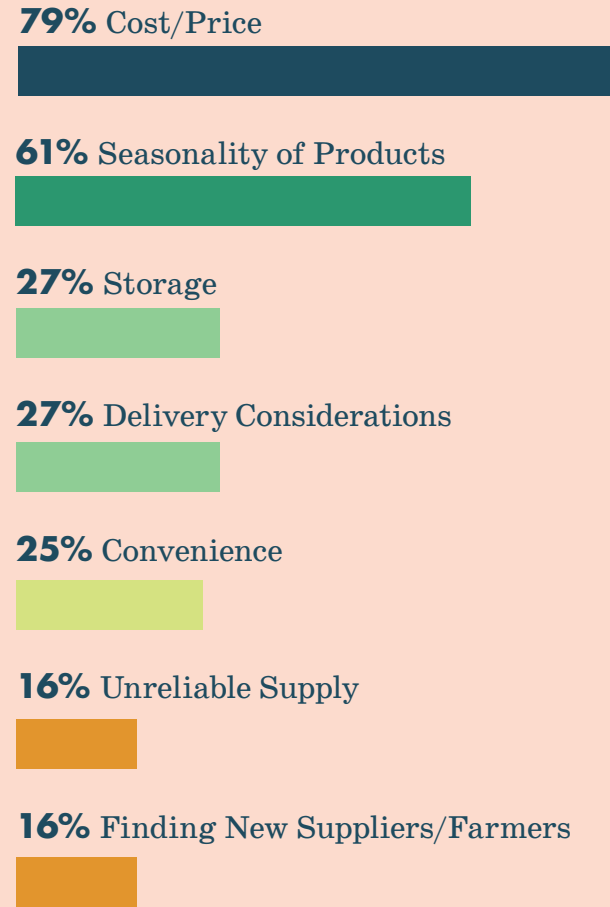
Among the survey respondents, 71% of ECE programs serve local foods; produce, maple syrup, and dairy were most common. The contributing facilitators included CSA participation, onsite gardens, strong farmer relationships, food hubs, and grants.

Barriers included high costs, seasonality, storage/logistics, and administrative burdens (especially the Child and Adult Care Food Program, CACFP). Almost all ECEs integrate food education into programming.

Frequency of Serving Local Food Reported by Early Childhood Respondents



Challenges of Serving Local Food Reported by Early Childhood Respondents



Conclusions

Local food purchasing is now a well-established part of Vermont's school and early childhood meal programs. In 2023–2024, schools spent approximately 14% of their food budgets, about \$3.5 million annually, on local foods, representing a 150% increase since 2014 and generating measurable economic benefits for Vermont farms and communities.

Findings show that policy and infrastructure matter. School Food Authorities (SFAs) participating in the Local Foods Incentive (LFI) report higher and more consistent local purchasing, and Universal School Meals have increased participation, reduced stigma and administrative burden, and created greater financial flexibility to buy local foods. Food hubs and farmer partnerships offered critical support for this work.

At the same time, higher costs, seasonal availability, logistics, and reporting requirements continue to limit how much programs can purchase locally - particularly for smaller early childhood providers. Strengthening these systems will be key to sustaining and expanding progress.

Recommendations

Strengthening infrastructure, such as storage, processing capacity, and distribution channels, would make it easier for schools and early childhood programs to integrate local foods year-round.

Streamlining program rules and reducing administrative burdens, especially for getting reimbursements, could make it more feasible for SFAs to purchase more local food.

Expanding food hub capacity and shared distribution systems could simplify procurement and delivery.

Continuing to invest in policy levers like Universal School Meals and the Local Foods Incentive program can amplify impact, ensuring that local food purchasing remains a sustainable, equitable, and integral part of Vermont's education system.

Full report @ vermontfarmtoschool.org/LPEval24



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