If our students are well nourished, their bodies and minds are ready to learn. School nutrition programs are as fundamental to student success as laptops, textbooks, and soccer balls, yet they are often overlooked as an essential part of the education day.

Schools in Vermont serve meals to more than 50,000 Vermont students, at a cost of $50.3 million each year, and $15.5 million of that money is spent on food. That is a tremendous opportunity to nourish kids, improve readiness to learn, develop healthy eating habits, provide new markets to farmers, and strengthen school culture and local communities.

School meal programs have a significant impact on reducing childhood hunger. One in seven Vermont children live in food insecure homes, where the pantry may often be bare. Children who arrive at school hungry, or who have poor health habits, have less academic success. These liabilities can follow them throughout their entire lives.
Almost 25% of Vermont schools now have universal school meals, served at no cost to families, eliminating the stigma of qualifying for school meals.

Partnering school meal programs with farm to school programs is an effective way to improve meal quality, increase participation and connect students with the source of their food and the nourishment it provides. This “virtuous cycle” also creates new local markets for farmers and improves local economies and food security. Close to 80% of Vermont schools have at least some farm to school activity, and yet there is much more opportunity for growth.

This guide outlines how Vermont schools feed our children and how farm to school programs can improve those meals.

Photo: Ben Hudson
How big is Vermont’s school meal program?

7.3M lunches served yearly
feeding 52% of Vermont students
at 250 public schools

4.1M breakfasts served yearly
feeding 27% of Vermont students

41% of Vermont students qualified for free/reduced meals

How much do school nutrition programs cost?

$50.3M was spent by Vermont school nutrition programs in 2018*

School lunches cost $3.81 to provide,
and students are charged $2.63.

School breakfasts cost $2.72 to provide,
and students are charged $2.34.**

Sources: *Spring 2019, Vermont Agency of Education
**National averages from April 2019, USDA School Nutrition Meal Cost Study & 2018, School Nutrition Association State of School Nutrition
How is the money spent?

Of the $50.3 million spent in 2018:

- **59%** Labor: $29 million
- **31%** Food Cost: $15.5 million
- **10%** Supplies & Other: $5.5 million

Who pays for the program?

- **59%** Federal Government
- **38.5%** Purchased Foods (from families & other sources)
- **2.5%** State Government
What federal programs do schools access to feed students?

- **NSLP** = The National School Lunch Program
- **SBP** = The School Breakfast Program
- **SFSP** = The Summer Food Service Program
- **CACFP** = The Child and Adult Care Food Program (serves childcare programs, and includes a separate afterschool meal and supper program).
- **FFVP** = The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (healthy snacks and nutrition education)
- **CEP/P2** = Universal School Meals (Community Eligibility Provisions and Provision 2) allows students to eat for free. These federal provisions are available to schools with very high free/reduced rates. In 2018-19, approximately 24% of Vermont schools offer universal school meals.

Some schools offer additional ways for children to access food to take home for the weekend through privately funded programs (these include Weekend Backpack Programs and Veggie Vango).

Food sold outside of the National Meal Program (in middle and high schools) can include a la carte drinks and food and vending machines, but must meet the USDA “Smart Snacks” guidelines.
Who prepares school food?

School meal programs are managed by School Nutrition Managers/Directors (district employees) or are contracted with Food Service Management Companies. School kitchen infrastructures vary based on facilities, equipment, and storage capacity. Some kitchens have capacity for scratch cooking, while others rely on centralized kitchens at nearby schools where the food is prepared, and then delivered to the smaller schools.

Operating school nutrition programs has become more demanding. School nutrition professionals must train and manage staff; meet health, safety, and professional standards; address USDA dietary requirements; balance budgets; work with food distributors and school administrators, accommodate food allergies; and serve their student clients with a smile. By finding ways to professionalize and fairly compensate school nutrition professionals, they can become a part of the education team.

65% of Vermont students eat in schools with independent meal programs staffed by district employees (some rely on centralized school kitchens).

35% of Vermont students receive meals from companies contracted to manage the school food service program on behalf of the district. The three largest firms in Vermont are: The Abbey Group (Enosburg Falls, VT), Café Services (Londonderry, NH), and Aladdin (Canonsburg, PA).

Photo: USDA
Where does food for school meal programs come from?

Vermont received $2.5M in USDA Foods in 2017–18. This includes foods like grains, dairy, proteins, fruits, and vegetables. $418K of that money was through the Department of Defense Fresh program to purchase fresh produce.

School Food Authorities purchase most food from the same distributors that serve restaurants and supermarkets. Major distributors to Vermont schools include US Food Service Co., Sysco, Upper Valley Produce, and Reinhart/Black River Produce. Food is also purchased directly from local farms, food processors, food hubs, and retailers.

SOURCE: 2018, The Vermont Agency of Education & The Vermont Department of Health’s 2018 Vermont Farm to School Data Harvest

In 2016-17, 1/3 of Vermont schools spent over 20% of their food budget on local food. Every dollar spent on local food contributes an additional 60¢ to the local economy.
A School Food Authority is the local government body legally responsible for administering and operating school nutrition programs in schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program. A School Food Authority is typically a town school district, union school district, or private school.

Food Directors Association (FDA) of Vermont is a buying cooperative of 180 schools with school-run meal programs (roughly 40,000 students). They purchase food under a single competitive contract. Members access a catalog of products, but order independently. Through this collective contract, $11 million in food is purchased annually. In addition to food purchased through the cooperative, schools may buy local food directly from producers.

Food Hubs, centralized sites where local foods are aggregated from many farms into one delivery system, are a labor saving way for schools to purchase directly from farms and for small farms to sell product to institutions. Schools order specific products and can identify the food’s source when purchasing. Vermont food hubs delivering to schools include Green Mountain Farm Direct, Food Connects, and Food Venture Center.

Food Service Management Companies (FSMC), as for profit businesses, bid directly with distributors. Some purchase local foods in bulk, such as apples, for their school accounts. A few individual school managers purchase seasonal, local foods from nearby farms for Harvest of the Month, celebrations, or taste tests.

In 2018, **56 Vermont schools** spent nearly **$175,000** on local food from **37 farms** through Green Mountain Farm Direct!

*SOURCE: 2018 Green Mountain Farm Direct Annual Report*
What is Farm to School?

Farm to School 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 Farm to School 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 in the community.

Through Farm to School, students develop positive relationships with food and an understanding how their food choices impact their bodies, the environment, and their communities—lessons and habits that will last a lifetime.

Farm to School programs in Vermont have been growing steadily over the last two decades. In a recent survey conducted by the Vermont Department of Health, 4 out of 5 Vermont schools have at least some form of Farm to School activity.

- 81% Have a school garden
- 89% Buy some local food
- 65% Connect to a local farm or farmer
- 84% Incorporate FTS into one or more subject areas
How Can Farm to School Impact School Meals?

FARM TO SCHOOL

More fresh, local food in school meals

The Virtuous Cycle of Farm to School

Increased capacity to afford higher quality food

Greater revenue for the school meal program

Increased participation

THE RESULTS:

• Supports local economy
• Improved student learning
• Increased attendance
• Improved math scores
• Decrease in reported behavior incidents & nurse visits

KIDS ARE ENGAGED & READY TO LEARN

Adapted from Hunger Free Vermont’s Virtuous Cycle of Farm to School & School Meals
How do we meet the challenges of more fresh local food in school meals?

CAFETERIA SERVICE INFRASTRUCTURE AND CULTURE
Food service training, proper equipment, and streamlining the process of buying local products are essential given the time and cost constraints school nutrition directors face. Changes in district wellness policy (example: moving recess before lunch and adhering to values-based purchasing) can bring a cultural shift in school meals.

COST & AVAILABILITY
Schools need a dependable supply of food at a competitive price. Building a reliable local product supply network that can meet the daily needs of both big and small school meal programs is essential for Farm to School. Adding language in bidding contracts, creating purchasing agreements with volume discounts, and establishing forward contracting will also help ensure adequate supplies are available when needed.

SEASONALITY
School menus don’t always follow seasonal availability. Introducing recipes that use seasonal foods and exploring methods to extend produce with light processing allows schools to enjoy Vermont produce for more of the year. Some foods are available year round such as dairy, proteins and grains. The challenge is finding the quantities and delivery of products that meet school needs.

FOOD SAFETY
Training and communication between farmers and school nutrition personnel can address any food safety concerns. Visiting farms before bringing in products builds knowledge and relationships, too.
What does a Farm to School lunch look like in Vermont?

Tossed salad with Vermont greens

Vermont ground beef burger or homemade black bean burger

Oven baked Vermont sweet potato fries

Vermont apple

Vermont 1% milk in cartons

80% of Vermont schools now have salad bars!

Menu complies with 2012 USDA School Nutrition regulations
How does Farm to School encourage kids to eat new foods?

Connecting students to the source of their food has the most direct impact on helping them make healthier food choices. Student preferences have to change along with school meal changes. Research shows students who know a farmer or grow their own food eat more fruits and vegetables.

**Curriculum integration** embeds Farm to School concepts into existing curricular requirements. Teachers use food, farm, and nutrition as the vehicle to address teaching standards.

**Taste tests** offer small samples of new flavors to expand student palettes and prepare them for new foods without the pressure of eating a new entree. The more students prepare, serve, sample foods, and help with menu development, the more willing they are to eat new foods on the lunch menu.

**Farm field trips** let students build relationships and learn where their food comes from by visiting local farms and meeting farmers.

**School gardens** allow students to interact with growing food in their own schoolyard or nearby community garden throughout the day, including classroom time and recess.

**Classroom cooking** allows students to practice measuring, explore changes in matter, read recipes, cook cooperatively, and share meals that lead to transferable life skills and exposure to new foods.

**Summer and afterschool programs** are less structured times and spaces to introduce, grow, and prepare new foods.

**Service learning and career exploration** offer real world experiences for students, such as gleaning farm produce and cooking for a local food shelf.
How can you help?

Farm to School brings together the entire community. All of us have a role in improving the well-being of our children.

**School District Leaders** can change the culture of school meal programs by encouraging district-wide adoption of farm to school programs, incorporate farm to school into job descriptions and professional learning, establish district committees that create wellness and farm to school policies, support a nutrition workforce that is well-trained and fairly compensated.

**Legislators** can support funding and expansion of Farm to School grants and technical assistance programs to reach more schools and early childhood programs and expand nutrition programs.

**School Community (teachers, students, parents)** can develop school-based action plans for incorporating Farm to School, including food, farm, and nutrition education.

**School Nutrition Program staff** can seek support and training for purchasing and using local foods, develop menus incorporating local, seasonal foods, and introduce this food to kids.

**Farmers** can contact school nutrition directors and set up appointments to discuss foods they might buy and farmers could offer. Consider setting up growing contracts to meet their needs. Talk with teachers to arrange farm field trips and classroom visits.

**Food Distributors** can work with the School Nutrition Association of Vermont or the Vermont Farm to School Network to source and feature local foods.

**State Government** can continue to embrace and expand Farm to School as a strategy to accomplish state goals: preventative efforts to combat chronic illness, new market opportunities for farmers, and project-based learning in schools.