



A report summary from the Economic Research Service

Local Food Procurement Pathways: Key Drivers of Farm to School Participating Authorities Buying Directly From Farmers

D. Adeline Yeh, Ashley Spalding, Christine Sauer, Pratyosh Kashyap, Ashley Chaifetz, Becca B. R. Jablonski, and Zoë Plakias



Key Points

- Farm to school (F2S) programs can connect local food producers and educational institutions with the objectives of promoting better nutrition for students, engaging local communities, and providing economic opportunities for farmers.
- School food authorities (SFAs) that participated in F2S activities (e.g., having a school garden, serving local foods, conducting field trips to farms) reported spending \$1.8 billion on local foods during the 2022–2023 school year.
- During 2022–2023, 74.1 percent of SFAs participated in at least one F2S activity. Of participating SFAs, 63 percent procured local foods to serve in school meals.
- Nearly two-thirds of SFAs reported procuring local food from Government programs such as the USDA Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (USDA DoD Fresh) and USDA Foods. About 25 percent of SFAs procured local food directly from individual producers.
- Rural and more experienced SFAs, as well as SFAs that participated in more F2S program activities, are more likely to procure local foods directly from individual producers.
- Higher shares of direct-to-consumer producers and higher densities of farmers markets, meat processing facilities, and refrigerated warehouses in a SFA's State were associated with a higher likelihood of purchasing food directly from individual producers and direct marketing channels.
- Most SFAs reported facing challenges in procuring local foods. Over 42 percent of SFA faced challenges with local food availability, citing limited supply (30.8 percent), lack of access through primary vendors (16.9 percent), difficulty identifying local producers or distributors (15.9 percent), limited access to precut or processed products (14.1 percent), and lack of product variety (14 percent).
- During the 2022–2023 school year, approximately one quarter of SFAs increased their purchases of local foods in response to supply chain challenges.

Why Does This Matter?

F2S has become the most commonly enacted subnational food policy in the United States, reflecting growing interest in supporting both child nutrition and domestic agricultural markets. School food markets have drawn attention in part because evidence suggests that direct marketing channels can support positive financial outcomes for farms,

particularly small- and mid-scale operations and those with beginning farmers and ranchers. These farms often face higher per-unit production costs and have limited ability to compete on economies of scale, making access to differentiated markets especially important. At the same time, research indicates that intermediated markets—or

participation in a mix of direct-to-consumer and intermediated channels—may be more strongly associated with positive farm outcomes than direct markets alone. This suggests that the structure of the supply chains schools use for F2S procurement may shape how participation in these markets affects producers.

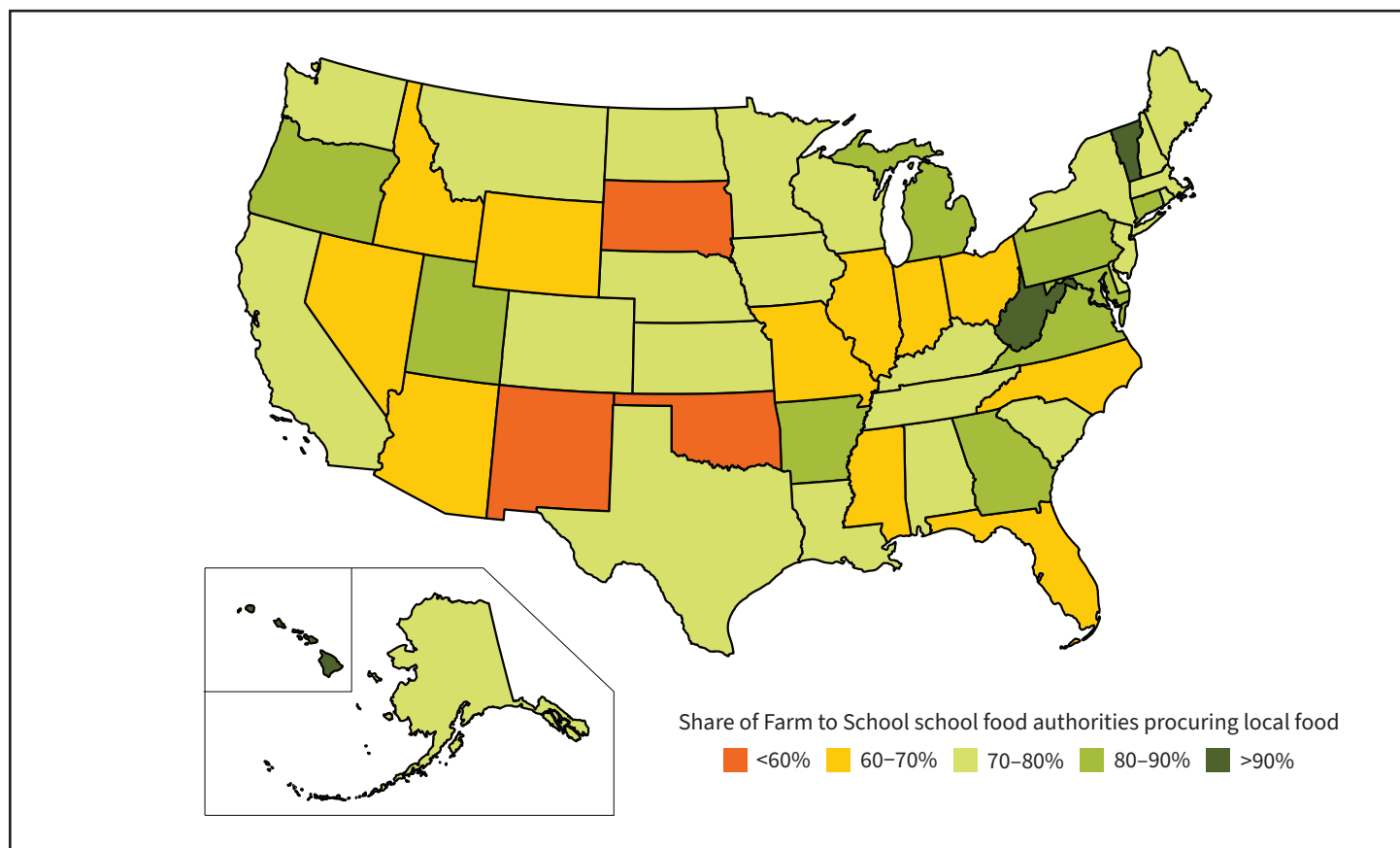
This report provides an overview of F2S local food procurement activities, highlighting how SFAs fund and source local food. It analyzes the effects of SFA characteristics, local food infrastructure/environment variables, and intensity of participation in F2S programs on the probability of purchasing local foods from direct sources. Other topics covered are the prevalence of local food procurement challenges and the responses of SFAs to these challenges. The results could help industry shareholders understand the roadblocks to greater participation in F2S programs.

A Few More Details

We used data from the USDA, Food and Nutrition Administration (FNA) 2023 Farm to School Census and 2022 and 2023 USDA, FNA Surveys on School Food Supply Chain Disruption and Student Participation to provide a summary of procurement and funding sources, challenges, and mechanisms for SFAs purchasing local foods. We used a logistic regression model to examine the factors associated with SFAs sourcing local foods directly from individual food producers and, more broadly, from direct marketing channels.

The U.S. map shows the share of F2S SFAs that procured local food in the 2022–2023 school year. In most States, between 60 and 80 percent of participating SFAs reported buying local food for school meals. States that fell below this threshold were New Mexico, Oklahoma, and South Dakota. Hawaii, Vermont, and West Virginia were above the 60–80 percent threshold.

Share of school food authorities participating in Farm to School activities that procured local food, by State



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, using data from the USDA, Food and Nutrition Administration 2023 Farm to School Census.

ERS is a primary source of economic research and analysis from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, providing timely information on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America.