

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

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge and thank California Department of Food and Agriculture Secretary Karen Ross, Deputy Secretary Rachael O'Brien, and Nick Anicich and the entire **CDFA Farm to School team** for supporting the evaluation. We thank Thea Rittenhouse, Amy Garfinkel, and our thoughtful and insightful reviewers and Advisory Committee, including Christopher Brown, Francisco Benitez, Andy Naja-Riese, Alexa Delwiche, Paula Daniels, Wendi Gosliner, Jennifer McNeil, Camille Biazzo, Trisha Bautista Larson, Cassandra Bull, Lena Brook, Bob Knight, H Nieto-Friga, Jennifer Gaddis, Jennifer O'Connor, Eric Span, Moira O'Neill, A-Dae Romero-Briones, and Susie Sutphin, as well as our former Evaluation Team members and contributors, Nina Ichikawa, Jennifer Rodriguez, Allegra Roth, Ben Satzman, and Sakeenah Shabazz. Finally, we offer our sincere appreciation to the California Farm to School Grantees and their partners who have contributed their time and voices to this evaluation.

The California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program Evaluation was made possible by funding from the State of California. For more information please see: <https://californiafarmtoschooleval.org/>

Recommended Citation

California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program Evaluation Team (2024). CDFA Farm to School Incubator Grant Program Evaluation Progress Report: 2022-2024. <https://californiafarmtoschooleval.org/>

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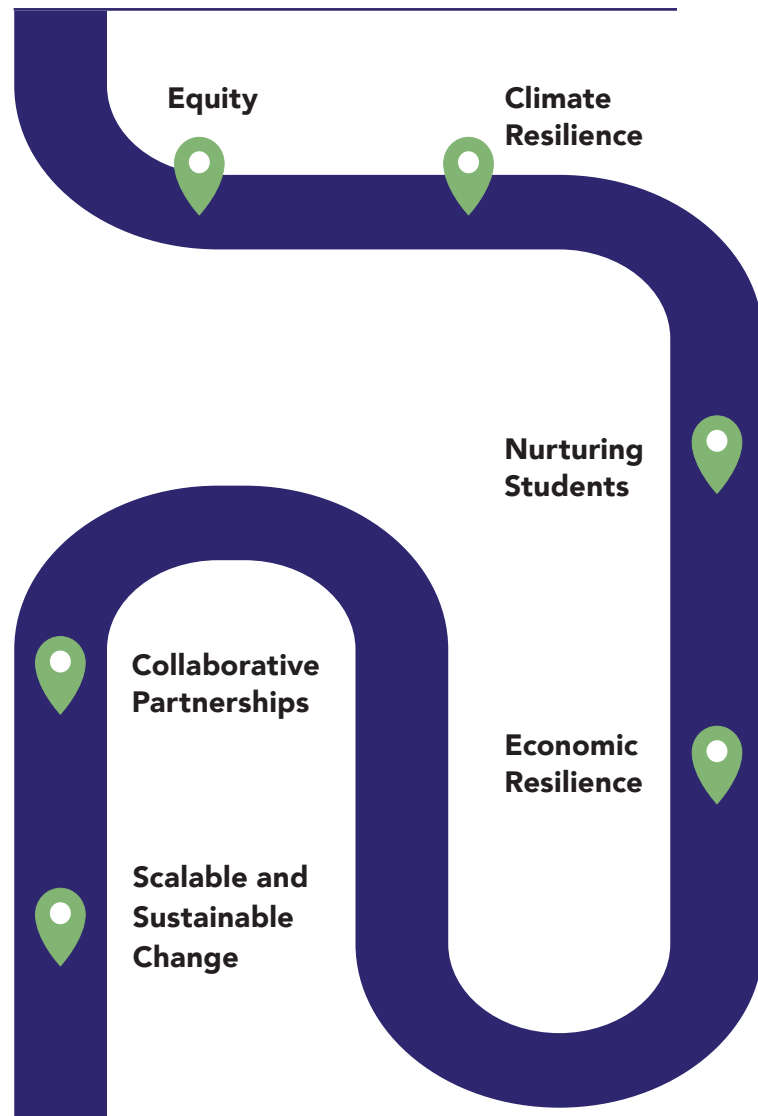
Key Takeaways and Alignment with the Farm to School Roadmap

The preliminary evaluation of the California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program's (F2S Grant Program) second grantee cohort (2022 Grantees) reveals significant progress in advancing the goals and principles set forth in the "Planting the Seed: Farm to School Roadmap for Success" (Roadmap). The key takeaways from the report demonstrate alignment with the Roadmap's priorities of cultivating equity, nurturing students, building climate resilience, and creating scalable and sustainable change.

Specifically, the program has supported:

-  **grantees' procurement of California grown or produced, whole or minimally processed foods;**
-  **continued use, expansion, and adoption of climate smart agricultural practices;**
-  **expansion of social networks that support farm to school work;**
-  **improved economic opportunities for a range of California producers; and**
-  **expansion of farm to school education and nutrition activities, especially in prioritized communities.¹⁸**

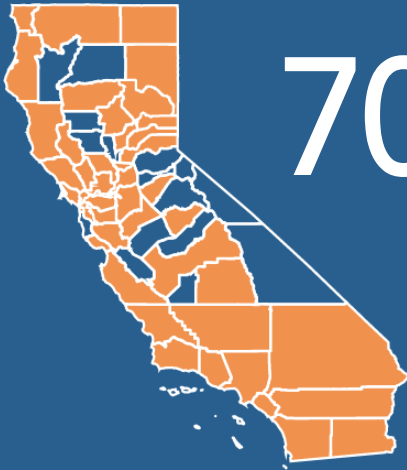
Primary challenges tend to reflect systemic barriers, which the grant program (including farm to school regional staff) addresses in part, and where policy interventions beyond the scope of the grant program are needed to fully achieve the Roadmap's vision of scalable and sustainable change.



¹⁸ 2022 F2S Grant Program RFA (https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/caf2sgrant/docs/2022_request_for_applications.pdf), p. 5.

By the Numbers

2022 Grant Program Investments and Reach



70%

of California's counties received grant funds.

84%



of schools served by the program are Title I schools.



94%

of California food producer grantees are small to midsize



42%

of California food producer grantees are BIPOC



62%

of California food producer grantees are women



71%

of students served by the grant program are eligible for free or reduced price meals

100%



of food producer grantees use or plan to use climate smart agricultural practices.

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Equity:



The grant program has reached priority populations, including by awarding proportionally more grants to BIPOC communities and organizations: while just 19% of California food producers are BIPOC, they were 60% of applicants and 50% of grantees.



Challenges persist in identifying and engaging priority food producers: small-to-midsize producers, socially disadvantaged producers, veteran producers, limited-resource farm households, and producers that use climate smart agriculture practices and production systems.¹⁹



Continuing to address equity-related gaps by building California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) staff capacity, including its capacity for multilingual outreach to diverse audiences, will move the program closer to achieving its equity-related goals.

¹⁹ 2022 F2S Grant Program RFA (https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/caf2sgrant/docs/2022_request_for_applications.pdf), p. 5-7

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Climate Resilience:

Producer grantees' use of climate smart farming practices, and the grant's role in sustaining and expanding these practices, demonstrate the program's potential for fostering environmental benefits.

- Of 49 producers awarded grants, eight (16%) reported adopting new climate smart agricultural practices in the first six months of the grant and 12 (24%) reported expanding climate smart practices on land in production for farm to school.
- Eleven farms reported adding acreage as a direct result of the grant within the first six months of the program, totaling 55 acres. These acres tended to be added on operations that are pesticide-free, use reduced tillage, and apply compost.
- Continued flexible support and targeted outreach to the grant program's priority producers can help ensure a diverse applicant pool and recruit farms using climate smart farming practices and systems.²⁰



Continued explicit support for food hubs and cooperatives may assist with providing busy food service professionals with accessible information about producer's farming practices, while providing a peer support network for climate smart producers to help navigate the marketing and distribution challenges typical of direct sales relationships.²¹



Areas for improvement include guidance for schools on best practices for procurement from priority producers, including a clear and operational definition for "climate smart" growing practices; development of transparent and reliable tracking and reporting systems that identify farm source and agricultural practices for school food buyers; and increasing the level of food procurement incentives to allow schools to meet production costs for targeted producers.



More data is also needed to understand whether the grant, alongside access to school food markets, is a strong enough motivator to incentivize new producers to change production practices and systems in order to participate.

²⁰ "Climate Smart Agriculture Practices, Climate Smart Agriculture Production Systems, or Other Regenerative Strategies" are defined in [2022 F2S Grant Program RFA](https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/caf2sgrant/docs/2022_request_for_applications.pdf) (https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/caf2sgrant/docs/2022_request_for_applications.pdf), p. 6.

²¹ F2S Grant Program's 2023-24 Request for Applications explicitly calls out public serving aggregation and distribution enterprises in the Producer Track, acknowledging the importance of this supply chain actor. [2023-24 F2S Grant Program RFA](https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/caf2sgrant/docs/2023-24_RFA_CA_Farm_to_School_IGP.pdf) (https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/caf2sgrant/docs/2023-24_RFA_CA_Farm_to_School_IGP.pdf).

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Nurturing Students:

The 2022 F2S Grant Program projects are reaching students across the state through increased fresh and locally sourced food in school meals and tastings, as well as hands-on gardening and agricultural education.

- Collectively, grantees planned to reach more than one in five (23%) of California's 5.9 million public school students.
- The program is reaching a diverse K-12 student body, serving proportionally more Hispanic/Latino students (65% project-wide compared to 56% statewide population) and BIPOC students (89% project-wide compared to 80% statewide population).
- 71% of students served by the grant program are eligible for free or reduced price meals, compared to 60% of students statewide.

- Early care and education (ECE) grantees aimed to serve nearly 1,000 children ages birth through age 5, plus an additional 200 school-age children.
- Within the first six months of the grant period, more than half (56%) of the K-12 school grantees intentionally procured foods from the F2S Grant Program's priority producers: small-to-midsize producers, socially disadvantaged producers, veteran producers, limited-resource farm households, and producers that use climate smart agriculture practices and production systems.

Through their programming, ECE grantees and their partner providers have prioritized procuring and promoting culturally relevant foods and education that celebrate the diverse backgrounds of the children and families they serve, through activities like culturally specific procurement partnerships, family cooking workshops, and CSA bags for families.



Photo courtesy of Santa Cruz City Schools

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Economic Resilience:

The resilience of the farm to school supply chain, and the economic benefits to growers in the long-run, will depend on the ability of schools, school districts, and ECEs to continue purchasing locally and the ability of growers to consistently meet that demand once the grant cycle is complete. The procurement analysis summarizes the California grown or produced, whole or minimally processed grant-funded food purchases by schools, school districts, and ECE organizations between April 1, 2023 and December 31, 2023.

- A total of nearly \$700,000 was purchased by school district, charter school, and county office of education grantees, primarily for school meals, with ECE organizations spending \$18,000 in grant-funded food procurement.
- The grant program has positively impacted growers' economic opportunities, with over half of producer grantees making school sales within the first six months of the grant.
- The grant program has also positively impacted grantees' network connections (farmers, distributors, schools), leading to improved market access, knowledge sharing, and farm to school participation.

We note that this is early in the grant cycle and anticipate that sales and purchases will expand in the next progress report, given the challenges with timely release of grant funds. Further data collection and analyses are needed to understand the factors influencing sales and the grant's long-term effects on growers' financial stability. To transition toward a school food market that better supports California's goals around priority producers and climate smart agriculture, school food buyers need more systematic and widespread access to information about which farms they are purchasing from and their associated characteristics.



Photo courtesy of Lodi Unified School District

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Collaborative Partnerships:



Aggregators and distributors, including food hubs, farmer cooperatives and values-aligned distributors with transparent supply chains, play a crucial role in facilitating farm to school procurement and supporting priority producers in accessing school markets.



Community organizations and partnerships are also essential for demystifying processes, ensuring cultural relevance, community buy-in, and youth engagement in farm to school programs.



Continued investment in these collaborative partnerships is vital to strengthening existing programs, bolstering relationships between schools and producers the program seeks to support and fostering best practices.

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Scalable and Sustainable Change:

The grant program has supported school districts seeking out California grown foods, farmers who use climate smart agricultural practices and production systems, and overall expansion of farm to school activities, including in regions with relatively minimal farm to school activity prior to the grant program. CDFA Regional Farm to School Staff have emerged as a vital resource for providing tailored support to grantees and facilitating connections with local communities. However, grantees report significant barriers to scaling and sustaining these areas of progress.



On farms, inadequate labor and a lack of markets, infrastructure, and financing are the most salient challenges.



Within school districts, insufficient farm to school supply chain knowledge and infrastructure, lack of scratch cooking capacity (including associated staffing difficulties), and bureaucracy at all levels of the system prevent sustained progress.

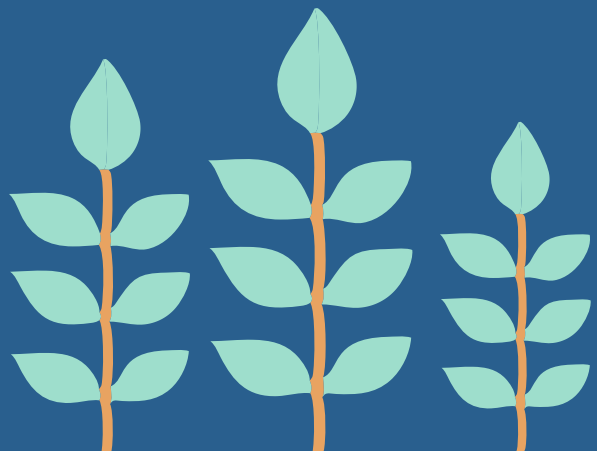
At this point, both in our evaluation process and in the broader trajectory toward sustainable change in the farm to school supply chain, we recognize that the F2S Grant Program is an intermediate step aimed at testing farm to school assumptions, approaches, and activities by individual actors and entities who face complex challenges. We are in the phase of learning how we might shift the broader farm to school system, such that existing supply chains facilitate progress toward the goals outlined in the Roadmap. To further accelerate change, challenges related to grant program implementation should continue to be addressed.

Entities and individuals throughout the supply chain reiterate that ongoing dedicated funding for this program will allow for longer-term planning and dependable markets so that

1. farmers prioritized in the grant program can learn about and access grant funds and school markets, confidently plan their growing around the needs of school buyers with consistent demand for their products, and have the time, training, and access to resources to plan for and implement environmentally beneficial farming practices,

2. school buyers can access information about the source and production methods of the food they purchase, plan menus around local crops and seasons and recruit, build, and sustain a trained labor force, and

3. community partners have the capacity to provide essential support to actors across the supply chain. Focused statewide investments in food hubs and distribution infrastructure, technology that facilitates transparency, kitchen infrastructure, as well as student nutrition and garden education can also help scale and sustain farm to school impacts.



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