



# VERMONT FARM TO SCHOOL CASE STUDY

## Joining Sustainability & Farm to School Goals

# Hardwick Elementary School



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.



**Hardwick Elementary School** sits in a town of just under 3,000 residents, which is often referred to as the “Gateway to the Northeast Kingdom.” Steeped in a rural community culture and agrarian heritage, it is also at the heart of Vermont’s local food renaissance. The elementary school sits downtown with little outdoor space of its own, but has a strong commitment to Farm to School; education for sustainability; place-based, experiential learning; and collaboration with farmers, businesses, local organizations, and parents. This 15-year-old program persists through changes in staff and administration because of strong community support. Experienced teachers help build the team by collaborating with new teachers who may be hesitant to start new programming. There is no pressure to participate, but rather a warm invitation and a “meet them where they are” mentality.



# SNAPSHOT

## **Supervisory union:**

Orleans Southwest, Town of Hardwick

**Town population:** 3,010

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

240 students, grades preK-6

## **Food program management structure:**

Independently operated

**Free & reduced rate:** 55%

## **Meals served:**

Breakfast, lunch, and after-school snack

## **How local is “local”?**

Local is defined as from Vermont.

## **Sources of support:**

- [x] Vermont Farm to School grantee
- [x] Northeast Farm to School Institute participant
- [x] Works with a regional partner,  
the Center for an Agricultural Economy (CAE)



## **How Hardwick Does Farm to School**

**A special kitchen classroom was developed, fully equipped with cooking appliances and tools, for teachers to use with students for cooking lessons.**

**Teachers engage students in community outreach by taking them to glean crops at local farms.**

**A tracking system for local food purchasing was created for the entire supervisory union.**

**The Sustainability Committee is allocated time by the principal to meet and create goals and action plans for integrating sustainability activities into the school curriculum.**

**Universal breakfast is provided to all students.**

**The Center for an Agricultural Economy (CAE) has incorporated two agricultural education outreach coordinators who work with teachers to strengthen community connections.**

# How Hardwick Makes It Work

**The group uses action planning to identify short- and long-term Farm to School goals and strategies.** Using the Vermont FEED Action Planning Template and with the goal of making a difference in the community, the Sustainability Committee worked with the entire staff to develop three-year goals for the cafeteria, community, and classroom, weighing actions by their impact and their feasibility. For example, goals in the cafeteria are to: (1) engage students with cleanup and compost systems, (2) purchase a food dehydrator for the kitchen, and (3) pilot a new local tracking system with the district business manager in order to indicate the portion from each invoice that is local.

**Hardwick builds on the familiar and makes change slowly.** In both the cafeteria and the classroom, the school nutrition director and teachers suggest taking baby steps. The director cautions, “Don’t all of a sudden one day wake up and say, ‘You know what? We’re buying everything local!’” Instead, “Try one or two items. Reach out to the people around to see who’s offering what, who has what, and how much it costs and try it in small doses.” Incorporating local food is more sustainable if it happens slowly. The same goes for the classroom. Hardwick’s veteran Farm to School teachers advise, “Look at what you’re already teaching. Now look at it through the lens of sustainability and Farm to School.” Some teachers love to cook and garden, but Farm to School education is more than that. Rather than changing their whole curriculum, they integrate those activities and connections in their established lessons over time.

## School administrative support is crucial.

Past administrators weren't always committed to the Farm to School program. When searching for a new principal, teachers and local leaders published a boilerplate job description without any mention of sustainability or Farm to School and received few candidates that were a good fit. The hiring team rewrote their call for leadership, outlining their school vision: "Students are exposed to place-based, experiential learning, and the arts in our community. Examples include: ongoing taste tests for new and locally grown foods... and gleaning as a community service project. Hardwick is seeking a leader to help make this school a true Sustainability Academy." Thus, the newly hired sustainability-minded principal prioritizes school goals by setting aside time through in-service days and trainings for the teachers to plan Farm to School lessons and to meet in committees.



# The Economic Value of Engaging in Farm to School

Community engagement with the school has buoyed the importance of local purchasing and Farm to School programming through the continued budgetary support of Hardwick Elementary. In addition to connecting students to the agricultural landscape of their home, farmers host school field trips to glean produce at the end of the season that will be frozen for later use in school meals. The Center for an Agricultural Economy (CAE) has also worked to track and make purchasing local food easier. With CAE's support, the school hired a sustainability-minded principal and financed agricultural coordinators to work with the food service staff and teachers. The food service director balances her food budget by utilizing the USDA Food Program, purchasing through the Food Director's Association buying group, and prioritizing purchasing local produce from nearby farmers.

# How Farm to School Benefits This Learning Community

**Farm to School connects families of all socioeconomic backgrounds with local and fresh food.** Engaging students in local food and nutrition education normalizes local food for everyone. As an agricultural center, this area boasts a high proportion of dairy and vegetable production, which provides families access to nutritious, fresh products. When children are taught about and experience these foods in school, they expand their tastes and are more likely to carry these lessons home.

**A commitment to outdoor education is part of Farm to School.** Farm to School activities provide integrated opportunities for students who may learn best in nontraditional classroom settings. The Hardwick team also noted that both students and teachers have become rejuvenated by engaging with outdoor learning spaces and community resources like the farmers market and local hiking trails. An additional outdoor committee has now formed within the Sustainability Committee to focus on identifying more outdoor learning spaces and community partners to bolster these efforts.

“Look at the lessons you’re already teaching. Now look at them through the lens of sustainability and Farm to School.”

—Suzanne Bader  
Fourth Grade Teacher



Bradley Elementary School  
B4CATS

# WHAT'S NEXT?

Hardwick Elementary is building capacity for resiliency and consistency so as to maintain the momentum during times of shifting priorities or when Farm to School champions leave campus.

Hardwick was able to secure initial financial investments early on through grants for Farm to School activities and local purchasing, but hasn't yet accessed reliable, consistent funding. Currently, leaders have formed a partnership with a local nonprofit, the Center for an Agricultural Economy, which is providing staff time and expertise to uplift and support Farm to School staff and activities.

With a principal in place who puts a high value on the contributions that Farm to School makes to learning, the school community has an opportunity to appropriately value and support teachers as they seek to continue to strengthen Farm to School activities as part of existing and emerging curricula.

**MEMBERS OF THE INTERVIEW TEAM:** Valerie Hussey, Food Service Director; Reeve Basom, Education and Agriculture Coordinator, Center for an Agricultural Economy; Johanna Laggis, parent, farmer, and community member; Mary-Ellen Lovinsky, retired teacher, farmer, and community member; Suzanne Bader, Fourth Grade Teacher



# 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)

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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)