



## NEWS ANALYSIS

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### Lansing Passes a Farm-to-School Test

*New law eases restriction on buying local products for student cafeterias*

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Great Lakes Bulletin News Service

TRAVERSE CITY—Michigan’s lawmakers and the governor just gave school children, farmers, and the state’s economy a tasty end-of-year holiday present: Legislation that supports schools’ expanding efforts to buy healthy, locally grown food for cafeteria meals and snacks.

Governor Jennifer M. Granholm signed the last two bills in the three-bill package the day before Christmas Eve.

“The governor was pleased to sign this important legislation,” Megan Brown, the governor’s deputy press secretary, told the *Great Lakes Bulletin News Service*. “This is truly a win-win for our kids and the economy.”

Enacting the bills puts Michigan among the ranks of at least [16 other states](#) that have already passed bills that help so-called farm-to-school programs take off.

But the bills’ relatively rapid passage also reflects growing interest in farm-to-school around the state. Legislators heard from numerous school superintendents, parents, farmers, and others from northwest to southeast Lower Michigan.

The new law accomplishes two big objectives of the farm-to-school movement in Michigan. First, it greatly reduces bureaucratic obstacle to significant food purchases by public schools. Second, it directs the state Departments of Education and Agriculture to lend schools and farms a helping hand in connecting for sales and good food—something that both sides in this new local market say takes time, effort, and new resources.

The net result could be a dramatic growth in farm-to-school programs across the state.

#### Quick Passage

Thanks to one part of the new law, starting in January schools will no longer be hamstrung by a state bidding regulation that was more stringent than federal law required. Schools can now buy \$100,000 worth of food, the federal limit, in a year without developing a formal bid process. That provision is contained in the pretty dry-to-read but important House Bills [6365](#) and [6366](#).

Before passage, the state had enforced a much smaller limit—less than \$20,000 a year.

This past March, farmers, parents, school officials, and others who packed a regional [farm-to-school conference](#) in Traverse City were stunned when they learned about that limit during a panel discussion and a workshop. Meanwhile, Beth Collins, the conference keynote speaker who shared her positive experiences moving this area’s Catholic school system toward local food, observed the frustrated reaction among conference participants to the state rule. A pioneering, national [food service consultant](#), she went home and wrote an opinion piece about it that the Michigan Land Use Institute published on it’s Great Lakes Bulletin News Service.



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Governor Granholm has signed new laws that will help Michigan schools catch up with farm-to-school programs in Florida and at least 15 other states.

Ms. Collins' piece caught the attention of the state Commission on Agriculture, which quickly passed a resolution supporting change.

It also caught the attention of state Representative Lee Gonzales, D-Flint, who was already considering drafting a bill to ditch the purchase and bid restrictions after reading an analysis of the rule by [C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at Michigan State University](#).

Representative Gonzales said that changing the bid provision was easy, "low-hanging fruit" for the state to change, and so he decided to seize the moment of interest that the farm-to-school conference generated. He introduced his bill in April, barely a month after the Traverse City conference.

At the time, Leelanau County farmer and recently retired MSU Extension Director Jim Bardenhagen, who sells potatoes, apples, and table grapes to schools in the Grand Traverse region called it a "no-brainer" for the state to change the rule.

Dozens of people wrote to legislators calling for change, many of them among the 330 people who attended the Traverse City conference.

Many of them told the lawmakers exactly what Ms. Brown, the governor's spokeswoman, said about the bill when announcing that Governor Granholm had signed it into law.

"It helps make sure our kids have fresh and healthy foods to choose from at school, and it benefits the local economy by helping schools purchase fresh grown Michigan products," she said.

### **Widespread Interest**

A look at the testimony and letters state legislators received from around the state shows just how much interest farm-to-school programming has gained in Michigan. Those making the economic and good food case to legislators included:

- Patty Cantrell of the Michigan Land Use Institute, which organized the Traverse City conference. She talked about the [progress](#) made in northwest Michigan since the nonprofit organization launched a farm-to-school initiative with area schools in 2004. And she noted how the bills could help not only schools but also the broader Michigan [food economy](#).
- Mike Hamm, of the C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at Michigan State University. He cited his research that shows we could boost Michigan's economy by \$200 million if we simply ate a bit more of those fruits and veggies that health officials recommend—and make sure they're grown in Michigan. "We can directly link public health needs, agricultural production, and economic development opportunities."
- Chris Bedford of the Center for Economic Security, who launched a Muskegon County farm-to-school effort and website, <http://www.healthyschoolmeals.org/>. He noted the millions of public dollars schools spend annually on food and said those dollars should go to local farmers: "In a period of economic crisis we should do everything we can to keep our tax dollars working in Michigan communities."
- [Michael Buell](#), superintendent of Grand Traverse Area Catholic Schools, which launched a major farm-to-school and wellness initiative last year.
- [Michael Murray](#), superintendent of Suttons Bay Public Schools, which is shifting to fresh local foods and is searching for dollars to upgrade the district's kitchen—built during a time when school officials assumed cooks needed only limited space for "heat and serve" processed meals, instead of fresh food preparation.
- Eric Hahn of [Cherry Capital Foods](#), a Traverse City-based food distributor who's building a business supplying local foods.
- Jill Baker of the Baker's Green Acres farm in Marion, near Cadillac, who wrote to the senate: "We are among the

local farmers seeking sustainable employment who would benefit from the measures you are considering.”

### **Help Instead of Hindrance**

The rest of the three-bill package is designed to actually *help* schools and farms hook up for sales and good food for kids.

[House Bill 6368](#), the “Farm to School Procurement Act,” directs the Michigan Departments of Education and Agriculture to cooperate in promoting farm-to-school efforts.

The bill charges the Michigan Department of Education with investigating all the different ways in which schools can purchase local food and stay within federal regulations. The bill then requires the department to educate food service directors about these opportunities, encourage them to do so, and provide fresh food preparation training for school cooks.

The department also must encourage schools involved in new construction projects to consider kitchen facilities capable of producing fresh and healthy school meals, along with opportunities for hands-on learning—a simple thing that school Superintendent Murray of Suttons Bay said he wishes had been in place several years ago when his district built its tiny school kitchen.

The new laws also require the state agriculture department to house a farm-to-school point person to coordinate efforts across state offices—including the Michigan Department of Community Health.

The agriculture department must also investigate opportunities for farmers, processors, and suppliers of local foods to tap into school markets and connect them to schools through Web directories and other tools. And, in a nod to the importance of agriculture to the economy of the state and its rural communities, the department is to assist in job creation around farm-to-school initiatives.

All of this is bound to affect another impact of farm-to-school efforts that Mike Hamm, of the MSU Mott program, spoke of in his testimony to legislators. Farm-to-school, he said, increases our children’s awareness of “where their food comes from and the real people who produce it.”