



A guide to building  
integrated farm to  
school programs



# Connecting Classrooms, Cafeterias, Communities



A FARM TO SCHOOL PROJECT  
of NOFA-VT and Shelburne Farms



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# Overview

## Purpose and Use of this Guide

This Vermont FEED Guide is intended to support school communities in developing robust, long-lasting, and integrated farm to school programs, addressing whole school change. It reflects 20 years of practice, evaluative research, and innovation in the field. It is, in fact, the ninth farm to school resource that VT FEED has created since 2000.

It is an updated compilation of earlier resources and offers new approaches and tools to help your school community successfully grow your farm to school program.



This guide is primarily intended for a multidisciplinary team of individuals working within the K-12 system: school nutrition staff, teachers, administrators, students, community members, and members of support organizations. Each school community will have a different level of experience and familiarity with farm to school. This resource can support a team as they align their existing activities to their school culture and community priorities, while also sustaining the changes.

The guide is organized around farm to school action planning, a step-by-step process to help you assemble a team, identify shared goals, and plan and conduct strategic activities. In addition, it provides valuable content on classroom curriculum, school meal programs, and community building. These are critical areas for action and influence. Finally, the guide is filled with useful templates, curricular design strategies, and creative ways to communicate and celebrate farm to school success. Revisit the tools and templates as your program develops or as you plan each new school year.

A robust, long-lasting, and integrated farm to school program should be able to:

- Maximize equitable student access to fresh, nutritious, locally grown foods
- Educate students about food systems and healthy eating habits through hands-on and community-based experiences
- Support and grow market opportunities for local producers and processors.

# What Is Farm to School?

Farm to school (FTS) is a program, policy, or initiative that intentionally connects students, school communities, and local farms with the goals of improving student nutrition and academic outcomes, strengthening local food systems, and protecting the environment. Comprehensive FTS programming includes strategies that are integrated across the cafeteria, classroom, and community, such as: serving fresh and local meals in cafeterias; offering food, farm, and nutrition education in the classroom; and building school relationships with farms and community organizations. Through FTS, students develop positive relationships with food

## FARM TO SCHOOL

“enriches the connection communities have with fresh, healthy food and local food producers by changing food purchasing and education practices at schools and early care and education sites.

Students gain access to healthy, local foods as well as education opportunities such as school gardens, cooking lessons, and farm field trips. Farm to school empowers children and their families to make informed food choices while strengthening the local economy and contributing to vibrant communities.”

—National Farm to School Network

and an understanding of how their food choices impact their bodies, the environment, and their communities—lessons and habits that will last a lifetime.

**43,000 schools in all 50 states have farm to school programs today, reaching 20 million students and spending \$789 million a year on local food.**

Because of their value to students and schools, farm to school efforts have been growing across the country. [The USDA Farm to School Census](#) reports that programs have grown from a handful of schools in the late 1990s to nearly 43,000 schools in all 50 states today, reaching more than 20 million students. Collectively, those schools are spending \$789 million a year on local food. In Vermont schools, \$915,000 was spent on local food in the 2013–2014 school year, out of \$16 million total.

## WHO IS BEING SERVED BY U.S. SCHOOL FOOD PROGRAMS?

**14.6 million** students eat **SCHOOL BREAKFAST** each day, 2.4 billion breakfasts annually

**30.4 million** students eat **SCHOOL LUNCH** each day, 5 billion lunches annually

Sources: “Economic Contribution and Potential Impact of Local Food Purchases Made by Vermont Schools,” Center for Rural Studies, University of Vermont, 2017; National statistics based on schools reporting to the 2015 USDA FTS Census.





And there's so much room to grow! [The United States serves approximately 31 million students each school day](#). That's 7.4 billion breakfasts and lunches served in a year! The scale of these food programs presents tremendous opportunities to feed more fresh, healthy food to hungry kids and to shift how all our students think about food and nutrition.

*Note: Farm to school is growing in early childhood education, too—in center- and family-based child care settings, preschools, Head Start programs, and home visiting programs. Early childhood professionals may find the action planning tools and templates useful in their program development and in forging enhanced connections with public schools.*

# Benefits of Farm to School

The long-term benefits of farm to school are many. There are health and education benefits to students, as well as positive impact on the local economy, the natural environment, and the greater community. The National Farm to School Network has compiled country-wide research into a short brief, [The Benefits of Farm School](#) (April 2017), excerpted here. See the brief for source citations.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- Each dollar invested in farm to school contributes an additional \$0.06-\$2.16 to the economy; one state saw a \$1.4 million annual contribution.
- Individual farmers see an average 5% increase in income from farm to school sales and establish a long-term revenue stream.

## PUBLIC HEALTH

- Farm to school activities support the development of healthy eating habits for children while improving family food security by boosting the quality of school meal programs.
- When schools offer school gardens, 44% of students eat more fruits and vegetables; when schools serve local food, 33% of students eat more fruits and vegetables.

## EDUCATION

- Overall academic achievement in K-12 is enhanced, including grades and test scores; more opportunities for physical activity and social and emotional growth; increase in engagement.
- FTS offers innovative teaching platforms for core subjects, such as science, math, and language arts in PreK-12 settings, and greater opportunity for necessary experiential and hands-on learning.

## ENVIRONMENT

- Waste of local food is reduced, both on the production side and the plate waste side; overall food waste decreases due to farm to school activities.
- FTS supports environmentally sound, sustainable and socially just food production, processing, packaging, transportation, and marketing.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- FTS increases community awareness about and interest in purchasing local foods and foods served in school cafeterias.
- FTS increases support from parents and community for healthier school meals—connecting community and schools.

# 3Cs Model of Change

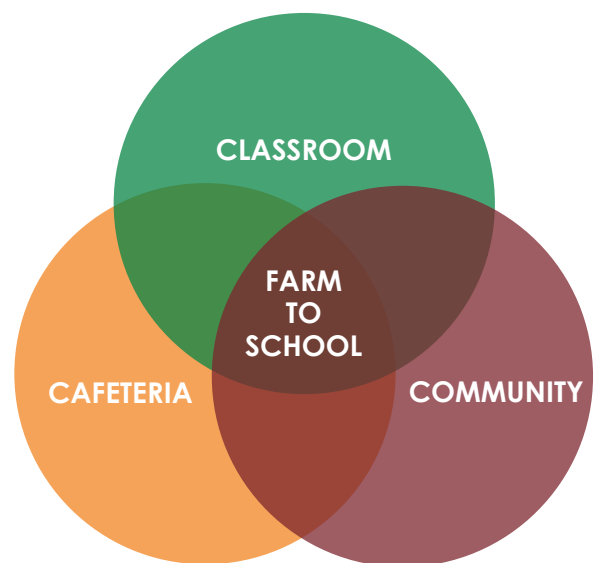
Farm to School is a comprehensive strategy that extends beyond serving a local product in the cafeteria. The “3 Cs” approach, which VT FEED developed in 2000, has taken root across the country as a successful model of change that integrates efforts in the cafeteria, the classroom, and the community to achieve robust and sustainable FTS programs.

VT FEED has found that the most successful programs are not “add-ons” (separate programs that run outside the regular policies, systems, and curricula of a school), but integrated throughout school culture. This requires collaboration among administration, food service, students, families, and teachers. Ideally, farm to school can link school wellness policies, nutrition programs, curriculum reform efforts, family-school-community partnerships, student voice, nurse, guidance, and after-school programs.

The school cafeteria is a major hub of activity. It can be the largest classroom in the school because it is a powerful educational environment connecting with every student. Farm to school programs demonstrate that nutrition and the cafeteria are integral to the school day and the education of the whole student. School cafeterias also can support

**The school cafeteria is the largest classroom in the school. It can be a powerful educational environment that connects with every student.**

the local food economy by buying from local farmers to incorporate healthy, local, and seasonal foods into school meals; connecting the expertise of school nutrition staff with food and nutrition education initiatives; reducing waste; encouraging



### The 3 Cs of farm to school

Farm to school is most successful and enduring when it is integrated into the cafeteria, classroom, and community.



student feedback; and making nutritious food accessible to all students. When school meals are produced sustainably, taste great, are nutritious, and support the local economy, everyone wins!

In the classroom, FTS education provides a real-life context for learning across all disciplines—science, math, art, language arts, social studies, and more. Classroom learning can be extended by engaging students both in hands-on community projects (building community gardens, visiting a local farm, volunteering with a local food pantry), and with the cafeteria (running taste tests for new recipes, learning culinary skills alongside school nutrition staff). Activities like these introduce students to new foods and empower students to make healthy food choices that last a lifetime. Farm to school naturally dovetails with the broader 4 Cs model in education: critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity.



“With the right interventions, we can give every child a chance to get the nourishment and support they need to thrive and grow. When our children eat healthy foods, we know that they grow stronger brains and they’re better able to learn. When children are well fed, they have fewer discipline incidents and are able to engage in learning. We know that the best food we can give them is fresh food: unprocessed, full of nutrients straight from our farms to their plates.”

—Rebecca Holcombe  
Former Vermont Secretary of Education







Making FTS connections within the community builds partnerships outside the school for place-based learning and garners community support for school initiatives. Youth have opportunities to learn about how their food is produced and to develop their own agency for creating change. Farmers build relationships with schools and other local institutions that allow them to expand into new wholesale markets and boost the local economy. Community dinners, service learning projects, and harvest festivals involve parents, families, and the whole community in building a food culture committed to healthy and sustainable food choices.



# Staying Power

This chapter is intended for your farm to school team, your school administrator, and/or whoever is leading the coordination of farm to school in your school community. It covers the important considerations to be made when trying to make your work systemic and lasting. It covers the connection to wellness policy and overall school culture, while giving hints and strategies to sustain coordination.

## WHAT IS IN THIS CHAPTER?

### School Culture

- Building relationships
- Broad and inclusive communications
- Embedded priorities
- Wellness Policy

### Coordination Today & Tomorrow

## RELATED APPENDICES

- Sample Job Description: School-Based Farm to School Coordinator
- Sample Job Description: District-Wide Farm to School Coordinator





# Staying Power

## School Culture

This section is based on “[Understanding School Culture and Its Relation to Farm to School](#),” *The Journal of Child Nutrition and Management*, Spring 2018. For the article, VT FEED staff interviewed 10 Vermont principals.

A school’s culture is one of the most powerful predictors of success in implementing new educational strategies. *School culture* means both the explicit and implicit values, traditions, and messages expressed in the day-to-day affairs of a school, and has been linked to educational value measures including teacher behavior, which impacts curriculum, school climate, and student achievement. How a school establishes its culture has to do with how the principal leads, how empowered the staff feel, and how well the individuals of the school work together.

**When farm to school becomes part of a school’s identity, it has staying power.**

Many schools have found that adopting and embedding farm to school with all 3 Cs in mind has led to a long-term and systemic impact

on their school culture. When FTS becomes part of a school’s identity, it has staying power. Not only do students eat healthier, but FTS is seen as good educational practice with solid pedagogy, improved health, and engaged professional learning that is

connected to the community. FTS and positive school culture create a win for all involved.

In the research, three major themes emerged as a way to understand the positive connection between FTS and school culture: (1) building relationships; (2) broad and inclusive communications; and (3) embedded priorities.

### BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are foundational to support educational innovation and experimentation that lead to positive school culture. Trust in those relationships is key to setting the stage for a healthy school culture that embraces FTS. Successful FTS programming is often attributed to strong foundational community partnerships and internal relationships with school nutrition professionals, teachers, and other school staff who support innovation. One principal described how relationships with community partners and other schools were vital to her school’s FTS success: “*We’re making an extension; we’re making connections with other schools, other people. This work cannot be done in isolation.*”

When teachers and school nutrition staff feel trusted and supported, they feel empowered to try new things and new approaches to their work. These trusting relationships lead to partners acknowledging one another’s attempts and successes, which naturally leads to celebrating and appreciating efforts. This supports a culture of innovation and experimentation.



“We’re not doing anything magical here; it’s just taking advantage of the fact that you have smart people working with you. When they have a smart idea, have them define the goal and then get out of their way and let them do the work.”

—Vermont Principal interviewed for study



## BROAD AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATIONS

While it’s clear FTS has great value for students, this value must be clearly and regularly communicated to multiple stakeholders in the school community and beyond in order to create a groundswell of support. As mentioned earlier in the Action Planning chapter (p. 11), communication is a significant part of any successful FTS program and crucial for impacting school culture. An atmosphere of open and frequent communication helps an entire school embrace its farm to school goals.

“Strong communication of the value of FTS can lead to support for policies and funding that can sustain programming beyond the passions of any one individual person,” stated a principal. Schools should consider using current communication platforms to articulate the benefits, outcomes, and impacts of FTS to the students and school community. This could be through a weekly newsletter, school website, classroom webpages, local and regional TV and radio outlets, social media platforms, or other creative ways.

## EMBEDDED PRIORITIES

As a school community identifies FTS as a school-wide priority, people look for places to integrate



“Farm to School has helped to promote a sense of pride in who we are and what we are, and to promote good healthy nutrition. I think there’s tremendous potential for that.”

—Vermont Principal interviewed for study



and embed goals and activities within the existing school environment. It is the daily practice of FTS in the cafeteria, classroom, and community that has the staying power and changes the overall school culture. Research by the Vermont Department of Health (2018) has found that 80% of Vermont schools are embedding FTS into their schools in at least one of the 3 Cs. A 2017 outside evaluation for VT FEED found that nine out of 10 schools that have adopted FTS have identified its positive impact on improving overall school culture.

## Wellness Policy

All school districts participating in the National School Lunch Program or the School Breakfast Program are required to develop and implement a school district wellness policy. These policies can be a great step toward creating a healthy, supportive school environment. The most successful policies are ones that establish goals, monitor success, and are revisited annually. (Most wellness policies are reviewed on a three-year cycle.)

Local wellness policy requirements were originally passed as part of the 2010 Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, then updated in 2016 to expand their scope. The 2016 final rule required districts to revise



local wellness policies and fully comply by June 30, 2017. The legislation requires that your community be involved in writing and reviewing your wellness policy, and that your school board approve it. Directing some of your team's energy to the wellness policy can be a great way to get board members involved in FTS efforts as well. (See *Classroom* chapter, p. 66 for an example from Minnesota of how to embed farm to school in a school's wellness policy.)

The State of Vermont has created some useful tools for schools as they navigate creating, implementing, and evaluating their school wellness.

- [Vermont School Wellness Policy Guidelines and Implementation](#)
- [Local School Wellness Policy Action Implementation Tool](#)

## Coordination Today & Tomorrow

It will take ongoing coordination to successfully implement your farm to school program. Schools do this in different ways during different stages of implementation. As you get started, it is easiest and makes the most sense to coordinate as a team. Sharing the work among a group of people will increase each person's commitment to the effort and spread out the work responsibilities so that no individual feels overburdened, just like the old adage "many hands make light work."

Some schools find a nice balance within their team and are able to sustain this shared coordination indefinitely. This has some real advantages for full school buy-in and ownership of the program. A team approach to coordination where you have regular team meetings; check in and support one another on work accomplished; have new members join the team and learn from senior team members; and reflect and plan together for future



work will lead to a comprehensive effort that can be woven into your school culture. To succeed, you will need clear, consistent communication, clarification of roles, and a clear process for decision making. Since farm to school impacts the cafeteria, classroom, and community, having leads from all three areas involved in coordination can succeed with strong teamwork.

Some schools choose to have an individual coordinate their farm to school efforts, either in a paid position or formally included in an existing staff position. In this case, establish a job description and work plan that allows focused attention on the farm to school goals.

Having a designated FTS coordinator can be an efficient way to communicate across the school and identify challenges quickly, and it demonstrates a school's investment in FTS. But when all coordination is done by one person or one position, others may back off responsibilities, which can create a difficult transition if the coordinator leaves. If your coordinator is in a temporary position such as a [FoodCorps](#) or [AmeriCorps](#) volunteer, the team will have to work extra hard to embed the program in the school to sustain beyond the members' service. Success should never rest on one person.

Vermont recently conducted research about the types of tasks that farm to school coordinators and coordination teams had to dedicate time towards in order to achieve their farm to school goals. These tasks were organized into administrative, promotional, direct, and indirect services.

Top **administrative** tasks performed:

- Communicate with interested stakeholders
- Facilitate meetings
- Engage with the statewide farm to school network
- Generate reports, enter data
- Write grants to support programming

Top **promotional** activities performed:

- Present to school community
- Engage local media
- Highlight local food items on school menus
- Promote Harvest of the Month
- Run table at school/community events
- Advocate to school board

Top **direct** services performed:

- Arrange farm field trips
- Coordinate/manage school gardens
- Organize school taste tests
- Conduct education in school garden
- Conduct classroom cooking activities
- Conduct classroom nutrition lessons

Top **indirect** services performed:

- Plan school events
- Plan school gardens
- Plan school taste tests
- Plan classroom activities

In the Appendix, pp. 93–94, you will find two sample job descriptions: one for a school-based farm to school coordinator and one for a district-wide farm to school coordinator.

You may find that you try a variety of approaches to coordination over time. The most important factor to keep in mind when planning your long-term coordination strategy is to match your workload to the capacity of your coordinators. You don't want to burn out your school, your team, or your coordinator with unrealistic expectations.

## SAMPLE JOB DESCRIPTION

# School-Based Farm to School Coordinator

The successful candidate will collaborate with the farm to school committee, the food service manager, and local farmers to foster a positive school nutrition environment by supporting the use of fresh, local food in the cafeteria, integrating nutrition education curriculum into classroom experiences, and cultivating interactions between local farmers and the community. Specific responsibilities include:

**Cafeteria:** To increase consumption of local foods in cafeteria:

- Implement monthly taste tests in cafeteria, with student prepared recipes, and establish systems for recording and using feedback about new foods and recipes
- Market local food served in cafeteria
- Communicate with cafeteria staff on school garden harvest and timeline for delivering food to the cafeteria

**Classroom:** To integrate nutrition education into existing curriculum:

- Support existing classroom activities
- Develop, coordinate, and facilitate delivery of educational programs
- Build on existing and forge new relationships with local farmers to arrange field trips and school visits
- Attend relevant school meetings
- Engage students in the planting and harvesting of school garden

**Community:** To raise awareness of and build support for the FTS program and local agriculture:

- Design and distribute outreach materials to communicate with parents
- Keep website updated
- Work with school nutrition director/staff and committee to hold annual harvest festival featuring local food and fundraising opportunities
- Write articles and press releases to publicize FTS activities
- Maintain school garden through the summer months, utilizing community volunteers as much as possible

**Sustainability:** To provide for the future sustainability and growth of the FTS program:

- Build a network of active volunteers to assist with responsibilities listed
- Collect and use feedback to inform practices and next steps
- Plan and implement fundraising initiatives with FSM and committee
- Develop and maintain partnerships with community members, including volunteers, farms, individual donors, businesses, and grantors
- Create and maintain a directory of school, farm, and partner contacts

### Skills Needed

- Ability to communicate and collaborate with a variety of people
- Strong public speaking and writing skills
- Organization and problem-solving skills
- Ability to locate resources in an efficient manner
- Knowledge of local food system and sustainable agriculture a plus
- Knowledge of Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards a plus
- Grant-writing and fundraising experience a plus

## SAMPLE JOB DESCRIPTION

# District-Wide Farm to School Coordinator

Our supervisory union (SU) needs an energetic, creative person to coordinate SU-wide farm to school activities. The coordinator will work closely with school based coordinators to promote school gardens, professional development opportunities, field trip possibilities, curriculum development and fundraising for long-term sustainability.

### **Responsibilities**

The coordinator will:

- Facilitate monthly steering committee meetings
- Help organize and support school garden efforts
- Identify field trip opportunities to local farms for participating schools
- Identify professional training opportunities for in-school FTS coordinators
- Help document FTS activities undertaken at school in writing and with photographs, and provide report to funding sources
- Communicate efforts with staff, students, parents, school administrators and the broader communities to engage their ideas, energy, and involvement in the FTS programs

### **Qualifications**

The coordinator must have excellent communication (written and oral) and organizational skills in order to work with in-school FTS coordinators, school staff, administrators, and community members.

### **Required**

- Basic computer skills related to email, word processing, spreadsheets, and Internet searches
- Reliable transportation
- Ability to work well with students, staff, parents, school administrators, farmers, and other community members
- Familiarity with schools
- Experience in fundraising and grant-writing
- Availability during school hours and some evening meetings
- College degree in related field

### **Preferred**

- Education and/or experience in local food, healthy eating, gardening, farming
- Experience working with elementary school students
- Familiarity with the communities of our district schools



# VT FEED

Vermont Food Education Every Day (VT FEED) began in 2000 as a collaborative farm to school project of three nonprofits: the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT), Foodworks at Two Rivers, and Shelburne Farms. Today, Shelburne Farms and NOFA-VT provide leadership, resources, and support to an evolving farm to school movement, providing hundreds of school communities and producers with technical assistance, educational resources, and professional development in order to increase local, healthy food choices.

VT FEED believes that:

- In a sustainable food system, everyone has access to nutritious, healthy, affordable foods and opportunities to produce it.
- Students who are well-fed with nutritious foods are able to be more engaged and successful in their learning.
- Farm to school gives students the knowledge, skills, and values to make healthy choices for themselves and their communities.
- Local food systems are essential to the health of the local economy, environment, and communities.
- A healthy food system is critical to a sustainable future.
- School systems change when a diversity of partners and the school community align to invest in creating change together.



Shelburne Farms is a nonprofit education organization whose mission is to inspire and cultivate learning for a sustainable future. That means learning that empowers students to build a healthy future for their communities and the planet. Located on Abenaki land, Shelburne Farms' home campus is a 1,400-acre working farm, forest, and National Historic Landmark.



The Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont is a nonprofit association of farmers, gardeners, and consumers. Its mission is to promote organic practices to build an economically viable, ecologically sound, and socially just Vermont agricultural system that benefits all living things.



This guide is lovingly dedicated to

**ENID WONNACOTT**

(1961-2019)

Enid planted, tended, and nurtured the VT FEED project during her entire tenure as executive director of NOFA-Vermont. Her passion for agriculture, dedication to our communities, and love for Vermont were unparalleled. The seeds that Enid planted will forever nourish us.

Thank you, Enid!



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