

CASE STUDY  
OCTOBER 2024

# Local Foods Incentive School Pilot Program

THE  
GEORGIA  
**ACRE**  
Collective



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# Introduction

In September 2023, the Georgia ACRE Collective, led by The Common Market Southeast, launched the Local Foods Incentive School Pilot Program. During the 2023-2024 school year, the local foods pilot program provided funding to two metro Atlanta school districts — Marietta City Schools and Rockdale County Public Schools — to increase the amount of Georgia products served in school meals. In addition to funding for local food, the ACRE Collective provided training and technical assistance to menu new culturally appropriate recipes and support for student taste tests. This case study provides an overview of the pilot program and opportunities for future programs. An additional case study will be released in 2025 after further implementation and data collection has been completed.

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*The ACRE Collective is made possible with the support of The Rockefeller Foundation. For more information about the structure and history of the ACRE Collective, [see here](#).*



## The Georgia Acre Collective

The **Georgia ACRE Collective** is a Georgia-based coalition of local and national organizations that share a vision for a vibrant and more equitable regional food system. Partner organizations include The Common Market Southeast, The Conservation Fund, Emory University’s Turner Environmental Law Clinic, Georgia Organics, Health Care Without Harm, and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation. The two goals of the ACRE Collective are to:

- 1 Organize demand:** Develop market opportunities for values-aligned producers through anchor institutions in the metro Atlanta region; and
- 2 Build supplier capacity to meet the demand:** Support the development of resilient regional food production capacity with an emphasis on support for historically underserved and underfunded producers.

# Background

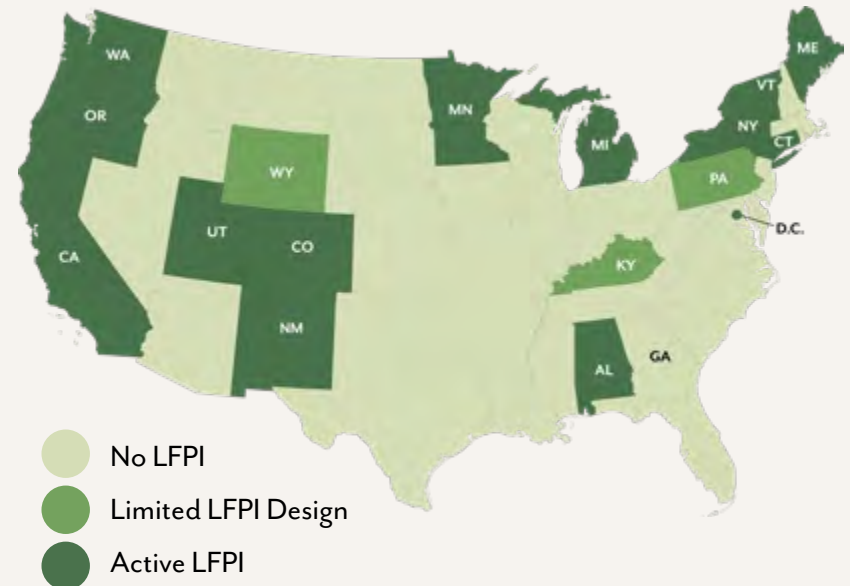
School food is a nexus of childhood nutrition and American agriculture. Procurement for our school cafeterias presents a venue where we can intentionally improve outcomes for vulnerable children and regional farmers.

## A nationwide scan: Local food incentive programs

A 2023 systematic review of the global challenges to increasing local food procurement in schools concluded that procurement systems change was a primary barrier— family farms struggle to gain access to the child nutrition market and child nutrition programs struggle to shift procurement from agribusiness to a more sustainable, localized one ([Chaves, 2023](#)).

Across the country, state-funded local food purchasing incentives (LFPIs) provide resources to help overcome the barriers to incorporating local foods into school meals. Since 2006, 15 state legislatures have passed LFPIs into law ([Bull, 2022](#)). Georgia is not currently one of those states. These programs vary in funding amounts, structure, and scope but all offset the cost or incentivize local food purchases by

## STATE-LEVEL LOCAL FOOD PURCHASING INCENTIVE (LFPI) PROGRAMS



Source: Farm To School Network, Feb 2024

school districts ([National Farm to School Network](#)). The ACRE Collective's pilot program offers the unique opportunity to demonstrate the impact of incentive funding and learn best practices for future policy and program implementation.

## INSPIRATION FROM THE GARDEN STATE FULL FUTURES

The Georgia ACRE Collective's pilot program was modeled after the success of Full Futures Camden, a pilot project in New Jersey funded by the Campbell Soup Foundation. Implemented in the 2021-2022 school year at Camden City School District, Full Futures focused on improving the entire school nutrition environment with a key focus on getting more nutritious, locally sourced ingredients into school cafeterias. The Common Market served as a pilot partner responsible for diversifying and improving local procurement practices within the New Jersey district. In its first year, the pilot reinvested \$93,000 into the local economy through food purchases,

supporting 15 farmers and producers in the process.

To learn more, visit this [Year 1 Impact Report](#).

The Common Market and partners are actively advocating for a new Farm to School Local Food policy that would continue to help schools purchase 100% New Jersey-grown produce, meats, seafood, and grains to serve in school lunch programs. Learn more [here](#).

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*Right: A Camden student with local lettuce.*



# Pilot Goals

The ACRE Collective’s funding is the first opportunity of its kind for metro Atlanta school districts to reduce the burden of cost and provide technical assistance to increase the amount of local, sustainable foods served in school meals.

The **goals** of the ACRE Collective’s Local Foods Incentive School Pilot include:

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- 1** Demonstrate how local food incentive dollars jumpstart an increase in products grown in Georgia purchased by Georgia schools
  - 2** Catalyze economic opportunity for farmers in our region
  - 3** Increase student access to fresh, healthy foods

## 2023-2024 PILOT DISTRICTS



### ● Marietta City Schools

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- **12 Schools**
- **8,600 Students**
- **38% Hispanic/Latino, 36% Black, 20% White**
- **61% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch**

*The ACRE Collective pilot program was implemented at the Sixth Grade Academy and High School and will expand to a third school during the second year of the pilot program.*

### ● Rockdale County Public Schools

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- **18 Schools**
- **15,601 Students**
- **68% Black, 18% Hispanic/Latino, and 8% White**
- **District qualifies for Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which offers free school meals to all students**

*The pilot program was implemented at two elementary schools and will expand to a third elementary school in the pilot’s second year.*

# Process and structure

## Site selection

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The ACRE Collective selected two pilot sites based on the following criteria:

- Percentage of population qualifying for Free and Reduced Lunch
- Geographic diversity
- Metro-Atlanta proximity
- District size
- Experience level of School Nutrition Director
- Interest level of district in local purchasing
- Inclusion of elementary, middle and high schools

## Visioning: district-led change

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Central to the project design was the investment and input of the School Nutrition Director (SND) and food service staff. The Common Market staff initiated a visioning workshop with the SND to co-develop a clear set of program goals and brainstorm innovative new menu items. These sessions were invaluable for relationship building, generating buy-in for the program, and surfacing creative ideas to implement during the pilot program.

For example, Marietta City Schools shared a desire to develop new culturally appropriate menu items for the large Spanish-speaking student population. That conversation sparked an interest in developing two culturally relevant recipes and training their staff on how to prepare local, sustainable meat that would appeal to their diverse student base.

## Technical assistance

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The planning meetings also led to the clear need for technical assistance and training in recipe development for school nutrition staff. Three culinary skills training sessions built confidence in school nutrition teams and supported buy-in for the menu changes. The trainings, tailored to each participating school, were taught by chefs with food service experience and featured Georgia-grown fresh fruits, vegetables, and locally raised meats. The recipes were later added to the schools' menus.

In addition to culinary technical assistance, the ACRE Collective helped partner districts overcome a key hurdle to increasing local products in school meals: seasonal menu planning. In Georgia, there are several long growing seasons and access to many local products year-round, but availability overall varies from season to season. Incorporating seasonal products instead of creating a menu item that can be added to a school district's four or eight-

week menu cycle required a workload shift. The ACRE Collective worked alongside school nutrition directors and managers to plan for seasonal items based on The Common Market's crop plans. The Common Market's seasonal availability was referenced to inspire several regularly menued recipes like kale and apple salad, blueberry crisp with frozen blueberries, cooked collards, and roasted chicken.

***“A challenge is the seasonality of the local food. It's not an easy fix. It just has to be a shift in our mindset when it comes to purchasing food for school lunch.”***

*- School Nutrition Director from partner school district*

## **Food ordering and deliveries**

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The Common Market Southeast served as the food distributor for this pilot program. Each week, The Common Market's current seasonal availability was shared via email with school nutrition managers who placed orders for deliveries the following week. The Common Market sources products from family farms within 250 miles of Atlanta that use responsible farming methods and business practices. Many of the growers in The Common Market's network are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), females, veterans, and other historically disadvantaged farmers.



*Top: Kimberly Della Donna, Chef & Director of Community Collaborations at Georgia Organics, demonstrates knife skills to school nutrition staff. Bottom: The Common Market Southeast served as the food distributor for the ACRE Collective's pilot program.*



## Student & community engagement: communications, marketing, and taste tests

To drive awareness and participation, The ACRE Collective provided partner schools with marketing materials to promote local foods on the school menu to students and teachers in the cafeteria, as well as to the broader school community through social media. Marketing materials included large, custom printed posters as well as farmer profiles for use on digital screens in cafeterias and social media channels. During the 2024-25 school year, the ACRE Collective plans to increase the level of marketing and communications support for partner schools to help ensure that students are fully aware of the local food items on their school menus.



With support from an Atlanta-based public relations firm, the ACRE Collective also helped school districts receive local media coverage for trainings and special events associated with the pilot program. This media coverage helped School Nutrition Directors receive much-deserved recognition for their efforts.



Above left: The Common Market Blog post about the school pilot.  
Above right: Article about culinary skills training in The Atlanta Journal Constitution.

Student engagement via taste tests was another component of this pilot program. Taste tests are an important tool for gaining student buy-in and feedback before incorporating menu changes. The pilot supported each school district in implementing student taste tests of these new recipes before they were offered on the school menu and messaging for the entire school community for use on the districts' social media, posters for the cafeteria, and school-wide announcements.

Based on this experience, the ACRE Collective recommends future programs provide support for student and school community engagement including taste tests and ongoing education for the entire school community around the value of local food in school meals.

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*Right: Students taste tested kale salad and provided feedback.*



# Evaluation

In partnership with Alliance for a Healthier Generation, an ongoing evaluation aims to identify barriers and opportunities for implementation.

**The most important finding from this evaluation so far is that securing funding for more than just local food purchases is critical to success.** In addition to dedicated funding for local products, the schools and farmers also required **technical assistance and support** including training for school nutrition staff, taste test support, menu/recipe development, and marketing support.



## BENEFITS

During the inaugural 2023-24 school year, the ACRE Collective’s pilot program brought positive benefits to Georgia farmers and students, including:

**\$40,300**

reinvested into the Georgia economy,  
primarily through food purchased from  
local farms

**62**

unique Georgia  
food items served  
in schools

**11**

Black- & women-  
owned farms  
supported

**24**

Georgia farms  
& producers  
supported, across  
19 counties

**12**

new recipes  
developed



### TOP PRODUCTS SERVED:

- Apples
- Blueberries
- Chicken
- Lettuce
- Cherry Tomatoes

Students also had access to unique local foods like grass-fed beef, muscadines and scuppernongs, shiitake mushrooms, Asian pears, and pecans.

### 12 NEW MENU ITEMS INCLUDING:

- Chicken chimichurri
- Grass-fed, hot-honey beef tacos
- Blueberry crisp
- Kale salad
- Local garden salad
- Breakfast frittata
- Cooked collards

*Left: Alexis Edwards, owner of R&G Farms in Dublin, GA, with her hydroponic lettuce.*

# Chicken chimichurri at Marietta City Schools

Raw meat can be an intimidating ingredient for school meals — there are more food safety concerns, technical skills needed for preparing and cooking, and additional staff time. However, through this pilot program, Marietta City Schools was willing to address these concerns to provide their students with fresh, local chicken and grass-fed beef.

At the start of the pilot program, the ACRE Collective held a “visioning workshop” for each participating school district to better understand their goals, values, and ideas for potential local menu items. In this workshop, the staff expressed a desire to serve more culturally relevant menu items to their students. The staff were already fairly comfortable with local fruit and vegetable use, but wanted to use this funding to explore more “center of the plate” options.

The ACRE Collective offered technical assistance with recipe development and training for a chicken chimichurri dish — roasted chicken with a cilantro lime chimichurri sauce to support this goal. The first training session walked school nutrition staff through the recipe and brainstormed ways to incorporate the prep into their systems. The staff got to taste the recipe and provide feedback. On the day the item was on the menu, the chef instructor returned to help the staff troubleshoot challenges in real time.

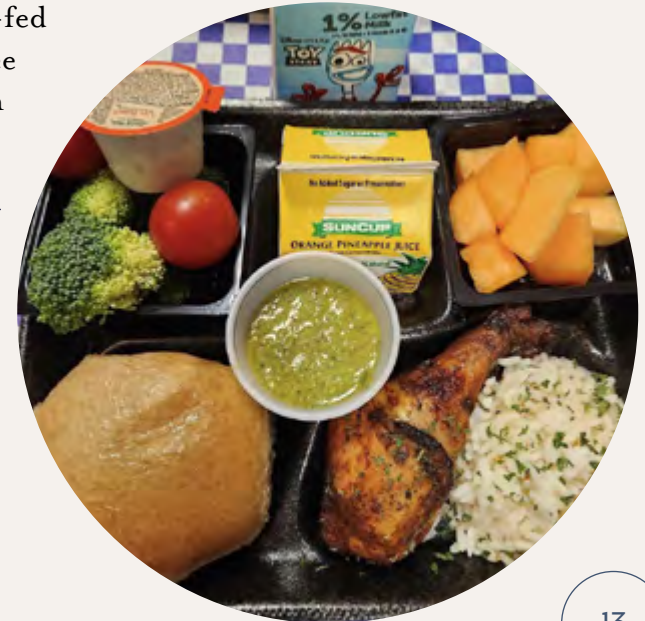
***“Having [the chef] return on the day that we menued the item was crucial. It made our staff feel much more comfortable and on board with the additional work. They were able to jump in, answer questions, and then discuss ways to make it go more smoothly next time.”***

*—Marietta City Schools menu developer*

After trying this recipe a few more times, Marietta City Schools created a second roasted chicken recipe and tested a new taco recipe featuring fresh ground beef. For the first school year, Marietta City School served over 1,400 pounds of chicken and 500 pounds of grass-fed beef, supporting three Georgia producers in the process.

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*Marietta Schools' chicken chimichurri plate that won Georgia Department of Education's "Tray of the Week."  
Photo credit: MCS School Nutrition.*



## Georgia farms entering and reentering local school markets

The ACRE Collective-funded pilot program has opened, and in some instances, re-opened, doors to small and mid-scale farming operations based in Georgia, catalyzing new economic opportunities for farmers in our region.

PL Only Organics is a new hydroponic growing operation based in Douglasville, Georgia that supplied fresh produce to both Marietta and Rockdale during the 2023 school year. Its partnership with The Common Market allowed it to supply schools for the first time.

***“[Selling wholesale within school markets] allows us to expand our operations. We know that schools buy produce regularly, allowing us to plan accordingly. It offers stability, confidence, and revenue that we can expect.”***

*– Naveen Kadimcherla, grower, PL Only Organics*



*Above: PL Only Organics team. The farm’s hydroponic production allows for the year-round availability of high-demand products, like lettuce and tomatoes.*

## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT: FARMER IMPACT

Coastal Georgia Small Farmers Cooperative of Glenville, Georgia had previous experience selling to school markets until they were outbid. It was not until they partnered with The Common Market that they were able to reenter K-12 markets in a meaningful way.

***“[Accessing consistent institutional markets] means a lot for the business. We talk about having an idea of pricing before something’s in the ground. It makes them feel like their farm is becoming sustainable — not just profitable, but sustainable as well.”***

*Benjamin Sterling, Jr. (McIntosh SEED), Technical Assistance Provider for The Common Market farmer network, representing Coastal Georgia Small Farmers Cooperative*

Their chopped and bagged collards made its way to menus in both Rockdale and Marietta this year. Minimally processed vegetables, like Coastal Georgia’s chopped collards, simplify the preparation of locally grown products.



*Above: Members of Coastal Georgia Small Farmers Cooperative hold bagged collard greens, a product they supplied to Georgia schools.*

# Looking Ahead

During the 2024-25 school year, the ACRE Collective is expanding the pilot program to a third school district, Atlanta Public Schools, and will reinvest more than \$100,000 into the local economy through food purchased from local growers. Technical assistance will be refined to best support each school district, including working closely to develop school nutrition trainings alongside district-level chefs.

Based on this pilot, the ACRE Collective is confident that Georgia school nutrition programs are eager to increase local food in school meals. To effectively support increased local food purchases, school districts need more than just funding—technical assistance in recipe development and culinary training is also crucial for success. To expand this work beyond the pilot phase, policy changes—such as local food incentive programs found in other states—could offer long-term funding opportunities.

*The ACRE Collective has the recipe for success to increase local sustainable foods in Georgia's school meals. If you are interested in partnering, please contact [emily@thecommonmarket.org](mailto:emily@thecommonmarket.org).*





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