



**VERMONT FARM TO SCHOOL CASE STUDY**  
**Engaging the Community in Wellness**  
**Bennington County Head Start & Early Head Start**



This Farm to School case study was developed by the Vermont Farm to School Network. It is one of a series of five that demonstrate the range of Farm to School experiences, successes, and challenges across the state in K-12 schools and early care programs. Vermont defines Farm to School as engagement and connection among the classroom, cafeteria, and community—including farms. We hope that you'll learn and apply some valuable tips or considerations to your own Farm to School programming.

## The Bennington County Head Start (BCHS) is



an important hub of services for families with young children in the southwestern corner of Vermont operating at various sites, including the area's federally funded Early Head Start program for very young children. Its mission: to provide comprehensive, community-based education and health and social services that foster personal growth, well-being, and lifelong learning opportunities for the families it serves. BCBS encourages full participation in programs through respectful, trusting relationships that recognize the inherent dignity and individuality of all family members.



# SNAPSHOT

## **Supervisory union:**

Bennington, Town of North Bennington

**Town population:** 15,290

## **School population & grade levels:**

169 students, six weeks to five years old

## **Food program management structure:**

Independently operated

**Free & reduced rate:** 100%

**Meals served:** Breakfast, lunch, and snack

**How local is “local”?** Local is defined as Vermont plus a one-hour driving radius from the main program site. Food is purchased from grocery stores.

## **Sources of support:**

- [x] Vermont Farm to School grantee
- [x] Northeast Farm to School Institute participant
- [x] Works with a regional partner, Hiland Hall Gardens

# How Bennington County Head Start Does Farm to School

Neighboring nonprofit Hiland Hall Gardens and Head Start teachers created a garden curriculum that engages three- to five-year-olds at the garden through weekly lessons.

BCHS hosts family cooking classes, nutrition activities, and shared meals.

Teachers integrate food education activities into classroom learning.

Two or three times each summer, the Head Start hosts the children's tent at the Bennington Farmers Market with activities for kids and support for parents in navigating and purchasing at the market.

Teachers address food access as a school community through involvement with a local food pantry.



# How BCHS Makes It Work

**The whole team is committed.** BCHS uses Farm to School activities as one way to support the development of strong families. Staff members recognize they are role models for the families they serve, and they try to demonstrate their own healthy food choices. For instance, teachers have found sugar-free ways to celebrate birthdays, such as a birthday book club, and appointing the child as class leader for the day. Staff meeting snacks include bowls of grapes and vegetables instead of candy. Teachers are encouraged to eat meals with children and model a willingness to taste new foods with enthusiasm (e.g., “I love chickpeas, you should try some!”).

**BCHS keeps family involvement, food, and nutrition central to its work.** Breakfast with Buddies is an established monthly program that invites parents and role models to eat a healthy breakfast with the children. Cooking Club is another monthly activity providing parents and guardians an opportunity to come together for a cooking class focused on improving the nutritional value of traditional recipes. The class is extended into the home with take-home equipment such as slow cookers, stockpots, chef’s knives, and recipe cards from the lesson. BCHS has established informal nutrition education to accompany meal times and family-oriented workshops to ensure children and families are better equipped to make healthy food decisions. In addition to on-site activities, staff work collaboratively with parents to ensure that infants and toddlers are experiencing new whole foods at home.

**Community partnerships are critical.** Head Start is part of Bennington Community Wellness and at the heart of a community group effort involving an advisory council of pediatricians, dentists, community members, Department of Health employees, and representatives from Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). This council collaborates to guide programmatic priorities and wellness of the whole child. Hiland Hall Gardens is also a vital partner of BCHS's Farm to School program, helping support childhood wellness initiatives.



# The Economic Value of Engaging in Farm to School

The Bennington County Head Start program is part of the STARS\* early care rating system for quality care program in Vermont. All of the sites it operates have achieved five STARS. With improved food quality and outreach to the community, early care programs are awarded more STARS, which means they will receive a higher reimbursement rate (5% to 40% above the basic rate) from the Child Care Financial Assistance Program and bonus payments for each level achieved. Additional STARS accrued also mean promotion of the program itself through the STARS communication channels, and opportunities to apply for grants that require STARS certification. Participation in the STARS program reimbursement offsets the cost of food purchases.

\*The STARS program in Vermont (STep Ahead Recognition System) recognizes and improves quality in early childhood, Head Start, and preschool care programs. Facilities receive up to five stars for their program, with more stars resulting in financial benefits to the programs themselves as well as to the parents, who can qualify for additional tax credits.

“Really, when you enroll a child,  
you enroll their family”

—Betsy Rathbun-Gunn, Director

BILL SAFF  
COLLEGE



# How Farm to School Benefits This Learning Community

## **Wellness strategies extend to the families.**

Farming, gardening, cooking, and nutrition opportunities provide many ways for parents to be involved with the school community, and simultaneously build their own skills, knowledge, and wellness. The Head Start staff believe that growing healthy children who can realize their full potential and become healthy adults is the cornerstone of their work; therefore, when you enroll a child, you are enrolling the entire family.

## **Farm to School connects community partners around childhood wellness.**

Hiland Hall Gardens, located behind the primary Head Start building, is integral to supporting the childhood wellness goals. As a result, Hiland Hall and Head Start teachers developed a garden curriculum for three- to five-year-olds to engage them in lessons on the farm for six- to eight-week sessions, two or three times per year.

## **Staff introduce new foods in a way that supports the greater Bennington community.**

Head Start staff work collaboratively with parents to ensure that infants and toddlers are experiencing new, whole foods at home. As part of this effort, two or three times each summer, Head Start hosts a children's tent at the Bennington Farmers Market to facilitate that learning. BCBS provides activities for the children while the health manager meets with families to navigate the farmers market and help them use their EBT card.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Purchasing local food is a challenge. Even though the Head Start program serves a relatively small number of meals per day, limited food storage space means purchasing food from local grocery stores repeatedly through the week. Program leaders are currently exploring the option of partnering with the neighboring elementary school to combine food purchasing and minimize the cost of their bulk food in order to dedicate a percentage of the budget to local food purchase. By collaborating with the neighboring farm, BCHS is also developing a planting and harvesting schedule that will allow it to buy directly from its neighbors.

**MEMBERS OF THE INTERVIEW TEAM:** Betsy Rathbun-Gunn, Early Childhood Services Division Director; Melody Charpentier, Health and Food Service Coordinator; Allison Dutcher, Early Head Start Health Case Manager and LPN; Kim Batty, Early Head Start Manager; Rebecca Bishop, Assistant Director; Donna Bourgeois, Head Cook; Grace Winslow, Health Manager and RN; Sandra Magsamen, Director of the Board for Hiland Hall Gardens; Tim Newbold, Head of School for the Village School of North Bennington



# VERMONT FARM TO SCHOOL NETWORK

## Ready to work on your Farm to School plan?

Check out the Farm to  
School Planning Toolkit at

[vtfeed.org/toolkit](http://vtfeed.org/toolkit)

to see how you can begin  
integrating the cafeteria,  
classroom, and community  
in your school! Find  
additional resources at

[vermontfarmtoschool.org](http://vermontfarmtoschool.org)

## For more information about Bennington County Head Start & Early Head Start, contact:

Rebecca Bishop  
Assistance Director  
Bennington Head Start Center  
2 Park Street

N. Bennington, VT 05257  
802 • 442 • 3686

[rbishop@ucsvt.org](mailto:rbishop@ucsvt.org)

The Vermont Farm to School Network is a statewide network engaging students and school communities in a local food and farm culture that nurtures children's health, cultivates viable farms, and builds vibrant communities. [vermontfarmtoschool.org](http://vermontfarmtoschool.org)