

Research Update: Engaging School Food Authorities in Local Procurement Economic Impact Study

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Extended Abstract

Farm-to-school (F2S) programs are initiatives in which schools participate with the intent to promote healthy lifestyle choices among children and introduce agricultural lessons into school curriculums (Becot et al., 2017; Christensen et al., 2019). Program activities include local food procurement, educational activities, and school gardens (Besse, 2021). Based on F2S Census data, schools engaging in F2S activities in Louisiana public school districts increased from 152 in 2015 to 606 in 2019 (McKinzie and Bampasidou, 2022). This change can be attributed to increased efforts from local food coordinators and directors, increased legislative support, interest in local foods, and the Louisiana Farm to School Program, which began in 2016. Engaging in F2S activities offers opportunities for farmers to access new markets, expand their production, and diversify their

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revenue stream. With a growing interest from program coordinators and farmers alike, this study aimed to quantify the economic footprint from local procurement in Louisiana.

Few studies have attempted to examine the economic impact of F2S programs, as most of them have been conducted at a regional or state level (see Becot et al., 2017, for a summary of studies). Fewer studies examined scenarios of substitution and attempted to customize their economic model. One exception is Christensen et al. (2019), who collected information from producers on local procurement and/or CFOs. Yet, no studies make direct reference to collecting information from School Food Authorities (SFAs). SFAs are responsible for purchasing food products served to students in school cafeterias and ensuring that these products meet the nutritional value requirements of meals served in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program (USDA FNS, 2018).

In summer 2021, SFAs were interviewed from a number of public school districts in Louisiana, representative of metropolitan areas. SFAs were asked a series of questions pertaining to their respective school district's food bid solicitation items and processes. In addition, they were asked to identify traditionally sourced food items that could potentially be substituted by locally sourced food products and at what rate they could be substituted. The focus was on two districts, each serving 30,000–45,000 students and spending approximately \$4–\$6 million on their primary food expenditure budget per year. School food procurement primarily consists of commercial food purchases through formal procurement processes, such as competitive sealed bids and requests for proposals (USDA FNS, 2018; Besse, 2021). In Louisiana, formal procurement processes are used when the food expenditure total is greater than \$30,000 (Besse, 2021).

An input-output (IO) model was used to analyze the economic impact to the local economy due to potential increases in local food product purchases based on SFA responses. The data collected from these interviews provide information that allows for customization of the IO model to obtain the most accurate results for the specified metropolitan regions of Louisiana. For example, in a substitution scenario, the SFA indicated that they would be willing to substitute 100% of their rice, smoked sausage, lettuce, sweet potato, Cajun seasoning, and cabbage purchases and 50% of their strawberry and orange purchases for locally sourced alternatives. Results show that for every \$1 spent in these food categories on local procurement, an additional \$0.48 is generated in economic benefits (output) in the Louisiana economy.

This is the first local food procurement economic study to our knowledge that interviewed SFAs. It is important to engage these individuals in local procurement studies, as they provide a novel perspective, particularly in examining net zero effect scenarios (i.e., substituting with local foods while keeping the same budget and ensuring nutrition requirements). Moreover, discussions with SFAs revealed challenges related to local procurement, including regulations, school processing and kitchen capacities, and local produce availability. This information could bridge the gap between producers and schools, potentially increasing future F2S activities and overcoming the barriers to increase local procurement.

Keywords: farm to school, economic impact, local procurement, school food authorities, Louisiana

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