



# **California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program: 2024 Policy Recommendations**

# Policy Recommendations

---



## Overview

In response to the initial findings from the California Farm to School Evaluation, Berkeley Food Institute and Food Insight Group offer the following policy recommendations as the state considers next steps for California's Farm to School Incubator Grant Program. The Farm to School Evaluation Team<sup>1</sup> will provide updated information as the Farm to School Incubator grant-funded projects and evaluation activities evolve throughout the program, with final results and associated recommendations expected in 2026. Given statewide and national attention currently focused on school food and farm to school programs, we feel a responsibility to share policy options alongside emerging findings throughout the project rather than waiting until the end of the project period, carefully vetting these options against a growing body of experience and evidence across the country.

## Recommendations

The evaluation's early findings reveal that the Farm to School Incubator Grant Program's supply chain framework<sup>2</sup> is supporting progress toward the Farm to School Roadmap's<sup>3</sup> high-level goals to cultivate equity, nurture students, build climate resilience, and create scalable and sustainable change. Predictable funding was found to be a critical supportive element in starting up new farm to school activities and supporting ongoing work. Conversely, lack of permanent funding is a commonly cited challenge for farm to school programs in states without permanent funding.<sup>4</sup> Recent studies suggest that synergistic state and federal funding is not only improving meal service quality but also supporting the local food system.<sup>5</sup>

Given (1) early documented successes across the farm to school supply chain as a result of the grant program, (2) consistent growing demand for the program across the state,<sup>6</sup> (3) the state’s goal to improve meal quality and support California’s agricultural producers in coordination with California’s School Meals for All program, and (4) the Roadmap’s high-level goal to achieve scalable and sustainable change, we recommend that the Governor and state legislature adopt statutory language and continue to provide funding for the Farm to School program. The California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) should continue to improve its grant program application and award process with expanded capacity. Specifically:

**No. 1**

We recommend that the Farm to School Incubator Grant Program receive a baseline of General Fund investment to allow the program to continue to serve a diversity of schools, producers, and related partners. We also recommend that the Governor and state legislature consider additional diversified funding sources for the program, which may include the following:

- California’s Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF)
- State bond funding for infrastructure<sup>7</sup>

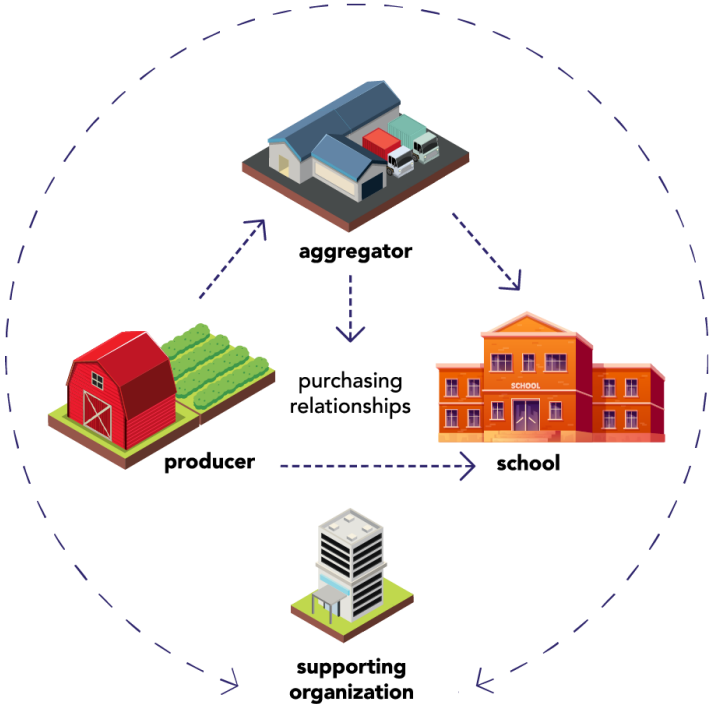
**No. 3**

We recommend that the legislature continue and expand existing synergistic programs that address key barriers to program sustainability and scalability, including the following:

- Kitchen Infrastructure and Training (KIT) funds, Farm to Community Food Hubs, Healthy School Food Pathway Workforce Development Program, Climate Smart Agriculture Programs, California Underserved and Small Producer Program (including bilingual educator staff positions), Beginning Farmer and Farmworker Training and Workforce Development Grant Program

**No. 2**

We recommend that the supply chain framework be maintained and the legislature consider adopting statutory language for the Farm to School Program that outlines the objectives of the program and provides guidance for future administrations.



## No. 4

### We recommend that CDFA continue to improve its grant program application and award process with expanded capacity:

- ❖ Continue CDFA efforts to streamline the application process and have it occur on a regular timeframe (e.g., announcements for new funding always happen in November with applications due within 45-60 days). Additionally, revise the grant award timeline to align better with the school year and planting season for farmers.
- ❖ Continue investing in the hiring and retention of CDFA regional leads and other permanent staff to expand relationships with producers and schools and to hold events that reach out to and include increasingly diverse audiences.
- ❖ Include extra points in the review process for Technical Assistance (TA) provider applicants that include targeted culturally responsive relationship and network building offerings for food producers, such as accessible and multilingual training and resources for small BIPOC producers in the funded TA track.

---

<sup>1</sup> California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program Evaluation Team (<https://californiafarmtoschooleval.org/evaluation-team-bios/>)

<sup>2</sup> "Supply chain framework" refers to the California Department of Food and Agriculture's strategy of splitting total grant funding across four tracks, such that multiple actors are supported across the supply chain. The four grant tracks include agricultural producers, institutional consumers (i.e., K-12 schools and districts, early care and education (ECE) entities), and partner organizations that facilitate farm to school programming.

<sup>3</sup> *Planting the Seed: Farm to School Roadmap for Success* ([https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Farm\\_To\\_School\\_Report\\_20220222-small.pdf](https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Farm_To_School_Report_20220222-small.pdf))

<sup>4</sup> Producers and school districts are reluctant to forge new relationships, learn new procurement techniques or dramatically shift their practices without assurance of ongoing funding. Bull, C. (2022). *Statewide Farm to School Procurement Incentives: Design Thinking & Analysis of the National Policy Landscape* [Master's thesis, Tufts University]. <https://bit.ly/LFPIToolkit>, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> *School Meals for All in California: Government investments are associated with better meal operations, labor practices, and local food sourcing* Research Brief • May 2024 (<https://ucanr.edu/sites/NewNutritionPolicyInstitute/files/397262.pdf>).

<sup>6</sup> Applicant demand for the 2024 grant program by California counties and legislative districts can be viewed on the *2023-24 California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program Total Requested Amount by County and Legislative District Maps* (<https://californiafarmtoschooleval.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/2023-24-CA-F2S-Incubator-Grant-Applicants-Map.pdf>). Applicants requested a total of over \$129 million for \$52.8 million available funds at the time the request for applications opened.

<sup>7</sup> Infrastructure investments should include "supply side" investments such as infrastructure to support sustainable food production, storage, processing, aggregation and distribution, and "demand side" investments such as upgraded and new school kitchens that maximize integration of freshly prepared, locally sourced products.

© 2024

**California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program Evaluation: 2024 Progress Report**