Four years ago, Michigan legislators began funding a pilot farm-to-school project with at least two goals: One, get more fresh fruit, vegetables and legumes on the plates of K-12 students; two, open up new markets for local farmers. On both counts, state officials and national leaders in the farm-to-school movement say, the Michigan experiment is showing signs of success.

“It is a gold standard program,” Helen Dombalis, senior director of programs and policy for the National Farm to School Network, says of Michigan’s 10 Cents a Meal for School Kids & Farms. “Other states are looking at it as a model.”

Administered by the Michigan Department of Education, the program provides matching funds to school districts — equal to 10 cents per school meal — to purchase food products from nearby farms. Over three school years, the number of students served through the pilot project has risen from 48,000 to 135,000, and the legislative appropriation for 10 Cents a Meal has increased from $250,000 to $575,000.

According to Dombalis, state incentives and grants are crucial for building networks that link local farmers (or distributors of their food products) with schools’ food service directors. Without the financial assistance, she adds, districts will tend to rely on traditional, large-scale supply chains — even if there are no extra costs for buying local.

During the current school year, 57 school districts in Michigan used the program to purchase 93 different fruits, vegetables and beans grown by 143 farms in the state (the pilot project currently is in place in five of Michigan’s 10 “prosperity regions”). “In some of these communities, the school district is the largest restaurant in town,” Meghan McDermott, food and farming director for Michigan’s Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities, says about the value of schools as a customer for local growers.

In response to a statewide survey about the program, food service directors for Michigan’s schools said the greatest impact of 10 Cents a Meal has been increasing the variety of produce served to students. As part of the program, too, students take part in taste testings and nutrition education.

“In Michigan, we have been focusing on the idea of finding ways to support the ‘whole child, the whole learner,’ ” says Phil Chase, assistant director of the Department of Education’s Office of Health and Nutrition Services. “Part of that is better nutrition, because we know it can help with learning.”

Why does Michigan’s 10 Cents a Meal stand out as a national model? Dombalis says one reason is the use of a strong evaluation process: The Legislature receives an annual report on the program, and researchers regularly survey participants (students, districts and growers) and measure the impact on the local economy and on students’ food consumption.

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