



Farm to School Institute

Evaluation Report

Summer 2024

Institute Organizers and Partners:



Extension



Center for Regional Food Systems



Evaluation activities supported by:



Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
Introduction.....	4
Methods.....	4
Results	4
Conclusions	4
INTRODUCTION	5
EVALUATION METHODOLOGY	5
Program Implementation	5
Training Quality Outputs	6
Participant Outcomes.....	6
RESULTS	6
Program Implementation	6
Training Quality	7
Participant Outcomes.....	9
Participant Feedback	10
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	11

Executive Summary

Introduction

The 2024 Farm to School Institute, a joint effort by Marquette-Alger Regional Educational Service Agency (MARESA), Partridge Creek Farm (PCF), Michigan State University Extension (MSUE), MiSTEM Network Central Region, and Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems, aimed to provide educators and community members with the skills needed to lead garden- or farm-based school programs. Supported by the Michigan Health Endowment Fund's Nutrition & Healthy Lifestyles program, this initiative combined previously separate trainings hosted by MARESA, MSUE, and PCF into a single comprehensive program.

Methods

Public Sector Consultants (PSC) evaluated the Institute using session-specific questionnaires and a retrospective pre/posttest design to measure training quality and participant outcomes. Participants provided feedback on their experiences and responded to questions related to knowledge gains, confidence in applying lessons, and satisfaction with the training.

Results

Participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the sessions' content, with 92 percent indicating strong enjoyment of the sessions, 93 percent indicating increased knowledge, and 83 percent feeling confident in applying lessons learned. Participants also overwhelmingly reported strong agreement that participation in this three-day event was worth their time (86 percent) and that they experienced significant improvements in important indicators, including a 57 percent increase in the likelihood of starting or expanding farm- or garden-based programming. Participants also offered several opportunities for improving the Institute, such as offering additional resources (e.g., grant-writing support) and sharing recordings, notes, and takeaways from each session with all attendees.

Conclusions

The 2024 Farm to School Institute effectively enhanced participants' ability to implement educational programs focused on local foods and sustainable practices that will reach hundreds of students in the coming school years. By leveraging participant feedback on opportunities for improvement detailed in this report, such as providing grantmaking support and encouraging ongoing networking, future Institutes can continue to support the growth and impact of farm-to-school programming in the Upper Peninsula.

Introduction

In 2023, Marquette-Alger Regional Education Services Agency, in partnership with Michigan State University Extension and Partridge Creek Farm, hosted separate, back-to-back training events to provide teachers, school staff, and community organizations the tools to grow farm- and garden-based programming. These training events were one component of their respective garden- and farm-based programming:

MARESA and MSUE collaboratively lead the Locally Integrated Food Teams in the Upper Peninsula (LIFT UP) program. LIFT UP is a land-based learning project that offers students an opportunity to work with their classmates, local farmers, and school lunch staff to learn about and come up with solutions to improve local food access in schools.

PCF's reGENERATE initiative is an organization-wide effort to educate community members and local school students on the importance of local foods and farm-to-school programming.

The 2023 trainings were tailored to provide attendees with information specific to the LIFT UP and reGENERATE initiatives. Some individuals attended both trainings, while others attended just one. Overall, evaluations from each training showcased progress toward intended outcomes and received positive feedback from attendees. However, feedback for both trainings indicated that participants felt like much of the content was covered extremely quickly and could have benefited from more time. It was also frequently mentioned that attendees wanted to better connect with other schools implementing similar programs.

To streamline operations and respond to some of this feedback, MARESA, MSUE, and PCF partnered with MiSTEM Network Central Region and Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems to integrate their trainings and offer the 2024 Farm to School Institute. By offering a more comprehensive program to all participants, the joint Institute aims to build a strong network of Upper Peninsula-based educators pursuing farm- and garden-based programming in their schools. The Institute was hosted from June 18 through June 20 at Ishpeming High School and PCF. The Institute included more than a dozen sessions, including interactive workshops, panel discussions, and networking events.

Evaluation Methodology

In 2023, MARESA and PCF separately engaged Public Sector Consultants to identify a series of indicators to demonstrate progress toward short-, medium-, and long-term program outcomes. PSC designed surveys to capture program outcomes and other important feedback identified by the project teams. In 2024, PSC worked with MARESA and PCF to blend their evaluation indicators to create a single, streamlined evaluation plan that met the needs of both organizations. These specific outputs and outcomes included:

Program Implementation

- Reach (e.g., number of attendees, number of students potentially impacted by the programs supported)

- Participant satisfaction (e.g., session enjoyment)

Training Quality Outputs

- Program delivery and planning (e.g., participants receiving helpful information ahead of time, impact of trainers and environment on participant experience)
- Session-specific feedback (e.g., open-ended feedback to session presenters and Institute organizers)

Participant Outcomes

- Increase knowledge of farm- and garden-based programs (e.g., awareness of resources, knowledge of learning opportunities)
- Increase confidence in applying lessons learned (e.g., likelihood of pursuing expanded programming)

As part of the evaluation, PSC developed two digital surveys. These included brief questionnaires that participants were encouraged to complete directly following each session and a longer survey designed to measure training quality and changes in participant outcomes before and after attending the full training. PSC developed these surveys using a combination of validated best practices (e.g., Kirkpatrick Evaluation Model) and collaboratively developing novel measures specific to training content and outcomes with the training organizers. PSC also leveraged a retrospective pre/posttest design to assess change in participant outcomes before and after attending the Institute. Participants also had the opportunity, through short-answer questions on both surveys, to offer more specific feedback or recommendations for improvement.

PSC analyzed the data to identify areas for improvement and the level of program success in achieving its intended goals.

Results

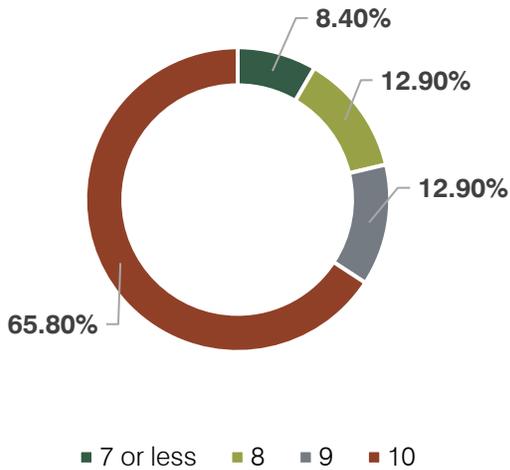
The evaluation results for each program component, including process outputs, training quality, and participant outcomes, are described below.

Program Implementation

Of the 22 teachers, school staff, and community agency representatives in attendance, 21 completed an evaluation at the end of the Institute. The school programs represented by these participants reach anywhere from a single classroom of 15 students to entire school districts of up to 600 students. These 22 participants also completed a total of 155 session-specific evaluations across the 11 sessions offered through the Institute.¹ Sessions included lectures, hands-on skill-building workshops, and community-building activities. Following each session, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement “I enjoyed this session” on a scale of one to ten (with one being strongly disagree and ten being strongly agree). Of the 155 responses recorded across all 11 sessions, 142 (92 percent) were ratings of eight or higher (Exhibit 1).

¹ Not all participants attended each session, and not all attendees completed evaluations for each session they attended.

EXHIBIT 1. Participants' Agreement with the Statement "I Enjoyed This Session"



Note: 1 = Strongly disagree, 10 = Strongly agree; N = 155
Source: Farm to School Institute session survey

Training Quality

Program Planning and Delivery

In the post-Institute evaluation survey, participants strongly agreed with a series of metrics to assess the overall quality of the training opportunity provided by the Institute. Eighteen of the 21 participants (86 percent) strongly agreed that their learning was enhanced by the training environment and the trainers, and that participation in the Institute was worth their time. Seventeen participants (81 percent) strongly agreed that they were engaged by the training activities and exercises and that the activities and exercises enhanced their learning. The only statement that a majority of participants did not strongly agree with was, "I received helpful information prior to the training;" only seven (33 percent) strongly agreed, with 12 (52 percent) agreeing, and two people (10 percent) strongly disagreeing.

EXHIBIT 2. Participants' Agreement That the Institute Was Well-Organized and Well-Delivered

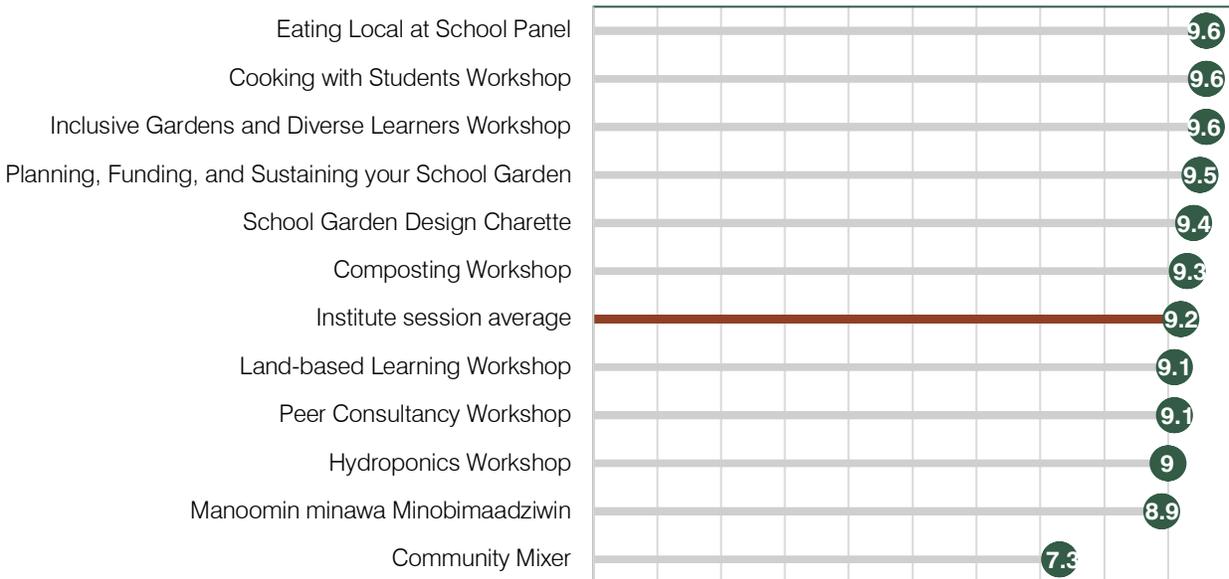


Note: N = 21
Source: Farm to School Institute evaluation survey

Session Evaluations

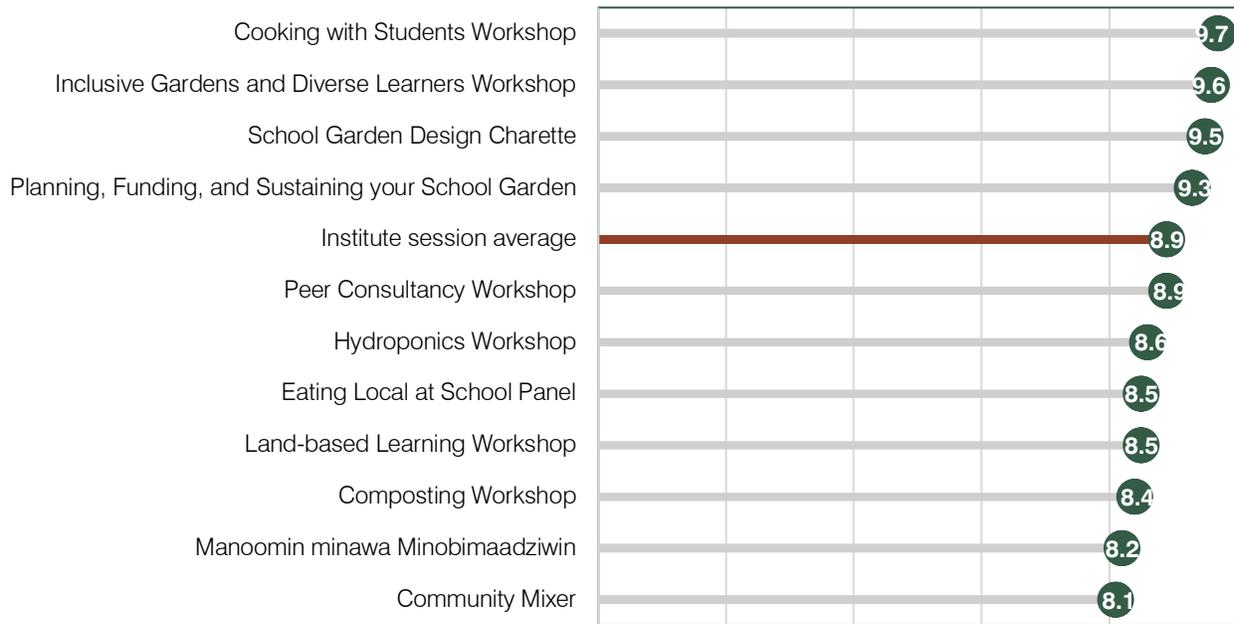
Following each session, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with two statements on a scale from one to ten (with one being the lowest level of agreement and ten being the highest): “This session increased my knowledge on the topic” and “I am confident that I will be able to apply the lessons learned from this session.” On average, participants indicated a high level of agreement with both statements across all sessions. The average response for increased knowledge was 9.2 and confidence applying lessons learned was 8.9. Individual session averages ranged from 7.3 to 9.6 for increasing knowledge (Exhibit 3), and from 8.1 to 9.7 for confidence in applying lessons learned (Exhibit 4).

EXHIBIT 3. Participants’ Agreement That the Institute Sessions Helped Increase Their Knowledge



Note: 1 = Strongly disagree, 10 = Strongly agree; N ranges from 9 to 22
Source: Farm to School Institute session survey

EXHIBIT 4. Participants’ Agreement That Institute Sessions Increased Their Confidence in Applying the Lessons Learned



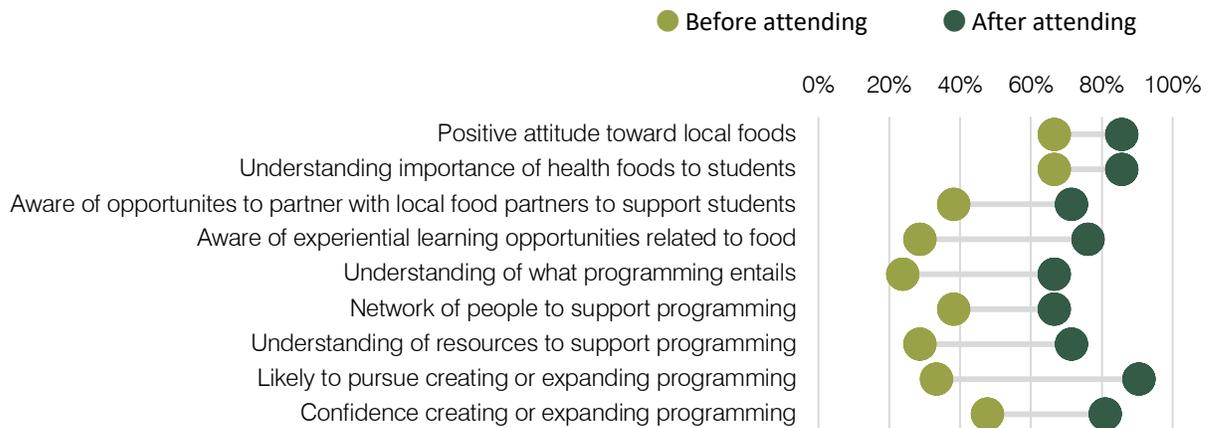
Note: 1 = Strongly disagree, 10 = Strongly agree; N ranges from 9 to 22
Source: Farm to School Institute session survey

The largest difference between agreement in increased knowledge and confidence applying lessons learned were the Manoomin minawa Minobimaadziwin (The Good Berry and the Good Life) session, the Eating Local at School—Investigating the Supply Chain panel discussion, the Composting workshop, and the Land Based Learning workshop.

Participant Outcomes

This evaluation used a retrospective pre/posttest design, so at the end of the Institute, participants were asked to reflect on several statements and indicate their agreement based on how they felt before and after participating. Participants reported stronger agreement with each key outcome statement after attending the Farm to School Institute (Exhibit 5). The largest increase in agreement was with the statement “I am likely to pursue creating or expanding farm- or garden-based programming,” with only 33 percent strongly agreeing that they felt that way before their participation, compared to 90 percent after (an increase of 57 percentage points). Other significant increases were in awareness of experiential learning opportunities related to local foods (48 percentage point increase), understanding of what farm- or garden-based programming entails (43 percentage point increase), and understanding of the resources available to them to support farm- or garden-based programming (43 percentage point increase).

EXHIBIT 5. Participants' Agreement with Each Key Outcome Statement, Before and After Attending the Farm to School Institute



Note: N = 21
 Source: Farm to School Institute evaluation survey

At posttest, the highest levels of strong agreement were related to the likelihood of creating or expanding programming (90 percent), having positive attitudes toward local foods (86 percent), understanding the importance of fresh and healthy foods to students (86 percent), and confidence creating or expanding farm- or garden-based programming (81 percent). Despite seeing one of the largest percentage point increases, fewer than 70 percent of participants strongly agreed that they understood what a farm- or garden-based program entails after training. Additionally, fewer than 70 percent strongly agreed that they had a network of people to support programming moving forward.

Participant Feedback

Participants were given multiple opportunities at the end of each session and upon completion of the entire Institute to offer open-ended feedback to the presenters and organizers on what they felt could have been improved, as well as suggest additional resources that could be beneficial. Participants were also asked to provide input on the ideal timing for this type of training in the future, and overwhelmingly agreed that June is the best month to host a training.

Overall, participants seemed happy with the length of the event, with only two participants noting that they would change the length. One suggested that they would shorten it by a day; the other thought it could have been a bit longer. Regarding the mixer, many participants shared that while it was nice to connect and reconnect with others, the venue and environment was loud and overwhelming. Both in the Institute and session evaluations, people requested access to recordings, presentations, or other information covered at sessions, including sessions they were not able to attend.

When asked about additional resources, the most common suggestion was funding assistance. Multiple people said that dedicated time to complete grants, proposals, and other funding applications, potentially with support from grant writers or program staff experienced in obtaining funding for this type of

programming, would be a worthwhile addition. Participants also requested participant and presenter contact information to allow them to continue building their networks after the Institute. A few individuals specifically said they would have liked to be able to connect more with community members throughout the Institute. Some also suggested more engagement between the Institute organizers and attendees throughout the year to stay connected and follow up to make sure progress is being made in creating or expanding school programming.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The 2024 Farm to School Institute successfully provided essential training and resources to educators and community members, enabling them to pursue and enhance garden- or farm-based programming within their schools. Evaluation results indicated high levels of participant satisfaction, increased knowledge, and confidence in applying lessons learned. They also highlighted significant improvements in key outcome indicators, such as participants' likelihood to create or expand programming and their understanding of farm- or garden-based education. Some areas for future outreach or connection could include sharing participant and presenter contact information. This would allow attendees to continue building networks that can support program building or expansion. Overall, the Institute made substantial strides in supporting farm-to-school programming, promoting local food education, and improving the health and well-being of students and communities in the Upper Peninsula.

Institute Organizers and Partners:

Marquette-Alger Regional Education Service Agency, <https://www.maresa.org/>

Partridge Creek Farm, <https://partridgecreekfarm.org/>

Michigan State University Extension, <https://www.canr.msu.edu/outreach/>

Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems, <https://www.canr.msu.edu/foodsystems/>

MiSTEM Network 906 Central Region, <https://nmu.edu/mistem/>

Michigan Health Endowment Fund, <https://mihealthfund.org/>

Public Sector Consultants, <https://publicsectorconsultants.com>