

10 CENTS A MEAL

BY DIANE CONNERS, MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Beth Kavanaugh, food service director of the Public Schools of Petoskey, remembers when Dave Coveyou of Coveyou Scenic Farms first approached her about buying produce to serve to her nearly 3,000 students in 10 school buildings.

How would she keep her costs in line, she wondered? How much extra labor would it mean? How safe would it be? The list of questions racing through her mind “just went on and on. I placed a small order with him and nothing more. I was so skeptical.”

Then, along came the 10 Cents a Meal for Michigan’s Kids & Farms grant from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE). It provides match funding to help schools purchase Michigan-grown fruits, vegetables, and dry beans. 10 Cents a Meal was in pilot regions for four years (including Petoskey) and this year the legislature and Governor Gretchen Whitmer made it available to schools statewide. As long as legislators see that it is well-used, it should continue.

The grant receives high praise from quite a range of food service directors, such as Kavanaugh, in her Chartwells operation; Tom Freitas of Traverse City Area Public Schools and

his self-operating food service program for 10,000 students; and Xaviar Jaramillo of Spectrum Juvenile Justice Services, a residential treatment facility in the Detroit area where he serves 100 “high security teens” three meals every day.

The students love the flavors. Parents have even stopped Kavanaugh in the grocery store to ask for recipes she’s served at school.

But that fear about costs? Like all school nutrition directors, Kavanaugh said, she must keep her food costs at less than 41% of her total department costs. She is consistently between 30 and 33% and has expanded her local food purchasing to as high as 68% of her annual produce spending.

“Going from no locally grown purchases to reaching over 68% locally speaks for itself when being able to utilize the 10 cents grant funding,” she said. It’s also saved on disposal costs, because students are actually eating the food. Custodians “literally grab my arm, walk me to the trash, and show me how much food is not wasted anymore.”

Freitas encourages food service directors to think of the program as cutting costs for local produce in half, because for every 20 cents spent per meal on local produce 10 cents is reimbursed. With this



price reduction in mind, he opts for local Honeycrisp or McIntosh apples because of their better flavor instead of Washington Red Delicious apples. Jaramillo, who received the grant for the first time this year, found so much product available from both farms and distributors that he spent all of his grant quickly and was given more funding from MDE in a second award. He points to a video available through SNAM – Michigan Farm Fresh Skills Training – to help staff with knife skills, and also secured an equipment grant for a machine to slice colorful peppers in quantity for beef stir fries.

What about packaging? Freitas' staff cooks apples or peaches with cinnamon one day and then serves it cold in four-ounce containers packed for classroom meals during COVID.

Almost everything on Kavanaugh's salad bar now is Michigan-grown. And during COVID, she's tucked locally grown apples, pears, plums, cucumbers, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, broccoli, green beans, carrots, and tomatoes into sacks and family boxes for children and their families to eat at home.

Her advice to food service directors not experienced with serving locally grown food?

"Try one item a week," she said. "There is no reason to rush and offer everything from the farm on the salad bar like we do now. Start small. Take baby steps. I worried over nothing."

SIDEBAR:

Now is a great time to get prepared for the second year of statewide funding in the 10 Cents a Meal for Michigan's Kids & Farms program, which is expected this fall. Here are some tips:

Put your toe in the water:

- Find one or two Michigan-grown products you can try this school year or for summer programs.
 - Asparagus will be up soon, and many food service directors discovered their students love the flavor when the tender green spears are lightly roasted on a sheet pan.
 - Sweet, red strawberries are a favorite and available now frozen.
 - Salad greens have become available almost year-round.

By starting small now, you will be able to cite the experience you have already had purchasing Michigan-grown produce when you apply for the grant. This experience also will better prepare you for spending the grant dollars!

Think about who in your community could help:

- Here are some people who have helped 10 Cents a Meal food service directors with taste tests and fun voting that students love:
 - Dietitians from local hospitals (which allocate their time in schools as part of "community benefits" programming)
 - Health department and MSU Extension staff
 - Students in 4-H, Future Farmers of America, culinary, health, and environmental programs
 - Parent and garden groups
 - Teachers who might combine it with an academic lesson – like teaching students how to use the vote results in graphs
- Education and marketing activities about locally grown foods are required for the grant. Knowing community members who can assist you with these activities will help you when you apply.

Get comfortable with how the program works. There are lots of resources:

- Head to www.tentcentsmichigan.org and the Tools for Schools section, where you'll find videos featuring experienced grantees and others talking about where to source local foods, how to engage students, and more. You'll also find a video for grantees about how the program works, reporting requirements, and how you'll be reimbursed.
 - Click on Build Your Farm to School Program for links to even more resources.
 - Contact a food service director who's already had the grant. Find a district near you by checking the legislative reports on the About page of www.tentcentsmichigan.org.

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