



Lessons from
**The Georgia ACRE Collective's Local
Foods Incentive School Pilot Program**

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Introduction

In 2023, the Georgia ACRE Collective launched an opportunity for metro Atlanta school districts to increase the amount of local, sustainable foods served in their cafeterias.

Led by The Common Market Southeast, the ACRE Collective's Local Foods Incentive School Pilot Program provided both financial support and technical assistance to increase the quantity and diversity of local products served in school meals. Through the pilot, schools received support with local product identification and sourcing, farmer coordination, recipe development, menu integration, student taste tests, staff training, and communications.

THIS CASE STUDY:

Demonstrates the impact this incentive funding had on farmers, students, and the local food system.

Shares lessons learned and best practices for future policy and program implementation.

Background

The ACRE Collective launched its school program to pilot how local food incentive funding might spark and sustain greater purchasing of Georgia-grown foods in school cafeterias. The pilot aimed to identify challenges and explore the essential ingredients of an effective local food incentive program in Georgia.

Throughout the implementation process, the team identified and addressed several key challenges, including product sourcing, staff training, and technical assistance needs for schools. By collaboratively resolving these issues, the pilot not only proved the value of local sourcing but also created a practical roadmap for how schools and farmers can mutually benefit from investing in and building a sustainable local food system.

The Common Market Southeast served as the lead partner for this ACRE Collective program, managing product sourcing from local growers and distribution to participating school sites. **Georgia Organics** contributed culinary training and taste test support to ensure student acceptance of new foods. The **Alliance for a Healthier Generation** provided project evaluation to track outcomes and measure impact.



How Local Food Is Transforming School Meals



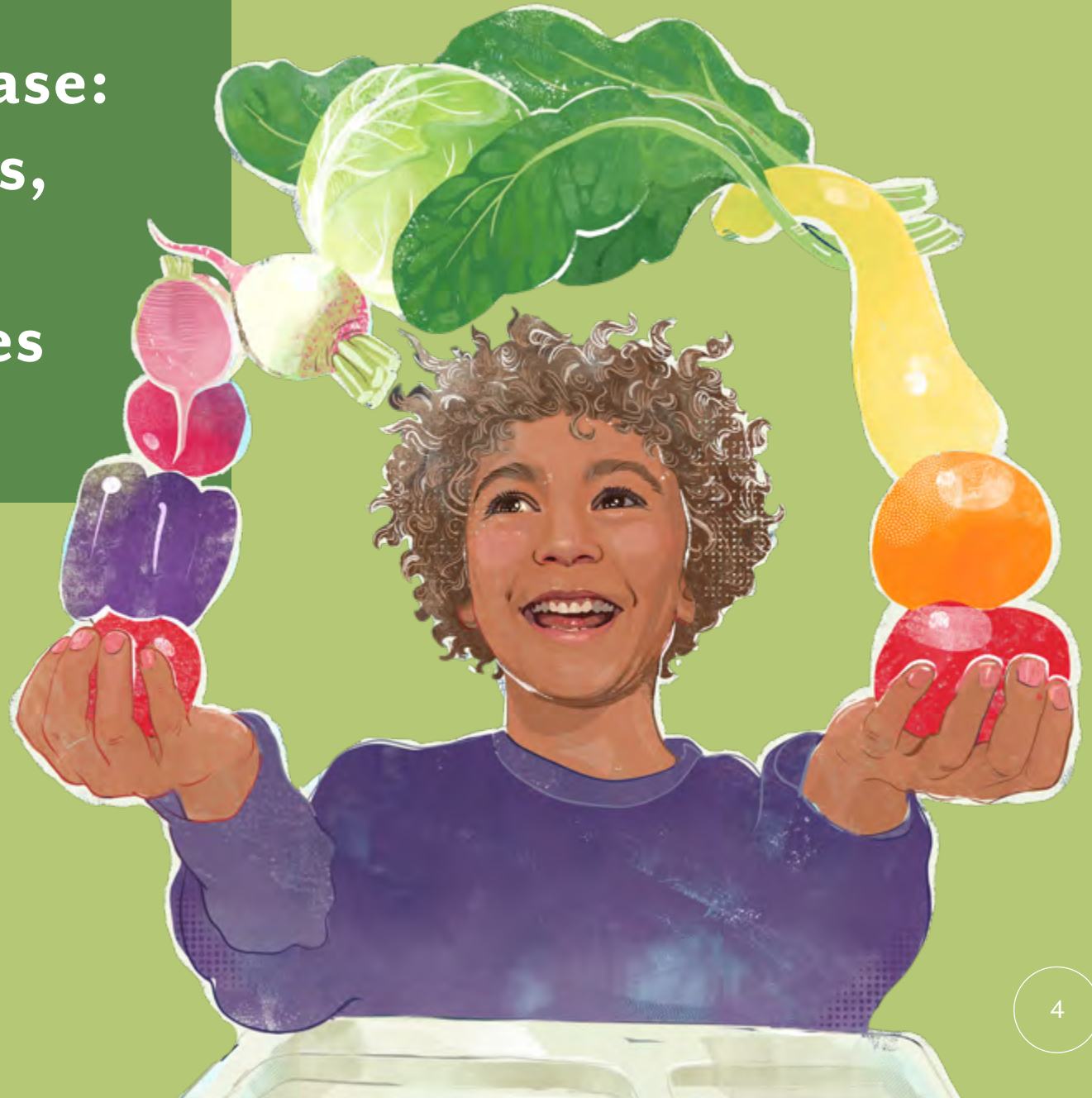
The Common Market
1.64K subscribers



3 districts in greater Atlanta participated in the pilot, comprising 9 schools:

- **Marietta City Schools:** Sixth Grade Academy, Middle School, and High School
- **Rockdale County Public Schools:** C.J. Hicks Elementary, J.H. House Elementary, and Peek's Chapel Elementary
- **Atlanta Public Schools:** Burgess Peterson Academy, Garden Hills Elementary, and South Atlanta High School

Impact Showcase: Benefits to kids, farmers, and local economies



Benefits to kids and school communities

The pilot program enriched meals at participating schools with a wider variety of local fruits, vegetables, dairy products, meats, poultry, and grains. Across the three participating districts, over 20,000 children were introduced to roughly 50 new local products.

New menu items at pilot schools showcase local products, notes **Kimberly Della Donna**, formerly of **Georgia Organics**. In Marietta, menus featured Lo Mein with local shiitake mushrooms, and kale braised as greens and featured in “rainbow salads.” Rockdale served grass-fed beef burgers and sweet potato soufflés throughout the entire district, and a recipe for blueberry crisp made with Georgia-grown berries was developed with student feedback.

“These menus are now on par with some of the menus in our really popular farm-to-table restaurants in Atlanta.”

Kimberly Della Donna (right)



The program empowered school food service teams to prepare meals that better reflect and celebrate students' cultural backgrounds. In Marietta, staff worked with ACRE Collective partners to learn how to prepare fresh, free-range chicken dishes—food that looked more familiar and appealing to students than the pre-cooked products previously used. “Now that they’ve mastered that recipe... our staff truly enjoys having that variety, and then they get to showcase some of their skills as well,” said **Director of School Nutrition Cindy Culver, Marietta City Schools**.

The ACRE Collective's school community outreach efforts also reflected the connection between food and culture. During Black History Month, ACRE Collective partners worked to source local products for the **Atlanta Public School** district's special menu, like pink-eyed peas and collards. As **Marietta's Cindy Culver** noted, when students thank staff for serving homemade carnitas in tacos and burritos, they're recognizing that “the work that we're doing is really for them.”

The ACRE Collective used farmer and local ingredient spotlights as key communication tools within the school community. Cafeterias displayed the “farmer profiles”

Chef Lisa Dailey of Rockdale County Public Schools with a blueberry crisp made with organic blueberries from Byne Blueberry Farm.



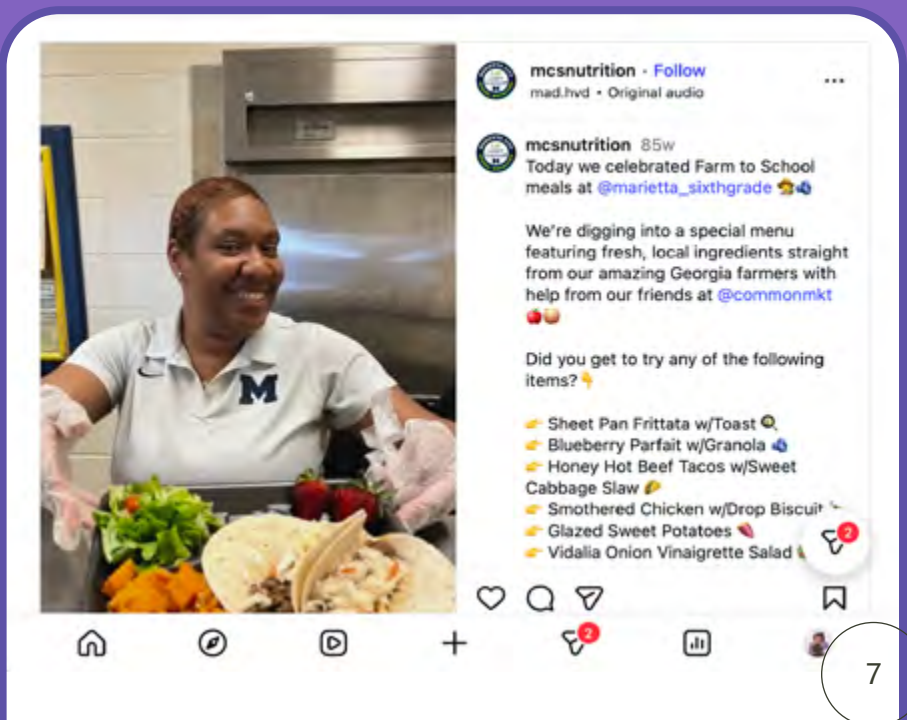
information about the farms and farmers behind the food—sharing their stories, locations, and connections to the region.

This marketing approach helped students and families understand not only what they were eating, but who was involved in producing it. When paired with local media coverage, these efforts strengthened community awareness and built a shared sense of pride around supporting local growers and participating in the pilot.

Sharing these stories with the wider community builds momentum. “When you start educating the community, [you get] more support,” shared **Blaine Allen, School Nutrition Director at Rockdale County Public Schools**. “Because at the end of the day, when we talk about public schools, it’s public support that makes schools thrive.”



Top: A cafeteria-line flyer promotes local ingredients at J.H. House Elementary School of Rockdale County Public Schools. Bottom: Marietta City Schools Nutrition Program promotes the pilot and some of the new local menu items using social media.



Benefits to farmers

The ACRE Collective is committed to growing the supply of locally produced food, and that means working closely with the region's farmers and ranchers. For farmers like **Alexis Edwards of R&G Farm** in Dublin, Georgia, that collaboration makes all the difference. Alexis appreciates that The ACRE Collective is asking all the right questions: "How can I help a small to medium farmer grow? How can I help to get their product out to the consumer? How can I get it into schools so children can have access to healthier food?"

For farmers, gaining entry into the school food market is complex and often considered too difficult. Additionally, schools that traditionally source from large-scale industrial suppliers lack the knowledge and capacity to directly connect with local farmers. The pilot program removed those barriers, opening pathways to stable, business-sustaining institutional markets for **38 local producers**. "ACRE Collective is getting people connected that would never be connected," shared **Edwards**. Describing the soufflé made by Rockdale County Public Schools from sweet potatoes he grew, **Rafael Guerrero of La Hacienda Sweets** in Lyons, Georgia, simply said, "We have been able to help supply and feed America."



Top: Rafael Guerrero (right) with members of the La Hacienda Sweets farm family. Bottom: Alexis Edwards of R&G Farm.

The program also strengthened relationships between producers and their communities, making the work they do more meaningful. “[J]ust to know that we are helping feed our kids in schools, that means everything,” said **Guerrero**.

“[W]e get so much positive feedback from the teachers, from the students,” added **Edwards**.

“The kids come here for field trips, and the students say, ‘Until your lettuce was in the cafeteria, we didn’t even want to eat in the cafeteria. Now we have actual food that tastes good.’”

Benefits to local economic resilience

The program generated a significant economic impact for the region: Over \$180,000 was spent on local products, generating nearly \$320,000 in local economic impact. The dollars circulated among members of Georgia’s local economies, rather than between national or even international corporations.

Beyond the immediate financial benefits, the pilot supported

a shift toward sustainability in the region’s food system. By helping historically underserved farmers access bigger, more reliable markets, the pilot supported their operational growth, which in turn increased the supply of local food and overall regional food security.

On the buyer side, the pilot enabled school districts to choose local food by providing the necessary relationships, skills, and knowledge to source and prepare local food. The pilot demonstrated what locally grown food can look and taste like in cafeterias, and then communicated its value through marketing materials that engage students and families. Schools received positive feedback for their participation through the pilot’s public recognition and support for their efforts.

Finally, the pilot supported food system transformation by serving as a tested logistical model, one that meets challenges in supply chain coordination, training, and menu development. Other schools can adopt and adapt the pilot program’s elements in their own regions.

Tegan Hagy, ACRE’s school pilot consultant, observed, “So much of this feels impossible until you see what’s possible. It makes people more open to change. And that’s what this is: a systems change.”

Impacts

From 2023-2025, the ACRE Collective's pilot program brought positive benefits to Georgia farmers and students, including:



200 hours of technical assistance provided to school districts through hands-on culinary trainings, taste tests, menu development, and ordering support

20,000 students had access to local products in their school cafeterias

32 Georgia farms & producers supported, across **29** counties

20+ recipes featuring local food items

\$180,000+ reinvested into the Georgia economy through food purchased from local farms leading to nearly **\$320,000** in local economic impact

50+ Georgia food items served in schools, including grassfed beef, satsumas, muscadines, mushrooms, free-range chicken, asparagus, lettuce, cucumbers, and more

Lessons Learned: Key takeaways for other districts



1 Success depends on relationships.

For any transformative change to last, everyone involved must be a true partner: equally heard and equally invested.

Tegan Hagy, school pilot consultant with the **ACRE Collective**, cautioned against offering “a canned program.” The key to the success of any program like this, **Hagy said**, “is taking a person-first approach, meeting districts where they are, and co-creating approaches tailored to each school’s needs. This allowed [districts] to create farm-to-school programs they could take ownership of.”

Blaine Allen, **Rockdale County Schools’ nutrition director**, agreed that the partnership must come first “because there are so many ... factors that take place from day to day in order for a successful school nutrition farm-to-school pilot program to work. You need partnership and [for] the community outside the school organization to help out.”

The pilot’s built-in support reinforced these relationships. For each school, pilot participation began with an on-site visit. ACRE partners met with school leadership, toured the cafeterias, assessed equipment and storage capacity, and got to know the staff

members who would implement the changes to school menus.

The Common Market then followed up with bi-monthly coaching calls with school nutrition staff to review availability lists, answer questions, and work through any issues relating to the changes in their routines.

Each of these support structures proved necessary: School nutrition programs must ensure that kids are fed within a short time period in accordance with strict budgets and state and federal nutrition guidelines. As **Hagy** noted, even a single menu change can create a domino effect across the entire complex system.

By focusing on the needs and skills of the people involved, the pilot overcame these challenges. With the support of ACRE partners, **Atlanta Public Schools’** local purchasing surpassed the scope of the pilot. “In addition to the regular support calls, I was able to get good customer service from The Common Market on the business side,” said **Susan Stone**, the district’s **Senior Director of Nutrition**. “If I needed to make purchases outside of the grant, The Common Market has a good setup with customer service as well. Those two areas of support helped us to expand.”





Above: Rockdale County Schools Nutrition Director Blaine Allen takes part in a training. Below: The Common Market's Dory Cooper leads a culinary training with Atlanta Public Schools' staff.



2 Pair Financial Assistance with Technical Support

Incentive funding can play an essential role in supporting local procurement programs. To complement the increased funding for purchasing fresh, local food, school nutrition staff often require additional training to help them prepare and serve it effectively.

It is common practice for today's time-pressed school nutrition programs to use processed and frozen ingredients. "Getting back to cooking more scratch has been challenging," shared **Marietta's Cindy Culver**, especially "when you're feeding thousands of kids in a day and within a very constricted amount of time during lunch." Confidently and efficiently deploying from-scratch cooking skills gives her staff "a lot more pride in the outcome of our menus."

ACRE partners also worked with nutrition staff on recipe development, helping identify realistic menu items for tight lunch schedules. District chefs played a vital role in this, offering direct, hands-on guidance. **Blaine Allen** described the leadership of **Rockdale County Public Schools' Chef Lisa Dailey**, who helped develop their recipes: "Being a former school nutrition manager, [she] really knows how to connect with staff and [make] things simple."

The chefs brought an infectious passion for fresh ingredients and local foods to the kitchens where they work. As **Chef David Garcia of Marietta City Schools** explained to the **Georgia Department of Education's FuelCast podcast**, "What I want to do is have a produce-driven menu. I want to get that from local sources. Georgia is a big ag state, and I want to use as much local produce as we can."

"We did raw beef patties for sliders from White Oaks Pastures," said **Atlanta's Susan Stone**. "This district has not done raw meat in a very long time. We felt confident that the pilot schools had extra attention, and our chefs were there to provide extra support."

3 Secure Buy-In from Students and Staff

A successful school lunch is one that gets eaten, and a successful program is one that is supported by the community. Before launching a full-scale procurement transformation, it's essential to get input from students and school communities.

ACRE partners conducted taste tests at pilot schools to verify whether students would welcome new ingredients and recipes. **Rockdale's Blaine Allen** said, "We definitely want to involve and engage students in our process ... and most importantly, get buy-in from them."

This collective buy-in is part of ACRE's program design. Ongoing communication about the program earns the trust and support of the school community. "All of the support, down to the marketing, the planning, and the communication, was making sure that the pilot was a win-win for our school nutrition department, the school, the students, and the teaching staff," **Allen** said. "It's a total collaboration, and I think that's the game changer."

Left: Students participate in a rainbow kale salad taste test.



[[Caption]]

4

Tell the Story, Then Tell It Again

Robust marketing and storytelling efforts are necessary to earn support for changes to school meal programs.

The school community needs to hear and experience the story of why local food matters. In the beginning, **The ACRE Collective's Program Manager, Emily Hennessee**, presented at Parent-Teacher Association meetings to share information about the pilot with families. Students learned about the origins of their lunches from culturally significant cafeteria menu items, such as local collards during Black History Month and Sol Y Sabor with local chicken.

These lessons even made their way into the classroom: “Miss Davie taught us about how when a fruit or vegetable is not in season, they have to drive from a faraway farm to get those things here,” shared one **student**. “[That] can also put pollution in the air.”

Partnerships with classroom educators helped students understand how fresh, local food benefits their health and the environment. As one **student** put it, local sourcing matters “because if they go to local farms, it’s fresh.” Another **student** added, “We need proper food [with] energy and protein to boost our immune systems, to have fun in gym and recess.”

ACRE relied on trusted messengers to reinforce the message. “One of the principals just wrote us an email about the cheeseburger sliders and talked about how delicious they were and how she was promoting the pilot program to parents,” said **Susan Stone of Atlanta Public Schools**. “She’s able to promote our department and our program.”

Schools also shared their experiences with the pilot on social media, telling the story to the wider community. Posts have showcased local meals such as Peruvian chicken from **Hunter Cattle** in Marietta City Schools and Georgia-grown sliders, salads, and fruit in Atlanta Public Schools.

Local news outlets covered the activities of the pilot program, portraying it as both a success and a replicable model. For **ACRE's Tegan Hagy**, the most rewarding part of the pilot has been seeing the pride and joy on food service directors' faces “when they see themselves rightfully recognized in the paper for taking a chance.”



State-Funded Local Food Procurement Incentives (LFPIs)

As of December 2025, there is no LFPI in Georgia. The ACRE Collective's Local Foods Incentive School Pilot Program models the opportunities and impacts of properly resourced school districts —serving as a roadmap for what is possible. Consistent access to fresh, local food remains out of reach for many school meal programs. Meanwhile, small and family-owned farms and ranches face significant obstacles accessing institutional markets like schools. Across the nation, state-funded local food purchasing incentives (LFPIs) that help offset the literal and system change costs of shifting from industrial to local procurement, have developed as a solution to these challenges. The first state-level LFPI was created in 2001 and, as of May 2024, can be found in sixteen states and the District of Columbia. When properly designed and funded, LFPIs have proven to boost local agricultural economies while ushering more local, fresh foods into school cafeterias, and providing public health, community, environmental, and educational benefits.

Conclusion

The pilot program demonstrated what's possible when schools, farmers, and communities align around a shared vision. Together, these elements create the conditions for sustainable local procurement practices.

The best proof for the pilot's success is that participating districts plan to continue local procurement in some form. **Rockdale County Schools' Blaine Allen** remains committed to “finding ways that we can do more with local [food], because it stimulates the local economy.” **Susan Stone of Atlanta Public Schools** credits the pilot with helping her expand local procurement practices beyond pilot schools: “We were able to piggyback off of the momentum of the pilots with incorporating locally grown foods into all of our schools across the district.”

The pilot offers hope for the future of local food systems. Locally sourced school meals nourish the next generation while providing farmers with a stable market. When adopted widely, local procurement has the potential to create a food system that is more resilient and rooted in the community. This pilot can serve as a roadmap for other districts in Georgia and across the nation. With the proper support, Georgia schools and farmers can mutually benefit from access to a local food incentive program – one that nourishes students, supports local farmers, and strengthens local economies and communities.

The Georgia ACRE Collective



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Local foods incentive pilot districts celebrate their accomplishments at an October 2025 awards celebration.