

Impact Assessment of Vermont Farm2School Program

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

The Vermont FEED partnership engaged John Ryan Principal of Development Cycles in Amherst, MA to analyze efforts to increase the level of Vermont farm involvement in the Vermont public school food system. This increased level of involvement falls into two broad categories: 1) more total sales of Vermont-based produce and dairy products in the schools; and 2) more and deeper partnerships between individual school systems and local farms. Based on the research, the consultant sees these twin approaches as both supporting the goals of better nutrition, increased Vermont farm revenue, and stronger ties to the Vermont agricultural landscape. The consultant also sees these two approaches requiring different strategies for success.

I. Current Conditions

Vermont produce currently accounts for no more than ten percent of the roughly \$1,050,000 in fresh fruit and vegetable purchases made by the Vermont School Food System. This represents at most \$105,000 in Vermont fresh produce purchased annually. Vermont products represent only about 12 percent of the cheese and yogurt sold to Vermont schools, for another roughly \$150,000 annually. Taken together, these Vermont products represent less than two percent of the average food cost of a school meal in Vermont. Only liquid milk represents a significant purchase of Vermont product. According to the Hood Company, the dominant milk supplier to Vermont schools, most of the roughly \$3.4 million spent on liquid milk for Vermont served in school meals comes from Vermont cows. A quarter of the total food cost of a Vermont school meal goes to buy milk.

Currently, the school food system represents a very small share of the market for Vermont products. School food purchases represent less than 0.5 percent of the total sales of fresh fruits and vegetables grown by Vermont farmers. Vermont cheese and other dairy products purchased by schools account for only 0.03 percent of overall sales of these Vermont products. Even the state's significant purchase of milk and dairy products other than cheese accounts for only about 1.2 percent of overall sales for these Vermont-made products. While these overall numbers are low, school food involvement can make a significant impact on the practices and performance of individual farms.

Every School Food Authority (SFA) in Vermont buys some Vermont-based milk. Virtually every SFA has the opportunity to buy Vermont-grown produce, at least seasonally, through their primary food distributor. Local Farm2School partnerships range widely. More than 40 SFAs, serving at least 20 percent of the state's school children, engage in some level of regular Farm2School involvement. They may buy local apples, or sponsor farm-based field trips. Some tend local gardens. Others offer regular student taste-tests using local foods. Some have community-led food & nutrition committees. A few purchase food shares from community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms. Another handful of schools utilizes nutritional/ wellness curriculum that integrates the school food program with classroom learning. The most successful and comprehensive programs

have strong commitments from the school food administrator, the school principal, at least some teachers, and some members of the local farm community. Both anecdotal and study-based results demonstrate that student involvement in the school food program does result in their making better nutritional choices, improves academic performance, and increases health. In a soon to be published study of students in South Bend, Indiana, students involved in a sensory based nutritional education program shifted family food buying habits with dramatic increases in the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables. The keys to expanding and deepening local Farm2School partnerships are varied. They include: matching farms and schools together; making it easier for SFAs to take a first step to get started; increasing principal participation in workshops; getting school food workers on to farms; involving farmers in educational planning; celebrating successful programs; and developing and using evaluation tools for measuring outcomes.

II. Key Challenges

There are several levels of challenge to making significant and long-term changes in the type and quality of food purchased and prepared for Vermont School Food programs. At the most global level, good nutrition is not highly valued by society generally or by the educational system that mirrors those societal values. Those working in the school food system face the basic challenge of a system that expresses the priority of cheap food over healthy food in the cost of the school meal program, the prices paid for local produce, the utilization of commodity foods, the pay scale of food workers, and the classroom time given to nutritional education. Within this context, the key challenge is to increase the level of commitment on the part of school food administrators, school principals, farmers, teachers, food distributors, students, and community members to make an extra effort despite these constraints. Only by meeting that challenge will the entrenched values change.

Other basic constraints create their own challenges. The availability of fresh Vermont produce is limited seasonally, but the need for fresh produce in schools exists throughout the year. Even if the schools bought all of their fresh produce from Vermont producers in September and October, they would still need to purchase most of their fruits and vegetables from national markets for 75 percent of the school year. This is why it is important to look at lightly processed foods, value added foods, and ways to extend the season where Vermont produce is available.

The system of local School Food Authorities results in over 300 separate administrators making autonomous buying decisions and establishing individual cooking practices. Influencing these individual decision-makers one at a time presents still another set of challenges.

In order to make short term improvements in the amount of Vermont-based food purchased for schools, other practical challenges exist: making it easier for school food administrators to buy fresh local produce through their existing distributor; reducing the perception (and at times the reality) of a cost differential between local and non-local produce; increasing the capacity of school food authorities to process and store fresh

produce efficiently; and providing incentives to schools to support change represent four areas of challenge. Increasing student preference for fresh local produce is perhaps the key challenge at this level. They are the consumers: in the end, their choices represent the key feedback that will drive buying, preparation, funding, and educational decisions.

In order to increase the number and depth of local farm-school partnerships that engage children as partners in the school food program, the key areas of challenge include: 1) building the knowledge base of the school food administrators and school principals; 2) integrating the cafeteria into the school curriculum; 3) identifying and connecting interested farms to local schools; 4) providing an achievable “first step” range of programs; and 5) deepening and sustaining the commitment to these partnerships with so many competing priorities for time and resources.

III. Recommendations

The full report lists 22 specific recommendations to a) increase Vermont-based product sales to School Food Programs and b) increase the number and depth of local farm-school partnerships in Vermont. The recommended actions fall into several categories including:

- Influencing the Federal and State Commodity Food Program to double the state DoD Fresh allocation, sell more apples and other Vermont produce through the DoD Fresh Program, and increase and highlight the sale of Vermont cheese through the USDA Commodities Program.
- Working through existing food distribution channels to address pick up, delivery, price, standardization, and returns policies; provide produce order forms that identify and highlight the availability of Vermont-grown produce; provide School Food Authorities with processing tips and recipes, especially those that utilize less popular Vermont-grown products; and develop a marketing campaign and common F2S logo for SFAs that highlights the use of local products in the lunch-line to students and parents.
- Setting Other Long Term Actions in Motion to expand Vermont’s capacity to provide light processing and value added products that better utilize Vermont-based agriculture; collect, develop, and distribute “best practice” information to School Food Authorities at a detailed practical level; and establish baseline conditions and survey methodologies to track the change in nutritional, health and educational measures based on changes in school food offerings.
- Increasing Local Farm2School Partnerships by designating an entity with statewide purview to facilitate outreach, training, and evaluation; matching interested School Food Authorities with farms and other local food suppliers in their immediate area; developing and offering a menu of “Ways to Get Started” in curriculum-based Farm2School initiatives; developing a statewide award program; developing a strategy for contributing to local school food

administrator hiring decisions; and advocating for and training local school food committees.

- Providing Legislative Funding for fresh local produce purchases by SFAs; regional trainings for food service workers, principals, teachers, and farmers; equipment purchases; development of Farm2School curriculum and innovative activities; and to support the development of light processing and value-added foods appropriate for school food programs.

IV. Impacts

Pursuing these recommendations and accomplishing the goals set out in this report would have the following implications on key elements of the Vermont school food system over the next three years.

- Sale of Vermont Products: Accomplishing all of the goals would result in a projected increase of at least \$460,000/ year in local school food purchases within three years. This represents a 150 percent increase over the current level of sales of Vermont products by schools.
- Farmers: In addition to this increase in sales, 100 more farms would engage in some form of Farm2School partnership, with at least 50 farmers receiving training to enrich the role of farmers in the nutritional curriculum. These new farm-school partnerships will introduce the nutritional benefits of “buying local” from Vermont farms to as many as half of school children in Vermont.
- School Food Workers: These recommended actions provide school food workers with additional resources in terms of training, equipment, and additional funding to purchase fresh and local produce. Actions to recognize outstanding practices and advocate for more health-consciousness in hiring new school food administrators help increase the status and professionalism of these jobs. As these workers are asked to take on more responsibility for nutrition, the case for paying them higher wages grows more compelling.
- Teachers and Administrators: These recommendations would result in an increase in nutritional training for at least 250 teachers and principals over three years. It would increase participation in Farm2School initiatives by at least 100 new schools and would continue to increase the focus on the nutritional education curriculum. Funding recommendations provide resources for new initiatives and resource materials. An award program will provide recognition for those school systems, teachers and administrators who excel in this area.
- State Government: Recommendations increase the role of the State Commodity Office in advocating for greater local and fresh produce purchases in the DoD Fresh and USDA Commodity Program. The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Farms & Markets (VT AAFM) would focus its marketing and

processing efforts on products that support the greater use of local products in the school food program. The role of the VT Child Nutrition Programs or Department of Health would expand to include development of methodologies to measure the success of these initiatives in child health and educational improvements. One of these state agencies may have primary responsibility to oversee training, outreach, and evaluation of the range of Farm2School initiatives.

- School Meal Charges: The recommendations do not require any direct additional food costs be borne by increasing meal charges. However, one goal of these initiatives is to increase the level of local support needed to shift the additional cost of offering more fresh local produce from state funded support to some combination of higher meal charges and local funding over time. This level of additional cost is in the range of \$.05 to \$.10/ meal, including both food and labor costs. Some of these added costs may be offset by greater participation rates in the meal program as it makes improvements in nutrition and increases student involvement in meal choices.
- Local Government: Initially, the direct impact of these recommendations on local government is limited. However, as these initiatives bring greater awareness to the importance of nutrition in school foods, support should grow to address local needs around food purchases, kitchen facilities, staffing, and wages. These initiatives set the stage for local schools to incorporate some of the costs initially borne by legislative funding.
- Food Distributors: The major produce wholesalers in Vermont would be asked to follow through on their expressed interest in increasing local produce sales to SFAs, by participating in efforts to develop protocols addressing pick up, delivery, handling, pricing, and product standardization. They would also be encouraged to distribute order forms that highlight local products.
- Legislative Funding: The recommendations call for the Vermont legislature to fund at least \$1.2 million in Farm2School initiative support over the next three years. This amounts to about one percent of the total cost of the school food program over this three-year period or less than two cents per meal served. Roughly 30 percent of these funds will provide for direct purchase of local produce; another 35 percent will increase the training and infrastructure for school food administrators to utilize more fresh produce; 30 percent will result in direct Farm2School activities for more than 100 School Food Authorities in the state; the remaining will support the development of light processing and value added initiatives using Vermont products.
- Child Nutrition: Accomplishment of these recommended actions would more than double the amount of Vermont fruits, vegetables, cheese and dairy products consumed in Vermont schools. It will increase total consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables from all sources by more than 20 percent. At least

one third of all SFAs in Vermont will be engaged in local Farm2School initiatives with over 250 more school food administrators, food workers, teachers and administrators receiving training on the role of Farm2School initiatives on healthy eating.

V. Summary

The driving goal in the Farm2School initiative is to promote healthier children and a healthier Vermont food system. Buying more fresh local produce should be seen as a means to achieving those goals. In the short-term, the capacity of the food system to increase purchases of Vermont products is limited. At whatever level of purchase, the value of buying fresh local food is greatly enhanced by the direct connection of healthy eating with a place-based nutritional and agricultural curriculum. Student participation in discovering, growing, recipe-making, cooking, and tasting these foods represents the crucial link that drives real change in eating habits. Local school food purchases alone will not change basic nutritional values nor will it serve to secure the future of local agriculture in Vermont. Vermont agriculture's self-interest in this effort is a long-term one: their participation will develop the connection with and loyalty of the next generation of healthier-eating, Vermont consumers.