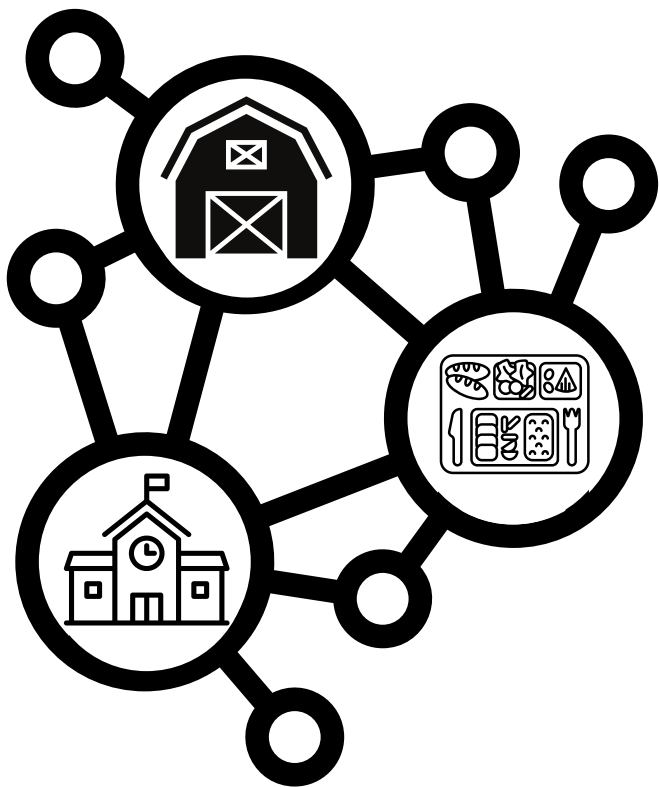


2025

BUILDING THE FARM TO SCHOOL NETWORK

IN WEST CENTRAL MINNESOTA



This project is in partnership with The Land Stewardship Project, UMN Extension Southwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership and UMN Morris Center for Small Towns. The project team also collaborated closely with Countryside Public Health Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) and Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission (UMVRDC).

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report, compiled by University of Minnesota-Morris student Elsa Eaves, summarizes research and findings from Land Stewardship Project's (LSP) "Farm to Institution Network in West Central Minnesota" project. Beginning in July 2024 and wrapping up in August 2025, the project supports LSP's mission to connect local food producers with schools and institutions. The goal of this project was to analyze existing data for local food procurement by schools in western Minnesota, enhance this data by interviewing food service directors, and to assist institutions in adopting more locally sourced options by identifying the top 10-20 in-demand products that could be sourced from local producers.

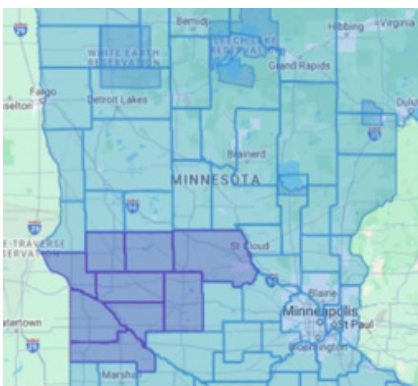


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Southwest Regional Sustainable
Development Partnership

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
EXTENSION



This project was a partnership with the University of Minnesota (UMN) Extension, Southwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership (RSDP), and UMN Morris Center for Small Towns. This project also included a close collaboration with Countryside Public Health Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) and the Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission (UMVRDC), assisting with interviews with food service directors and the regional producer survey, respectively.

While this report focuses on "Farm to School" efforts, many strategies and findings apply to broader "Farm to Institution," or "Farm to Kids" initiatives, which include sales to early care establishments. Where applicable, we use "Farm to School" to reflect the focus of interviews and data collection but recognize the overlapping nature of these efforts.

OUR PROCESS:

To identify current Farm to School needs and opportunities in the region, data was collected through:

- **Interviews with 13 food service directors** across 12 school districts serving Yellow Medicine, Chippewa, Lac qui Parle, Swift, Big Stone, Stevens, Pope, and Stearns counties (see map at left for targeted region). Seven districts are already purchasing locally.
- **An online survey** of 31 food producers in and around the 5-county region of the Upper Minnesota River Valley. This survey was developed and distributed by LSP, Countryside Public Health, and UMVRDC.
- **Follow-up interviews** with two food producers and a food service director with significant Farm to School experience.
- **Price comparison report** of the top requested local food items by school food service staff. Pricing data was collected from a regional wholesale distributor of organic products, a local food hub, and the 2023 Farm to School Price Report published by University of Minnesota Extension.

TAKEAWAYS FOR PRODUCERS

- **There's strong demand.** Most schools interviewed are highly interested in buying local food – many rated their interest at a 9 or 10 on a scale of 1-10. Start simple. You don't have to supply everything. Start with one or two products that require minimal processing and that fit easily into school menus or salad bars.
- **Relationships matter.** Schools want to buy from farmers they know. Introductions, repeat contact, and simple materials like “Meet the Farmer” sheets are effective.
- **Marketing support is essential.** Farmers cited lack of time for marketing as a key barrier. Support from a regional coordinator could help bridge this gap.
- **Schools need packaging clarity.** Offer flexibility in units (pounds, cases, etc.) and provide clear labeling to meet school needs.



TAKEAWAYS FOR SCHOOLS

- **Kids love local.** They especially love meeting the farmer!
- **You don't have to do it all.** Start with one product, one farmer, and one promotional activity. Small wins build momentum.
- **Local can be affordable.** Many schools found that local purchases were cost-effective, especially when paired with grants or local delivery.
- **Staffing is the top barrier.** Labor capacity (both for coordination and prep) is the biggest challenge across districts. Start with items that need little to no processing. Buying lightly processed or whole products can help too (apples, lunchbox peppers, etc).
- **Farm to School grant support is valuable.** Several schools requested assistance in applying for and managing Farm to School grants. Regional coordinators, local SHIP initiatives, and organizations like the Land Stewardship Project and Renewing the Countryside were identified as important partners in grant support.
- **Interest is widespread.** Even schools not currently purchasing local are interested. Pricing information, producer introductions, and clarity on regulations could shift participation.
- **A regional coordinator role is key.** Someone dedicated to connecting producers and schools could shift local food purchasing in the region.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM SCHOOL FOOD SERVICE STAFF:

Active Engagement and Strong Enthusiasm for Farm to School

Interviews with 13 food service directors across the region revealed strong interest in Farm to School purchasing:

- Seven schools are currently purchasing local foods and interested in expanding purchasing.
- Nearly all food service directors expressed high enthusiasm for local food purchasing. Eight food service directors rated their interest in local food at the highest possible level of interest (10/10), with another 3 directors rating their interest as an 8 or 9.
- Only 2 directors rated their interest lower (5/10), citing limited staff capacity, inadequate funding, and confusion around how to navigate the purchasing process.



Directors Showed High Interest in Existing Farm to School Activities:

- October Farm to School Month
- Minnesota Great Apple Crunch
- Local Foods Taste Tests
- Farm to School Educational Community Events
- Harvest of the Month



WHAT'S GETTING IN THE WAY: KEY BARRIERS

While producers often cite delivery logistics as a key concern, schools instead pointed to barriers related to staffing, infrastructure, and uncertainty around how and where to source local foods. These findings highlight the need for clearer pathways, training, and infrastructure support to enable more local purchasing.

Labor and staffing shortages limit the ability to prep, serve, and manage additional ordering and vendor relationships, especially for minimally processed or bulk produce.

Limited knowledge around how to procure local foods leaves many directors unsure of where to identify producers, how to navigate regulations, or how to incorporate local food into existing purchasing systems.

Product availability and seasonality was cited as a common challenge. Peak harvest times don't overlap with the school year. However, there is a key opportunity here: producers are often planning what to plant at the same time schools are doing their menu planning in late winter. With improved coordination between schools and farmers, both can better align supply with demand and increase the potential for successful Farm to School integration.

Concerns about Farm to School grant funding, including the expiration of federal grants, uncertainty about eligible uses, and impacts on their annual budgets have made some schools hesitant to rely on these funds for local food purchasing.

Inadequate storage and prep space constrain the types and volume of local food that schools can purchase, process, and serve. Kitchen staff are already having to get creative with limited space and budgets. Food service directors identified several infrastructure gaps, including physical space limitations, as well as lack of processing equipment, cold storage, and prep stations.



WHAT SCHOOLS NEED TO SUCCEED

User-friendly procurement: Directors reported making their food orders online once or twice weekly through vendor systems such as Sysco, IFD, Performance, and US Foods. Schools need simple, streamlined tools to be able to identify available products and to connect with producers.

The **Minnesota Grown Directory** was cited as the number one tool used to identify local producers. There was also significant interest in producer-school matchmaking events, online ordering with real-time inventory and pricing, and integration with current food vendors.

Technical assistance for state Farm to School grants: Directors expressed a need for clarity on Farm to School grant programs, including reporting requirements, grant-writing assistance, and what products were eligible for Farm to School grants. Confusion around product eligibility is likely due to 2023 grants funded by the USDA. Newer state funding will fund more products.

Regional Farm to School coordinator: Interviews with directors underscored the need for a regional coordinator who can facilitate connections between producers and schools, manage communication, and track seasonal availability. Without this dedicated role, opportunities are frequently missed, even when interest is high.

“Farm to school doesn’t have to be hard. Buying local can be easy and affordable. Start with one product, one farm, market that and share it. It’s all about building relationships.”

- Jeanine Bowman, Food Service Director, Morris Area Schools

Training and support for staff: Food service teams are already stretched thin. Additional help is needed to manage prep for minimally processed produce, to navigate new vendor relationships, and to integrate local foods into tight lunch prep schedules.

Menu-planning tools and support: Seasonal calendars or planning templates to help schools align school menu development with crop availability are needed.

Marketing and communication tools: Staff are eager for low-lift tools (signage, videos, social media content) that can build excitement and tell the story behind local food purchases to show the community, as well as the kids, that they are buying local.

Processing and prep equipment: Tools like Robo-Coupes, tilt skillets, slicers, and ovens were repeatedly mentioned as essential to making raw or bulk produce manageable within tight lunch prep timelines.

INSIGHTS FROM LOCAL PRODUCERS

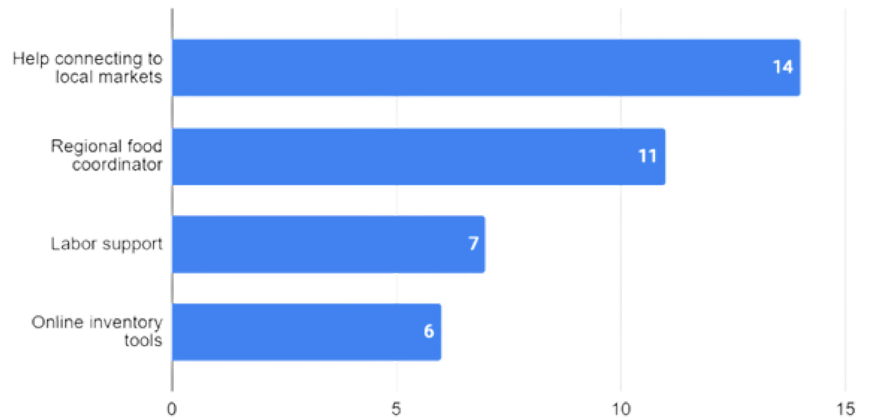
A producer survey was developed and distributed by UMRDC, LSP, and Countryside Public Health in 2024 to understand the current landscape of food production in the region.

Responses from 31 producers highlight the opportunities for Farm to School partnerships. Notably, 46% of respondents reported that they are interested or able to scale up their operations.

Survey responses from 31 producers highlighted:

- 71% (22) of respondents grow vegetables or fruits.
- 42% (13) raise livestock/meat products.
- 26% (8) grow or sell grains.

What Would Support You in Selling Locally?



Key Challenges:

- Time and capacity for effective marketing and delivery to each school.
- Difficulty connecting with buyers.
- Infrastructure: cold storage, processing space, delivery vehicles.

Areas of Support:

Producers reported a desire for long-term commitment and trust-building in regional food networks, and expressed interest in having assistance in connecting with buyers through such initiatives as matchmaking events.



KEY TAKEAWAYS AND NEXT STEPS: BUILDING ON SHARED MOMENTUM

High interest is already there: Ten out of 13 food service directors rated their interest in local food purchasing at 8 or higher on a 10-point scale. Nearly half of surveyed producers said they are interested or able to scale up.

Opportunity: Leverage this momentum with targeted matchmaking and technical support.

Strong feasibility for specific products:

Many of the products with the highest demand are products that are already being grown in the region, providing opportunities to scale up.

Opportunity: Promote and organize around a core list of 5 to 8 “easy entry” products for Farm to School purchasing.

Mini roadshows & one-to-ones were effective: Food service directors and producers appreciated in-person relationship-building and the sharing of best practices.

Opportunity: Host seasonal gatherings (e.g., fall harvest tours and planning events when schools and producers do their planning in February) to maintain momentum and build relationships.

Shared interest in education & promotion:

Schools are excited about Harvest of the Month, Apple Crunch, and local food marketing, but often lack the capacity to invest significant time in Farm to School communications.

Opportunity: Provide a marketing toolkit to help schools promote local foods.





100%

of MDA Farm to School Survey respondents rated local food quality at good or excellent, with 74% rated at EXCELLENT.

98%

school staff responses indicated the MDA Farm to School grant program allowed them to purchase more local products for school meals and snacks than they would have purchased without the grant.

TOP 20 PRODUCTS FOR FARM TO SCHOOL

Food service directors from 12 schools completed a Farm to School product checklist, identifying the products they would be interested in purchasing locally. Based on their responses, a list of 20 products with the highest demand from schools for Farm to School purchasing in the region was compiled. Sources for the pricing benchmarks below include a wholesale distributor of organic products, a local food hub, and the 2023 Farm to School Price Report (3) published by University of Minnesota Extension, which analyzed sales from Minnesota’s Farm to School procurement grant funding for fiscal year 2023.

Top 20 Farm-to-School Products in West Central Minnesota: Price Benchmarks							
Product *All prices are per pound unless specified.	Number of Schools Interested (Out of 13 interviewed in West Central MN)	Prices from Local Food Hub		Prices from Organic Wholesale Distributor	Prices from 2023 Minnesota Farm to School Price Report		
		Average Price Paid to Farmers	Average Cost to Schools	Average Price	Average Price	Minimum Price from Farm to School Price Report (\$/lb)	Maximum Price from Farm to School Price Report (\$/lb)
1. Apples	11	\$0.89	\$1.08	\$1.50	\$1.77	\$0.30	\$4.14
2. Cherry Tomatoes	11	\$4.05	\$4.90	\$7.06	\$4.05	\$0.83	\$7.20
3. Cucumbers	11	\$1.20	\$1.45	\$1.54	\$1.65	\$0.50	\$5.23
4. Melon, Cantaloupe	11	\$0.76	\$0.93	\$0.97	\$1.31	\$0.40	\$8.00
5. Melon, Watermelon by lb	11	\$1.00	\$1.21	n/a	\$0.93	\$0.47	\$1.29
Melon, Watermelon by ct	11	n/a	n/a	\$3.39	\$7.54	\$4.00	\$10.00
6. Snap Peas	11	\$4.13	\$5.00	\$10.34	\$2.93	\$0.99	\$7.00
7. Carrots	10	\$1.60	\$1.94	\$0.97	\$2.59	\$0.62	\$6.44
8. Peppers, Sweet	9	\$3.44	\$4.17	\$4.81	\$2.68	\$0.40	\$11.50
9. Squash, Winter	9	\$1.00	\$1.22	\$1.00	\$1.30	\$0.43	\$7.50
10. Strawberries	9	\$7.00	\$8.48	\$7.94	\$4.71	\$0.88	\$8.00
11. Tomatoes	9	\$2.00	\$2.42	\$3.17	\$2.65	\$0.77	\$11.78
12. Radish	9	n/a	n/a	\$2.75	\$2.12	\$1.00	\$3.00
13. Onions, Sweet	8	\$1.16	\$1.40	\$1.27	\$1.38	\$0.60	\$4.40
14. Onions, Red	8	\$1.16	\$1.40	\$1.48	n/a	n/a	n/a
15. Beef, Ground	8	\$6.25	\$7.58	n/a	\$5.57	\$1.36	\$18.66
16. Honey	8	\$8.85	\$10.73	\$9.26	\$5.90	\$3.67	\$19.00
17. Maple Syrup (by gallon)	8	\$80.00	\$96.97	n/a	\$70.55	\$46.09	\$125.00
18. Spinach	8	\$5.00	\$6.06	\$6.09	\$5.29	\$3.00	\$10.00
19. Potatoes, Russet	8	n/a	n/a	\$0.93	\$1.29	\$0.25	\$4.40
20. Lettuce by lb	8	n/a	n/a	n/a	\$5.89	\$1.62	\$22.00
Lettuce by head	8	n/a	n/a	\$2.29	\$2.50	\$1.52	\$5.00

Participating Schools in this Report:

Belgrade-Brooten-Elrosa Public Schools

Benson Public School

Clinton Graceville Beardsley Schools

Kerkhoven Murdock (KMS) Elementary

Lac qui Parle Valley School District

MACCRAY Public Schools

Montevideo Public Schools

Morris Area School District

New London-Spicer Schools District

Ortonville Independent School District

Yellow Medicine East Schools

Willmar Public Schools

For schools in 5 counties of Upper Minnesota Valley Region:

Estimate of local food purchases (2023-2024): \$12,712.71 (1)

FY24 (Feb. 2024 – Dec. 2026) Farm-to-School Grants for UMV
Region: \$0

FY25 (Feb. 2025 – Dec. 2027) Farm-to-School Grants for UMV
Region \$10,000 (2)

1. Data collected from school invoices and from the 2023 Minnesota Farm to School Price Report. Retrieved from the University Digital Conservancy, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/263888>.

2. AGRI Farm to School and Early Care Funding Recipients, https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?ll=45.166585643968915%2C-96.03524352025256&z=9&mid=1Hagni7a9rL_azF0nn1qzh0IYtgqK_Go



Learn More:

You can find this report and learn more about LSP's "Farm to Institution Network in West Central Minnesota" project by visiting: <https://landstewardshipproject.org/community-food/>

\$2.2M

in farm income directly related to Farm to School grants in Minnesota.

\$3.1M

in economic activity in Minnesota through increased demand for products supported by Farm to School funding.

63%

of Minnesota farm products purchased by schools comes directly from producers, with the remainder from food hubs and traditional wholesalers.

\$0.94

For every dollar spent on farm to school in Minnesota, an additional \$0.94 is generated in economic activity through via businesses such as farm input suppliers and through increased employee spending.