Methods

Pre-survey and application process: defining “readiness”

In December 2017, a pre-survey that functioned as an application was shared with Iowa school districts, inviting them to participate in the SCBG pilot project. A total of 24 schools applied and 11 schools were selected to participate (Fig. 1). Two of the districts shared one food service director, bringing the total number of food service partners to 10.

Schools were selected through a scoring process, based on readiness indicators defined by the Local Foods Program farm to school team. The four main indicators included: previous experience with local food procurement, an established definition of local,
The 11 partner districts selected to participate met these readiness criteria. School districts of varying sizes were selected; six of these enroll between 1,000 and 2,000 students (Fig. 2).

**Figure 2.** Most participating districts have 1,000–2,000 students enrolled.

### School district partner, ISU Local Foods Program: project agreement

The 11 selected districts agreed to terms of participation written in the SCBG application (Fig. 3). Representatives of the Local Foods Program farm to school team facilitated the project agreement: they hosted monthly calls, provided technical assistance for local food procurement, menu planning, and marketing, and connected partner schools with kitchen equipment incentives at the close of the grant.

**Figure 3.** School district partner project agreement.

1. Food service staff will participate in monthly peer networking calls or Zoom meetings through December 2018.
2. Food service staff will attend at least one face-to-face meeting, conference or field day about Farm to School.
3. Food service staff will work with the Local Food Team to plan menus, identify local products to source, create specs and submit bids to farmers.
4. Schools will set a definition for “local.”
5. Schools will commit to serve local fruits and vegetables September and October 2018 for National Farm to School Month. They will participate in Iowa Local Food Day on October 11, 2018. Schools will work with the Local Food Team on a procurement goal for fruits and vegetables.
6. Schools will share stories and photos of the project at their school with the ISU Extension Local Foods Team.

Based on components of the USDA Farm to School Planning Toolkit, a set of five homework assignments were built into the project agreements. These functioned as a five-module curriculum that district partners completed throughout the project. The modules are titled:

1. Identifying your farm to school team
2. Defining “local”
3. Setting a local food procurement goal
4. Submitting an October Farm to School Month menu
5. Completing a small purchase procurement of local food

Districts completed these modules between monthly calls for the purposes of increasing their local procurement by 10% and participating in Iowa Local Day on October 11, 2018.

### Survey process

After eight months of hosting group calls, providing technical assistance, and reviewing district homework, 11 Local Foods Program farm to school team emailed a final survey with 16 questions to the participating districts. Of the 11 districts that signed up to participate, 8 completed the final survey, for a response rate of 73%; these 8 districts met the full requirements of the grant. Chelsea Krist, farm to school program coordinator and evaluator of the team, created and sent participants the final survey in November 2018. The electronic survey was disseminated using the Qualtrics® survey program. It asked participants to self-evaluate their learning, confidence, challenges, spending, and new projects that resulted from this project.

### Results: processes and learning

All respondents were moderately to highly engaged in the project and would recommend the project.

Participants were asked to self-evaluate their level of participation in the project from low participation to high participation. Of the eight respondents, 30% answered with moderate participation and 50% answered with high participation (Fig. 4). While all eight districts met the requirements of the grant, those who rated their level of participation as high were likely internally engaged in the project to a higher degree than those who rated their level of participation as moderate. A participant’s level of engagement only somewhat influenced their likeliness to recommend this project to other interested schools and districts. Of the eight respondents, six are very likely to recommend the project, one is somewhat likely, and one is neither likely or unlikely (Fig. 5).

**Figure 4.** All sites identified their participation as moderate to high.

**Figure 5.** Most sites are very likely to recommend the project.

Three sites are not confident finding and contacting local farmers—a note for future projects. The challenge of finding and contacting local farmers was reiterated in a second question. It asked participants to rate, from not challenging at all to very challenging, various aspects of local food procurement (Fig. 7). Respondents rated finding farmers and suppliers, and cost, as the most challenging components of procurement. They cited bidding requirements and time to prepare as the second and third most challenging aspects of local food procurement. Participants rated these challenges both before and after participating in the pilot, and their responses were averaged (Fig. 7, gray). Notably, the districts’ confidence leading local procurement work, but finding farmers remains a challenge.

### Sites are moderately confident leading local procurement

Three sites are not confident finding and contacting local farmers—a note for future project focus and potential for peer learning (Fig. 6).

**Figure 6.** Sites are moderately confident with components of local procurement.

### Recommendation of project

Participating sites were asked to rate their confidence leading several components of local procurement as a result of participating in the project. One site did not respond to this question. While all sites are moderately confident leading small-purchase and micro-purchase procurement, confidence varied on incorporating local food into menus and finding local farmers or other local food sources. Two sites are very confident incorporating local food into menus.
respondents found the homework assignments at least slightly useful. When averaged, all homework assignments were rated between moderately and very useful—the most useful assignment being the process of defining “local.” Followed by identifying a farm to school team, and setting procurement goals (Fig. 8). Respondents evaluated the individual processes used in the project on a scale of not helpful at all to very helpful. Components of the grant defined as processes include frequency of communication, group check-ins, homework assignments, field trip and networking, and technical assistance from Local Food Program representatives. When averaged, the rating of these grant processes falls between slightly and very helpful (Fig. 9).

Respondents ranked the field trip and networking as most helpful. This rating is confirmed by a separate evaluation of the group field trip to Minneapolis Public Schools, which can be accessed at www.extension.iastate.edu/files/iowa-school-food-service-directors-visit-minneapolis-public-schools.

Technical assistance from Local Food Program representatives was rated the lowest of all processes. These representatives offered technical assistance in the form of one-on-one remote support, however this was not defined in the survey or grant process. Therefore, respondents may not have known what the survey was referring to. Even so, staff should consider this outcome in planning for future projects.

These representatives facilitated all components of the grant. The peer-learning facilitated through group check-ins and the district-based homework assignments, may have aptly served most participants. As the frequency of communication was rated as moderately helpful, participants may have needed more support and communication from these representatives. One quote shared here echoes the need for additional support via remote or in-person participation in district farm to school team meetings: "I wish there would have been more communication with the Farm to School Committee and the Local Food Team representatives. There were sometimes questions I couldn’t answer about the pilot and the purpose, and how other schools do certain things. If someone from the Local Food Team was available to Zoom in, and/or be at one or more of our committee meetings, I feel we could be more productive.”

After working through this pilot procurement process, seven of the eight participants said it is very likely that their farm to school teams will continue to work together and set procurement goals for next year (Fig. 10). Insights about working as district farm to school teams included several benefits and plans for future collaboration.

Direct quotes from participants are listed below, and speak to the benefits of having multiple perspectives, sharing workloads, and maintaining project momentum (Fig. 11). The district team that is unlikely to continue to work together shared that their team was comprised of only two people, identifying the small team size as a barrier to continued work.

“Creating a Farm to School Committee was a big step for me. I think it gets us to get multiple people’s input from the school administration, school board, teachers, parents, food service staff, garden managers, and students.”

“I work better in group situations to network similar problems/ successes than I do with individual homework tasks that I feel is difficult to fit in a day’s time.”

“Everyone is excited about our team. It helped with keeping our group moving forward.”

“We will continue to utilize the homework to define our plan for a local monthly meal.”

Sites: outcomes and economic impact
Sites launched new farm to school activities through this project; most were cafeteria-based. Of the eight responding sites, seven collectively launched 22 new farm to school activities. One site answered that “no new farm to school activities occurred as a result of this project” (Fig. 12). The majority of new farm to school activities took place in the cafeteria. Seven sites are serving local foods for lunch or breakfast, six sites are featuring local food on a salad bar, and five sites are hosting cafeteria taste tests. Newly launched activities taking place in other school environments include classroom nutrition education, school garden work, and a farm tour.

Figure 10. Likelihood of continued district teamwork.

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Figure 10. Likelihood of continued district teamwork.
Six out of seven reporting districts achieved and surpassed the goal to increase local procurement by 10%.

To determine if school districts had increased local procurement after completing homework assignments and other requirements of the pilot project, evaluators compared the districts' November 2018 figures (Fig. 13) to figures collected from districts in November 2017. Across all seven reporting districts, six food service programs increased their local procurement by far more than 10% (Fig. 14); the seventh district had an increase of 8%. This district is a unique situation, in which district family funding supports a full-time educator-growth position who supplies local food to the school; the value of produce grown for the school was estimated.

Five of the seven reporting districts shared monetary goals for the fall of 2019. If these are reached, the 2018 figure will increase by at least 40% across all districts. The $300 figure shared by Site 7 is reached, the 2018 figure will increase by at least 40%

As districts shared stories about their Local Food Day activities as part of this evaluation, five common themes emerged regarding their successes: increased student participation in meal program, increased awareness of local foods, new farmer partnerships, purchased from a food hub for the first time (seven sites), and enhanced community support from volunteers and special guests.

Several sites mentioned key activities for success included local promotion of district participation in Iowa Local Food Day through newsletters, social media, and sharing special menus. Several direct quotes regarding district participation in Iowa Local Food Day are listed below (Fig. 15). Noted challenges include issues with recalled local product (from one company), a shortened National School Lunch Week schedule, and receiving promotional materials one day after the Iowa Local Food Day took place.

Figure 15 Insights from participating in Iowa Local Food Day

**“Our participation increased for Iowa Local Food Day due to our promotion and more increased awareness as well as exposure to different local foods through social media and sharing special menus.”**

**“We worked with the Iowa Food Hub for the first time and saw the benefits first hand in the amount of local food we served.”**

**“I worked with the Iowa Food Hub for the first time and we learned a lot about Iowa's local food system, which we were able to incorporate into our district's food program.”**

**“I worked with the Iowa Food Hub for the first time and we found out they were local.”**

**“We focused on Local Food Day/Week by providing local foods in our school district for the first time.”**

**“We continued our local foods into the next school week as it was National School Lunch Week and we wanted to offer more awareness of local foods, new farmer partnerships, and surpassed the goal to increase their local food procurement by 10%. Seven districts purchased product from local food hubs for the first time for Iowa Local Food Day, an event that contributed to the districts achieving higher farm to school goals.”**

**Conclusions and recommendations**

Ongoing technical assistance can alleviate challenges related to district-farmer partnerships.

Along with project successes, districts experienced several challenges to planning and implementing local procurement and broader farm to school initiatives. Some of these challenges, such as frequently changing district personnel and challenging growing seasons, cannot be controlled but only considered in long-term planning.

Challenges and prospective work remain around connecting district food service programs with farmers (Fig. 7). This group of district leaders preferred peer-learning opportunities, networking, and ongoing support (Fig. 9). Therefore, representatives of the Local Foods Program should consider how to further support district and farmer connections through creative, ongoing forms of technical assistance.

Districts with readiness indicators made marked accomplishments in growing their farm to school programs.

This evaluation of the SCGB “Helping Create Readiness and Relationships to Increase Local Procurement in Iowa Schools” shows clearly that the eight districts who fulfilled the project agreement (Fig. 3) are investing more time, teamwork, and funding in farm to school and local procurement initiatives. They met the four main readiness indicators: previous experience with local food procurement, an established definition of local, a free and reduced-price lunch rate above 50%, and being located within a food hub service area.

At the conclusion of this process, eight districts set local food procurement goals, nine set definitions of “local” (the most useful homework assignment), and seven established farm to school teams that are very likely to continue working together.

Of the seven districts who reported data, six met and surpassed the goal to increase their local food procurement by 10%. Seven districts purchased product from local food hubs for the first time for Iowa Local Food Day, an event that contributed to the districts achieving higher farm to school goals.

These positive outcomes could be connected to the fact that all finishing sites were moderately to highly engaged in the project and would recommend the project; they had a positive experience and gained confidence and experience working through challenges associated with local food procurement. They rated all components of the grant positively, and collectively launched 22 new farm to school activities.

A quote to conclude this evaluation speaks to one district’s ongoing motivation to grow local procurement and work through challenge of farmer partnerships—and indicates that this motivation is a result of this project:

**“While I never challenged myself to take on any more that minimal efforts with Farm to School, this process has opened my eyes to how important it is to not only meet that challenge but to take it further than what I had done in the past. I want to continue my district's participation and make more strides in reaching out to our local farmers and plan to come up with innovative ways to better communicate with them. I would not have done this or plan to continue if I was not involved with this program.”**

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**Figure 14. Dollars spent on local food, November 2018.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local fruit &amp; vegetables</th>
<th>Local dairy, eggs, &amp; meat</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Site 1</td>
<td>$3,200</td>
<td>$1,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Site 2</td>
<td>$1,202</td>
<td>$1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 3</td>
<td>$1,204</td>
<td>$2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 4</td>
<td>$1,204</td>
<td>$2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 5</td>
<td>$857</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 6</td>
<td>$580</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 7</td>
<td>$1,382</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>$11,296</td>
<td>$3,986</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Figure 13. Dollars spent on local food, November 2018.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>November, 2017</th>
<th>November, 2018</th>
<th>10% increase</th>
<th>November 2018 Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Site 1</td>
<td>$500</td>
<td>$4,793</td>
<td>Yes, 95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 2</td>
<td>$400</td>
<td>$1,320</td>
<td>Yes, 164%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 3</td>
<td>$3,000</td>
<td>$2,379</td>
<td>Yes, 23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 4</td>
<td>$1,306</td>
<td>$1,474</td>
<td>Yes, 12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 5</td>
<td>$480</td>
<td>$857</td>
<td>Yes, started at $1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 6</td>
<td>$860</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>Yes, started at $0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 7</td>
<td>$3,000</td>
<td>$1,902</td>
<td>No, 6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>$4,886</td>
<td>$14,132</td>
<td>Aggregated 100% increase</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>