



Community

This chapter is intended for the farm to school team members who are focusing on overall program coordination, farmer relationships, and community engagement. The chapter covers many aspects of connecting to your school community, your greater town, and the larger farm to school community throughout the country. The community can often be the most easily overlooked “C” of the 3 Cs model of farm to school, but has proven to be the one that most likely sustains the long-term efforts of your team.

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- 10 Best Practices for School Community Gardens

Community

When starting or growing a farm to school program, community support is as important to the long-term success of your efforts as buy-in from educators, school nutrition professionals, and school administrators. Think of your community as the audience, co-workers, supporters, and beneficiaries of your farm to school program. Many programs look to their communities for financial support, but consider the long-term benefits that your Farm to School program can offer the community and in turn how that broadens the impact and the longevity of the program. Families, farmers, volunteers, community organizations, government, and local businesses can help your FTS team accomplish its goals, while raising awareness about your efforts, which will in turn generate more support.

All communities have intrinsic educational assets and resources that can enhance learning experiences for students.

Community-based learning (or place-based education) refers to a wide variety of instructional methods and programs that educators use to connect what is being taught in schools to their surrounding communities, including local institutions, history, literature, cultural heritage, and natural environments. Community-based learning is motivated by the idea that all communities have intrinsic educational assets and resources that can enhance learning experiences for students. Students



directly experience issues they are studying in the curriculum and participate in ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community. When it is inclusive, exploring your community can foster community pride. But be sure to take time to learn about and honor *all* the people in your community's history (including Indigenous people, white settlers, enslaved people, and immigrant populations) and the roles they have played in shaping that history. A key element in community-based learning programs is the opportunity students have to both apply what they are learning in real-world

settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences. Place-based education has been found to boost students' engagement, academic achievement, and sense of personal efficacy as stewards of their local environment and community. It also can re-energize teachers.

Working with Community Partners

Identifying and partnering with community members is an important aspect of your farm to school work. Some partners will be assets in your planning phase; others will be instrumental as you implement your plan. Take time as a team to brainstorm who to involve, and communicate that you are looking for partners. This will help determine your scope of work and long-term success.

ENGAGE FAMILIES

Families are often the first community partners considered when a team is establishing a farm to school program. This makes sense, because family members can be helpful in many ways. They are often willing to join an active committee or volunteer for specific events. They can help you promote your school's work to the larger community through their social networks, and over time, they can develop into strong program advocates, as they become aware of the value and success of your work.

How do you recruit families and/or make them aware of your farm to school efforts? Connecting with your school's Parent Teacher Organization/Association (PTO/PTA) might be the first order of business. Does your PTO host events? Does it put out a newsletter? What sort of funding might it have available to your committee?

Community Circle Activity

This activity highlights the value of community members in achieving your FTS goals.

1. Participants stand around a large circle, outlined with a rope or string.
2. Half of the group enters the circle and each person in this group selects a pre-made card naming a role in the community (e.g., Local Bank, Food Shelf, Department of Health, University Cooperative Extension).
3. Participants remaining on the outside of the circle form pairs: one person assumes the role of an educator and another the role of the school nutrition director.
4. Each pair decides on one person from inside the circle who they would like to have help their FTS efforts, and invites that person out of the circle to join them.
5. After all the pairs have chosen a person from inside the circle, each pair shares why they chose that role to help with their FTS program.
6. Participants remaining inside the circle then state why *they* should have been chosen. Any participant can also share a real-life example of their work with a community partner.

The two most important lessons in all this? First, you do not have to do it alone! There is much potential support from your community. Second, be sure to devote time and people power to reaching out to your community. You can't get more people on board with your FTS work if they don't know about it.

Not all parents and caregivers are comfortable with or able to join the PTO or an existing school committee. How will you reach these parents? Perhaps their first language isn't English, or they have other barriers preventing them from participating. Brainstorm places to meet parents where they are already gathering and feel most comfortable. Identify groups or individuals who may already be working with these families. Perhaps faith-based or community-based organizations can partner with you in reaching out to families. Make sure that you have ways to reach families and caregivers who either cannot or choose not to participate in your existing ways.

To build awareness among school families about your FTS efforts, try connecting your activities to other school events. For example, your annual harvest dinner highlighting local farm partnerships could be connected to a dinner honoring student athletes or to a science fair at the school. You might also reach families by conducting taste tests outside school hours—at recitals, theater productions, or other community service events. Or try offering school lunch as a community dinner, inviting families into the cafeteria for a free meal showcasing the healthy local food that their child actually eats! If one goal is to truly integrate a culture of health into the school, then connecting with existing initiatives is key. (It will also prevent burnout among family members and staff who are constantly volunteering their time outside school hours for other events!)

CULTIVATE COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS

Beyond the immediate families of the students, there are often other volunteers in your community. Some schools have found that retirees or senior members of their communities have skills or time to offer. Imagine the untapped cooking skills that local grandparents may be willing to share, or the gardening skills that members of a local senior center or community gardening club might donate.



Larger local businesses may also have a staff volunteer program in which employees volunteer for nonprofits (including schools) on company time.

It is crucial to remember to respect your volunteers' time and be clear with your expectations. Some volunteers will feel comfortable with an undefined time commitment and may serve on your committee for years; others will be happier to help out with a specific short-term project. You can ask volunteers to fill specific roles or poll them about their personal skills and interests. However you enlist them, remember that sometimes volunteers simply can't make their commitments, so have a backup plan for last-minute changes. Don't forget to honor their service, too. Many schools have end-of-year thank you dinners or local hero awards, and often a student-signed thank you note is appreciation enough.

SEEK OUT UNEXPECTED PARTNERS

Uncommon School Partners

It can't be stressed enough: Cultivate partners within the school first. Some of them can be easy to overlook. Maybe the music teacher could integrate garden songs or historic farm work songs into her

lessons. Maybe the afterschool program is considering adding a cooking club. Don't forget the P.E. teacher, the school nurse, the art teacher, librarian, or summer school or service-learning coordinator. Give each of these potential partners the chance to learn about your farm to school planning to see if they can identify ways to be part of it.

You may think that the custodial staff would not be interested in your FTS plans. But they often are just as important to include as the principal. If they have to mow around new gardens, need to clean up after cooking lessons, or are asked to haul school compost, the school maintenance staff need to be invited to the table from the beginning. They may

Community Partners

- Banks
- Hardware stores
- Chefs and restaurants
- Food banks
- Faith-based or cultural organizations
- Artist collectives
- Grocery stores, farmers markets, and food coops
- Local colleges and universities
- Cooperative Extension Service
- City, county, town employees
- Health professionals
- Community service groups (Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus)
- Local and state wellness councils
- Youth programs (Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4-H, Odyssey of the Mind)
- Libraries
- Garden clubs or organizations
- Senior volunteer programs
- Master Gardeners

have some great ideas since they are involved on a daily basis in school facility projects.

Uncommon Community Partners

Each community has unique assets that might benefit your farm to school efforts. The community college, the nearby hardware store, or the local restaurant may relish the opportunity to work with their school on food- and farm-related projects. There are examples throughout the country of grocery stores, local food banks, religious groups, rotary clubs, and healthcare facilities partnering with schools to achieve their farm to school goals.

As you contact some of these potential partners, take time to listen to their needs. They will be more interested in helping you meet your goals if you are helping them meet theirs. Create mutually beneficial situations in which all partners are achieving more collectively than they would have individually.

Connecting with Farms and Farmers

There are many ways to connect schools to farms and farmers. Connecting school food service to local farmers is explored extensively in the *Cafeteria* chapter (pp. 33–51). Successful strategies to connect classrooms to farms include farm-based field trips, farmer visits to the classroom, and farmer correspondence.

Farm-based education immerses students in nature, culture, history, and community. It teaches them valuable life skills, builds their self-esteem, and deepens their sense of place. Farms create a meaningful and relevant context for learning that is cross-curricular and engages the whole student—mind, body, and spirit. Vermont FEED's research has shown that students who know a farmer or experience growing food are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables.

FARM-BASED FIELD TRIPS

Start by scheduling a handful of visits to a farm in a school year, or by picking one or two classrooms to go on multiple visits. A one-time visit is a perfectly good starting point, but students will learn best about the cycles of food and farming if they are given multiple farm experiences through the seasons.

Before you take a trip to a local farm, consider:

Transportation: How will you get to the farm and how will you move around the farm once you're there? (If it's a large farm, you and your students might need to walk or drive between points.) Talk this through with the farmer ahead of time. Also discuss parking options, so your bus or cars don't get in the way of the farm's activities or business.

Safety: Talk to the farmer in advance about any potential hazards on the farm, such as electric fences, stinging insects, territorial roosters, large equipment,

or manure pits. Arrive prepared for them. (Don't forget to ask the farmer about bathroom facilities, too!) As with any other field trip, arrive with a first-aid kit, allergy and other medications, and an emergency plan for a sick student. Some educators find it helpful to do a pre-visit alone to identify safety issues that a farmer may not see, and to take photos of the farm to prepare students for their learning experience. Be sure to talk with your students about any safety issues before your visit.

On-Farm Activities: The depth of learning that happens on a farm visit depends on how students spend their time there. Sending a group of rambunctious first graders on an hour-long farm tour may let them see the whole working farm, but how much will they get out of it? If they help dig potatoes while investigating soil insects and link that to the classroom life-cycle lessons, their experience will be more memorable and influential.



Harvest Hill Farm

"When I see the second graders from Walden and Hardwick planting potatoes with their measuring sticks, with the spirit of cooperation, enthusiasm, inquisitiveness, and being allowed to get their hands dirty, it is to me what farming and relationships are all about. When they return in September to harvest, it becomes a bit more educational. They are able to see what has magically happened in the soil with the potatoes that they had planted. There are many questions about how did the potatoes grow? There are so many aspects of farming which are wonderful, but to hear the children, their teachers, and other adults be so happy and encouraging to each other is what it is all about for me. And of course they all get to have their own bag, weigh out five pounds of potatoes, and take them home."

—Bill Half, Harvest Hill Farm

To create meaningful student experiences, start by asking your farmer what is happening on the farm at that time of year. Is it lambing season? Are they harvesting garlic? Share what learning outcomes you're hoping for, and together you can match farm activities to your learning objectives. (Remember, though, that while farmers are very adaptable, you should not expect them to be natural educators.)

You might consider having several stations of activities for small group explorations, or having students participate in some real farm tasks, like picking rocks out of a potato row or moving compost or straw. A task should be short (less than an hour), benefit the farm, and be simple enough that it does not create more work for the farmer. It can also be a great way to thank the farmer for hosting you!

During your visit, farmers will be thinking about the safety of the visitors, and of their animals, crops, and barns. Visitors can unknowingly bring contaminants onto a farm, so please ask about and respect any rules farmers may have to protect their business. They may ask that you wear booties over your shoes while visiting the animals, hand wash before harvesting vegetables, or not enter certain barns or greenhouses. Knowing these boundaries up front will help you, your students, and the farmer have a positive experience.

See more on collaborating with farmers at [Farm-Based Education Network](#).

FARMER IN THE CLASSROOM

The cost of busing for multiple farm-based field trips can be prohibitive, so consider hosting a farmer in the classroom as a pre- or post-visit experience. Many farmers are more than happy to visit with students, share their experiences, answer questions, and even bring in some sample farm products. Classes could also host a farmer virtually by using an online conferencing platform (Facetime, Zoom Conferencing, etc.) Students can prepare interview questions and develop interviewing skills during these classroom visits. However, be sensitive to the amount of time you request of the farmer and when during their season you are requesting it. If possible, consider offering the farmer a stipend for their visit(s), to acknowledge the value of their time.

FARMER CORRESPONDENCE

Ongoing correspondence between students and farmers, especially before or after a farm field trip, can greatly deepen the relationship and learning. Whether handwritten letters or short inquisitive emails, the more points of contact that students have with farmers, the more they will understand a farmer's work—its complexity, seasonal rhythms,



and challenges—and feel connected to their community and their food. Three or four letters during the school year has worked well.

School Gardens

School gardens are a high-priority and high-impact activity in many FTS action plans. They can be amazing opportunities to engage students in real-world hands-on learning while producing real food for classroom lessons, harvest dinners, and taste tests. Many school gardens are built, maintained, and managed by community members or groups. Adult gardening clubs, Master Gardeners, town recreation departments, and even 4-H clubs can be key partners in your garden’s long-term success. (See p. 56 in the *Classroom* chapter for more about connecting gardens to the classroom curriculum.) Before your committee takes on building a school community garden, be sure to research how to

manage and maintain one, especially during the summer. Consider incremental growth, start small, and expand as interest and support grow.

Many resources are available online to help you plan, build, and sustain a school community garden. The Vermont Community Garden Network has created a wonderful resource, “10 Best Practices for School Community Gardens” (see Appendix, p. 124). Before you dig your first spade of soil, read through this and other resources, and also consider the following questions:

- Where will you build the gardens?
- How will you make them accessible to everyone?
- Will the garden get direct sunlight for at least six hours a day?
- Is there a water source?
- Who is building the gardens?
- Who will coordinate garden activities and communication?

- Will the gardens be in a place where they will be remembered and cared for?
- Can the grounds maintenance staff mow around the gardens? Will they be using any sprays, chemicals, etc., on the school grounds?
- Will there be an ongoing funding source each spring for soil amendments, seeds, and plants?
- How will you maintain the garden both during the school year and over summer break?
- What will you do with the produce?
- How will the garden be integrated into the school curriculum or programming?
- How will you train teachers to use the garden?

Include all the relevant school staff in your early planning efforts. Include school administrators and building and grounds staff in discussing the garden location; school nutrition staff if you are planning for the garden to produce food for the school cafeteria; and teachers if you are planning on curricular integration. There are school committees that have built gardens with the best of intentions, but the gardens have ended up underutilized and eventually abandoned. In those cases, during the planning process, the committees neglected to get buy-in from teachers or food service and built the gardens without ongoing maintenance plans.

Connecting to Resources

A community of FTS practitioners beyond your school are waiting to welcome you into their networks. You don't need to work in isolation! Lots of schools and communities are going through the same FTS planning and implementation process you are. Although each community is unique and should capitalize on its unique assets, there is great

value to networking with other communities to see what they are doing. You can learn a lot from their successes—and share your own story.

The National Farm to School Network (NFSN) is a great place to start when you're just getting going, and also a great resource for ongoing ideas and resources after your program is underway. Through the NFSN, you can research your own state to see who is nearby to help you, including state agencies, Cooperative Extension Service, statewide nonprofits, and all the state-level networks that support farm to school efforts in each state. In addition to the NFSN, the [USDA Food Nutrition Service Office of Community Food Systems](#) has an array of helpful resources and support materials on its website.

In Vermont, the [Vermont Farm to School Network website](#) shares information about media events, funding sources, current news, policy campaigns, and tools. In addition, VT FEED has an extensive website where you can find program planning tools, curricular resources, professional development opportunities, connections to technical assistance, and information about our annual Farm to School Institute.

No matter where you live, local farm to school organizations will keep you abreast of farm to school happenings in your state, including funding opportunities, recent news, and statewide gatherings. There are statewide, regional, and national farm to school conferences and workshops that will allow you and your school the opportunity to develop new skills and ideas, and learn from others. Stay in touch with these groups and seek out these connections. They will only make your school's farm to school program stronger.

Good luck, and enjoy your FTS adventure!