



Partnerships for Local Agriculture & Nutrition Transformation in Schools (PLANTS)

Midpoint Evaluation Report Summary

August 2026

Overview

Partnerships for Local Agriculture & Nutrition Transformation in Schools (PLANTS) supports systemic efforts to improve school food systems nationwide by strengthening relationships among community-based food system stakeholders and school districts. Launched in May 2024, the program supports **eight regional projects across the U.S.** that seek to strengthen local food supply chains, expand scratch cooking, and increase student access to nutritious meals.



Grantee teams consist of at least three regional partners, including at least one school food authority (SFA) participating in the National School Lunch Program and other community-based food system partners.

Key Outcomes From May 2024 to September 2025

Value Chain Coordination

PLANTS grantees are strengthening value chain coordination by organizing everyone in the supply chain to work as a team so that local farmers can find buyers, and people and organizations can easily buy values-aligned, local food.

This coordination includes developing soft infrastructure (e.g., relationships) and managing hard infrastructure (e.g., storage space, trucks) to create thriving, sustainable local food economies.

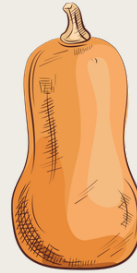


This project is part of the Partnerships for Local Agriculture & Nutrition Transformation in Schools (PLANTS) Grant program, which is funded by the USDA Food & Nutrition Administration Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative and is administered by Chef Ann Foundation in partnership with Kitchen Sync Strategies Collaborative and National Farm to School Network. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the view or policies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or the Chef Ann Foundation, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

Value Chain Coordination Cont.



PLANTS grantees have built 101 new partnerships with producers, aggregators, manufacturers, and distributors involved in local purchasing.



SFA partners have spent over \$658,000 on local food products,¹ contributing to the economic growth of small and local farms and businesses.

PLANTS Grantees	States	New Partners Involved in Local Purchasing
Anchorage School District	Alaska	5
CommonWealth Kitchen	Massachusetts & Maine	7
Detroit Public Schools Community District	Michigan	5
Gulf of Maine Research Institute	Maine	4
Iowa Valley Resource Conservation & Development	Iowa	34
Muskegon Area Intermediate School District	Michigan	22
New Roots Community Farm	West Virginia	12
NorthEast Washington Educational Service District 101	Washington	12
	Total	101

Grantee Spotlight: Infrastructure Changes

Muskegon Area Intermediate School District (MI) is scaling up scratch-cooking efforts by launching a centralized commissary kitchen and investing in equipment to efficiently process raw produce in bulk, making it easier for school sites to prepare and serve fresh, high-quality meals.



Logistical Challenges

Knowledge gaps:

Limited understanding between SFAs and local producers regarding local food availability, SFA menu needs, USDA Foods processing expectations, and federal meal pattern and procurement requirements hinder efficient collaboration.

Supply consistency:

Farmers experienced weather-related crop delays and difficulties scaling up operations to meet school district needs.

¹The total dollars spent on local foods represent SFA spending from all funding sources. No more than 10% of PLANTS grant funds may be used for food purchases. Food purchases should be limited to meal program development and educational purposes.

Enablers of Progress:



Formal procurement contracts between SFAs and vendors.



Food hub integration into SFA sourcing strategies.



Hard infrastructure improvements are made by aggregators, processing partners, and SFAs.



Soft infrastructure improvements to build relationships and develop training opportunities for partners.



Grantees have led or participated in **64 trainings with more than 560 attendees.**

These trainings have prepared farmers to sell their products to wholesale markets and helped school food professionals feel confident working with raw proteins and scratch-cooking skills.

Grantee Spotlight: Cross-Organizational Trainings

Local Producer Training

NorthEast Washington Educational Services District (ESD) 101 trained six local producers on school food requirements so they could start selling to SFAs.

“These directors are so excited to be able to offer breakfast sandwiches that are made with English muffins down the street. And the kids recognize some of these local business names.”

- Abby Miller, nutrition services director, NorthEast Washington ESD 101

School Food Professional Training

The Gulf of Maine Research Institute led two foundational fish skills trainings for over 30 South Portland School Department school food professionals to increase their knowledge of handling and cooking raw fish. Attendees processed local redfish, monkfish, hake, pollock, and dab for a seven spice fish dish.

“I am excited to serve more fish, different types, in different ways. Typically, I’ve just been breaded and baking, so this training gave me the knowledge and confidence in cooking fish differently.”

- School food professional from South Portland School Department



Grantee Spotlight: Menu Updates

Valley School District (WA) introduced a cheesy chicken quesadilla made with a local tortilla. The recipe was served alongside a new salad bar that featured scratch-made Pico de Gallo, Washington-grown Honeycrisp apples, and fresh vegetables.

They also replaced heat-and-serve nachos with local, scratch-cooked pulled-pork nachos.



Impacts on School Food Authorities

Menu updates:

80

new recipes have been developed, some featuring locally sourced and student-preferred foods.

Student engagement:

132

taste-testing events with 26 recipes, enabling student feedback in menu development.



Workforce development:

17

new staff hires, including chefs who are hired with an explicit goal to help districts increase their scratch-cooking capacity, and new staff positions that facilitate relationships like a regional food systems coordinator.

Operational Barriers

- **Staffing and turnover:** SFAs experienced labor shortages at all levels, including food service director vacancies, and highlighted the need for significant staff buy-in and training to transition to scratch-cooking.
- **Budget constraints:** Grantees emphasized that local food procurement is expensive for SFAs and reductions in federal and state funding may limit their ability to sustain local purchasing.
- **Equipment differences:** Variations in kitchen equipment between school sites can hinder district-wide recipe execution.

Technical Assistance

Chef Ann Foundation and Kitchen Sync Strategies Collaborative teams have provided a total of **295 hours in 135 technical assistance interactions to grantees** on topics such as

- procurement,
- menu planning,
- central kitchen redesign, and
- transitioning to scratch-cooking operations.



“Chef Ann Foundation proposed that we negotiate a relationship with a single regional distributor who is willing to prioritize local sourcing to fix our redundancies. Before, we had three different farmers delivering to the same school; it was a huge amount of wasted effort for everyone. Now we have streamlined delivery for products from all different local farms and less paperwork, saving time and resources.”

- Andy Pense, director of child nutrition, Fayette County Schools, West Virginia

Next Steps

PLANTS grantees have made strong progress advancing local food procurement and scratch-cooking by deepening cross-sector collaboration and building partnerships that sustain this work.

Through June 2027, the focus will shift to capturing and refining best practices – highlighting not only what works but also how it works – to support long-term implementation, sustainability, and the scaling of school-driven local food system transformation.



The Chef Ann Foundation gets schools cooking. We help schools replace ultraprocessed foods with fresh, healthy, and delicious scratch-cooked meals that nourish kids and protect the planet. Since 2009, our programs have reached more than 19,000 schools in all 50 states, bringing better meals to 5.9 million kids.