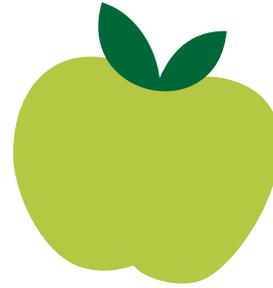




# RESEARCH SHOWS FARM TO SCHOOL WORKS



**SCHOOLS FIRST STARTED USING** local foods in school meals, planting edible school gardens, and teaching students about where their food comes from in the early 1990's. Today, these activities, in addition to many others, are taking root all across the country. Farm to school programs are thriving in every state and Washington, D.C. They stimulate local and regional economies, improve children's health and nutrition and create widespread school and community benefits. Results from the second national USDA Farm to School Census (the Census) are shared below.

## Farm to School Works to Create Positive School and Community Benefits

The Census, fielded in 2015, shows that 42 percent of school districts surveyed participate in farm to school activities. This equates to more than 5,200 school districts, working with more than 42,000 schools, impacting more than 23.6 million children. Over two thirds of school districts engaged in farm to school activities said they enjoy positive impacts, including increased support from parents and community members, improved acceptance of and participation in school meals, lower school meal program costs, and less plate waste. Nationally, 63 percent of school districts with farm to school programs completed at least three farm to school related activities. The most popular activities included serving local foods in school meals, holding taste tests and demonstrations using local foods, and conducting student field trips to nearby farms or orchards.

## Farm to School Works to Stimulate Local and Regional Economies

School districts spent almost \$790 million on local foods for school meals during the 2013-2014 school year, a 105 percent increase over the \$386 million of local food purchased during the 2011-2012 school year when the first Census was conducted. As of the 2013-2014 school year, 46 percent of school districts purchasing local foods report that they plan to purchase even more local foods in future school years.

On average, school districts purchasing local foods reported spending 11 percent of their total school food budget on local foods during the 2013-2014 school year with most districts purchasing local fruits and vegetables, followed by local milk, baked goods and other dairy products. School districts reported that in the future, they plan to increase local purchases of plant-based proteins, herbs and meat or poultry the most. Districts purchased local foods through a variety of market channels but most often from distributors and individual food producers such as farmers, fishers, and ranchers.

### In 2015, USDA fielded the second national Farm to School Census.

Over 12,500 public, private, and charter school districts responded for a response rate of 70 percent. Results show that schools invested \$790 million in local communities through local food purchases during the 2013-2014 school year. That's a 105 percent increase over previous results! Check out [farmtoschoolcensus.fns.usda.gov](http://farmtoschoolcensus.fns.usda.gov) for more information and resources.

## Farm to School Works to Improve Children's Health, Nutrition, and Academic Performance

School districts cultivated more than 7,100 edible school gardens during the 2013-2014 school year, giving children frequent access to fresh fruits and vegetables. This is a 196 percent increase over the 2,401 edible school gardens reported during the 2011-2012 school year when the first Census was conducted. Almost 44 percent of school districts completing farm to school activities reported cultivating edible school gardens and 62 percent of respondents with farm to school programs reported maintaining salad bars where children can access fresh fruits and vegetables. School districts completing farm to school activities reported stocking more than 17,000 salad bars during the 2013-2014 school year.

Researchers have found that participation in USDA's **Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program**, **Team Nutrition Program**, and **Farm to School Program** are significant predictors of the presence of a salad bar in elementary schools. Additionally, other researchers have concluded that school gardens improve student knowledge related to eating healthy and positively impact academic performance. For example, after completing an exhaustive literature review of sixteen studies, researchers found that of the twelve studies measuring a school garden's impact on fruit and vegetable consumption, all of them showed students eating or likely to eat more. Three of the four studies that measured the presence of a school garden's impact on academic outcomes also showed academic performance improvements.

## Farm to School Works to Help Healthy Habits Take Root Early and Provide Access to Local Foods All Year Long

School districts are increasingly engaging preschoolers in farm to school activities, and extending local food offerings while school is out through summer meal programs. During the 2013-2014 school year, nearly one out of every three school districts completing farm to school activities included preschoolers, and nearly one out of every four school districts purchasing local foods during the school year also used them in summer meals. These are modest but important increases compared to previous Census results for the 2011-2012 school year.

Research shows that when preschool children are exposed to nutrition education curriculum promoting local foods, they have a greater willingness to try and like healthy foods. Researchers discovered that compared to those who were not enrolled in a nutrition education curriculum, preschoolers participating had a greater willingness to try target foods such as carrots, butternut squash, sweet potatoes, cabbage, turnips, rutabaga, berries, beets, and asparagus. Data show that millions of children rely on summer meals for healthy food when schools are out. USDA encourages school districts to use local foods in summer meals as a best practice for providing fresh fruits, and vegetables, and helping children stay nourished, active and engaged during summer months.

Across the U.S., more than 1,500 school districts are completing farm to school activities with preschool children. Farm to School Census results also show that more than 1,000 districts are using local foods in summer meals. **USDA's Office of Community Food Systems** is here to help support your school district engage in these activities through grants and technical assistance. Contact one of our **seven regional leads** for more information.

## Hungry for More?

Visit the **USDA Farm to School Census** website to browse local, state, and national level results and access other valuable resources. The Food and Nutrition Service's **Office of Community Food Systems** also recently published a **curated library of additional studies** which all found numerous positive impacts of **implementing** farm to school activities.

\* \* \* \* \*

For more information, and to sign up for the bi-weekly e-letter from the Food and Nutrition Service's Office of Community Food Systems, please visit [www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool](http://www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool).

Questions? Email us at [farmtoschool@fns.usda.gov](mailto:farmtoschool@fns.usda.gov).

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer. June 2016

