

## Local Food Incentive Programs Necessary and Highly Effective for Iowa Farm to School and Early Care

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### 2020 Coalition Merger: An Essential Foundation for Partnerships

Farm to School in Iowa was first legislated in 2007, when lawmakers established a program to one, link elementary, secondary, public and non-public schools with Iowa farmers; two, provide schools with fresh and minimally processed Iowa-grown food for inclusion in school meals and snacks; and three, encourage children to develop healthy eating habits and provide them with hands-on learning activities. A coalition was formed to unite stakeholders, which continued meeting and networking through 2019. Realizing the need for the early childcare sector to receive the same support for and benefits of locally sourced food, food education, and site gardening, funding from the WK Kellogg Foundation provided the means to create the Iowa Farm to Early Care and Education (Farm to ECE) Coalition in 2016.

With similar objectives and several stakeholders engaged in both coalitions, a unanimous decision was made in 2019 to merge the coalitions into one.

The result of a two-day strategic planning session of committed partners, the Iowa Farm to School and Early Care Coalition was established January 2020. The newly formed group met again that March, just prior to the worldwide COVID 19 pandemic that forced businesses to close and employees to work remotely.

As the only stakeholder group in Iowa serving children ages birth through age 18, partners participating in the [Iowa Farm to School and Early Care Coalition](#) are in a unique position to provide continuity of programming and opportunities that serve all of Iowa's children. The committed, unique cross-sector partnerships across food systems and educational institutions laid the foundation for the coalition's coordinated response to the COVID 19 pandemic. Supporting the implementation of several local food incentive programs for K-12 schools and early childcare sites throughout the pandemic, the coalition's collaborative efforts have set the stage and built momentum for successful, long-term investment in institutional local food procurement across Iowa.

## The Local Produce and Protein Program

### *Investment in Local Food Supply Chain Enhances Local Food Purchasing and Partnerships*

Food supply chain disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical role that schools, and early childcare programs play in the daily nutrition of kids. The essential role of local food farmers was also brought into sharp focus. As administrators and directors scrambled to meet the needs of children, producers scrambled to establish new ways to sell and distribute their products to their local communities and institutions.

In response, \$750,000 of CARES Act money was allocated for the 2020 Local Produce and Protein Program (LPPP), administered by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship. To support the Iowa Farm to School and Early Care Network- K-12 schools, early childcare sites, local food farmers, and food hubs across Iowa- sub-grants were made available for equipment, and local food purchasing and processing initiatives.

The LPPP injected a great deal of money into the local food system and created connections between buyers and suppliers that did not previously exist. When the grant opportunity was released, initial applications requested over one million dollars. School and early care budgets for meal programs are tight- even outside emergent times like the Pandemic- and the overwhelming response indicates a desire and enhanced need to source and serve local food. The LPPP incentivized many institutions to procure local food for the very first time.

### Impacts of the Local Produce and Protein Program

- Schools in 53 of Iowa's 99 counties purchased local food through the LPPP grant.
- 51% of the \$225,000 reimbursed to schools for food procurement was spent at food hubs.
- Thirty-six K-12 schools were awarded grants to purchase kitchen supplies and equipment to process and serve more local foods.
- Over 100 childcare centers, schools, colleges, and universities received grants to purchase produce, proteins, and dairy directly from food hubs and local growers.
- 54 producers and distributors were awarded grants for supplies and equipment needed to provide schools and early care sites with their products.

### *End of LPPP Funding Elicits Decreased Local Food Purchasing*

As funding for the local food system and institutional food purchases decreased, so too did farm to school and early care purchases of local food. In 2021, Iowa food hubs saw a decline in local food purchases by schools and early care programs<sup>2</sup>. In 2020, 42 of Iowa's food hub customers received LPPP funds -, but only 15 of these sites purchased from food hubs again in 2021. Several recommendations came out of the [2020 LPPP Impact Report](#) and [2021 Supplemental Report](#), for the purpose of increasing the capacity of Iowa food hubs to support local food procurement in schools.

These data-driven recommendations are listed here:

1. Explore ways to continue the LPPP or a similar grant program to help more early childcare centers, K-12 schools and colleges/universities get started with local food procurement.
2. Time future incentives so that schools, farms, and food hubs can plan menus and local purchases in advance, and for purchasing periods to encompass the peak of harvest season to help schools more readily access volume and variety of local foods, if possible.
3. Support programs like the Farm to School Local Food Procurement Coaches who are local food system experts that have been trained to help farm to school teams develop local food procurement plans. More information is available at [www.iowafarmtoschoolearlycare.org](http://www.iowafarmtoschoolearlycare.org).
4. Invest in aggregation and distribution infrastructure at Iowa food hubs and key geographic locations to support access to markets for farmers.
5. Facilitate relationships between schools and food hubs, so food hubs can help overcome the challenges of locating product and arranging delivery.

## Farm to ECE Implementation Grant (FIG), funded by the Association of State Public Health Nutritionists (ASPHN)

*Local Food Incentive Pilots to Support Farm to Early Childcare are Consistently Successful*

In January 2021, a pilot program incentivizing local food procurement was designed and implemented by a small team of partners from the Iowa Farm to School and Early Care Coalition.

This local food incentive program, titled “Local Food Makes Cents: For Iowa Kids and Farmers,” was created to meet growing early childcare provider demand for local food purchasing opportunities, catalyze providers to test and develop new partnerships with local growers and distributors, and to support healthy meals and local economies.

Through the Farm to ECE Implementation Grant (FIG) from the Association of State Public Health Nutritionists (ASPHN), a total of \$43,000 was made available to CACFP-enrolled early care and education organizations. A “fair share” funding model adapted from Michigan’s 10 Cents a Meal program was utilized to equitably determine site-level awards and was prioritized to organizations serving children of color and children enrolled in Child Care Assistance (CCA).

After a successful pilot year, the grant term was extended. An additional year and additional funds totaling \$25,900 was offered to providers who participated in year one of “Local Food Makes Cents.” With an additional nine-month extension in 2022, partners will host a Farm to ECE learning collaborative with four of these early care and education providers to extend local food procurement planning, training, and peer-to-peer engagement. The learning collaborative will begin meeting the first week of November and will continue through July 2023.

## Local Food Purchasing Agreement Program (LFPA) and Local Food for Schools (LFS)

Robust collaboration within Iowa’s local food system is fundamental to designing projects that create connections and partnerships throughout the entire Farm to School and Early Care Network.

The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, in partnership with Iowa Valley RC&D, the Iowa Food Hub Managers Working Group, ISU Extension and Outreach, and the Iowa Food Bank Association, are currently implementing two valuable local food procurement programs with grant funding from the United States Department of Agriculture.

The USDA awarded Iowa \$2.7 million to create the Iowa Local Food Purchasing Assistance Program (LFPA). The LFPA increases access to local food and improves agriculture supply chain resiliency through partnerships with local producers and underserved communities. A unique website ([linked here](#)) was developed with contact information, program details, resources, and a registration link for childcare programs, preschools, and other community partners. Producers also register on the website to take advantage of the new market and collaboration opportunity. Iowa food hubs serve as the distributors between the farmers and community, managing both sides of the transaction.

Iowa farmers and producers registered for the LFPA are also partnered with Iowa schools in the second grant opportunity, Local Food for Schools (LFS). The LFS operates similarly to the LFPA by improving supply chain resiliency through partnerships. While the LFPA engages community partners including early childcare sites, the LFS has over \$2.1 million available to increase local food access specifically in K-12 schools.

## Local Food Incentives Work for Iowa Farm to School and Early Care, but What Comes Next?

As exemplified in the four statewide programs explained here, the collaborative and innovative nature of partners supporting Iowa farm to school and early care can swiftly and effectively move funds and build interest and momentum to enhance institutional local food purchasing. The K-12 school communities, early childcare partners, local farmers, food hubs, and state agencies who bring these programs to life have the motivation, skills, and support to take up the challenge of longer-term local procurement planning and integration of other farm to school and early care initiatives- gardening, food education, cooking, and more. What these institutions need is consistent, accessible, and equitable investments in their meal programs for the future.

Thanks for reading!

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For more information and resources on Local and Regional Food Systems Response to COVID: Recovery and Resilience, visit [www.lfscovis.localfoodeconomics.com](http://www.lfscovis.localfoodeconomics.com).

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