

VERMONT FARM TO SCHOOL NETWORK: CONNECTING CLASSROOMS, CAFETERIAS AND COMMUNITIES

Vermont

A cross-sector coalition in Vermont is working together to make progress on critical statewide issues: childhood hunger and nutrition, education, obesity and wellness, farm viability and environmental quality. Sixty statewide partners are collaborating to understand these complex challenges and advance solutions together—much faster than they could alone.

Skills and Capacity

Partnership development, advocacy, curriculum development, youth leadership, training

Partners

Vermont Farm to School Network, Vermont FEED, Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Hunger Free Vermont, Vermont School Nutrition Association, Vermont Community Foundation

Issues

Education, health and well-being, and economic mobility

Tools

Systems mapping, collective impact, storytelling, participatory budgeting, rapid prototyping

Tackling Statewide Challenges Together



Farm to School at the farm (Shelburne Farms)

The [Vermont Farm to School Network](#) came together in 2009 to address the complex and interrelated challenges of childhood hunger and nutrition, community development and local food/farm economies, and education outcomes and place-based learning. School communities across Vermont were working to connect kids to hands-on food and farm education, serve healthy and nutritious school meals and support local agriculture, but practitioners realized they could not create statewide change without working together.

In 2015, practitioners realized that a network was not enough—they needed to understand and change the whole, complex system. Sixty partners came together to [“Align-Act-Adjust.”](#) They mapped the Farm to School system, a web of interrelated challenges and factors influencing their success. They adopted a [Collective Impact](#) framework to help them *align* around four key leverage points and a common goal. Action teams formed to *act* quickly, launching projects to shift those leverage points. Now, they regularly evaluate their work and *adjust* their goals and strategies. The Network already can point to positive outcomes: improved school meals, more local purchasing, declines in childhood hunger and school nurse visits, academic progress and millions of dollars contributed to Vermont’s economy.

Tool Spotlight

Rapid Prototyping

Rapid prototyping helps groups quickly flesh out an idea and make it real, test it, gather feedback and improve it.

Collective Impact

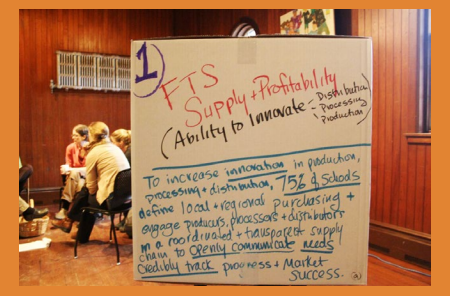
This framework offers a structured way for diverse partners to find common goals and make progress on complex social problems.

Participatory Budgeting

Stakeholders work together to allocate or share funding, instead of funders or officials making the decisions.

Storytelling

Stories are powerful ways to document and share successes, challenges, and personal impact—making the case to funders and decision-makers.



Collaboration Sparks High-Impact Solutions

Progress on complex challenges, such as hunger and education, can be slow and overwhelming, and organizations too often compete for resources or territory. Isolated actions may have limited results, but diverse partners can rapidly make progress if they align their work and identify the most impactful ways to take action. The Vermont Farm to School Network developed an effective model for identifying leverage points, scaling up solutions and building true collaboration.

PARTNER

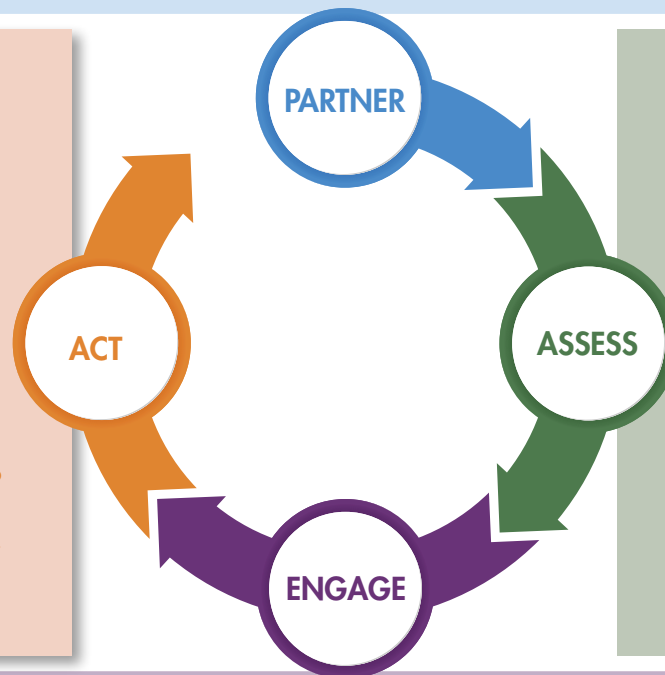
The Network started by identifying all stakeholders associated with Farm to School programs—hunger organizations, school nutrition workers, funders, school communities, farmers and conservation organizations, legislators and statewide agencies, and parents and children. Those groups created a process to map and analyze the system in which they work, and align around a common goal. Partners now share decision-making and leadership of the Network and action teams.

ACT

Hundreds of people work on Farm to School every day, from serving up healthy, local meals to running kids' cooking competitions and organizing farm visits. At the state level, action teams focus on developing shared strategies and projects that advance system change. Teams gather stories and data to make the case for Farm to School, develop resources and templates for practitioners, influence policy and support communication.

ASSESS

Leaders first conducted interviews and research, identifying 180 different factors that make up the Farm to School system and influence its goals. They build a learning community, which emphasizes continual assessment and adjustment. Now in the action phase, they continue to gather insights from those working on the ground; they use this "groundtruthing," along with data-driven metrics, to measure progress toward their goal and revise their strategies.



ENGAGE

The Vermont Farm to School Network engages and connects stakeholders at multiple levels:

- A core team with rotating membership provides coordination, communication and decision-making for the Network and collaboratively allocates funding. [Vermont FEED](#), a non-profit, provides additional support for coordination and communication
- Action teams form to work on collaborative projects that shift the key levers for change.
- Regional Farm to School groups coordinate activities and connect local school teams around the state.
- School teams connect educators and administrators, students and parents, food service staff and farmers to improve school meals, curriculum and community connections.
- Supporters around the state participate in Farm to School events or trainings, contact legislators, organize programs and more.

Impacts for Opportunity

Farm to School already was having a strong impact in Vermont before the Network adopted a model for collaboration. Now, strategic solutions are spreading and scaling even faster. More schools are starting or expanding Farm to School programs, purchasing local food and supporting the local economy; more students are accessing healthy meals; and educators seeing positive effects on student behavior and focus. The collaboration also benefits the participating non-profits; they now collaborate to design projects and resources, allocate funding and develop best practices, rather than competing and working in isolation.

Education

Farm to School improves many educational outcomes. Students learn about health and science through hands-on activities, such as classroom cooking carts, school gardens and farm visits. Connections with local farms help students understand and become more active in their communities. Older students benefit from unique leadership opportunities, such as public speaking, writing and advocacy, project planning and team building. Improved nutrition through school meals may help most of all—universal free school meals improve student attendance and focus, while reducing behavior problems.

Health and Well-Being

Nutritious meals are the cornerstone of health and wellness, and their benefits mount up. School meals and summer meals are the most reliable source of nutrition for many children. Vermont’s childhood hunger rates have declined 37 percent in 5 years, in part thanks to Farm to School. Students learn to taste and appreciate new foods in school cafeterias, and are more likely to eat vegetables they grow themselves. The [Jr. Iron Chef Vermont](#) youth cooking competition has drawn 3,000 teens to date. They build lifelong cooking and nutrition skills and help their families adopt healthier habits along the way.

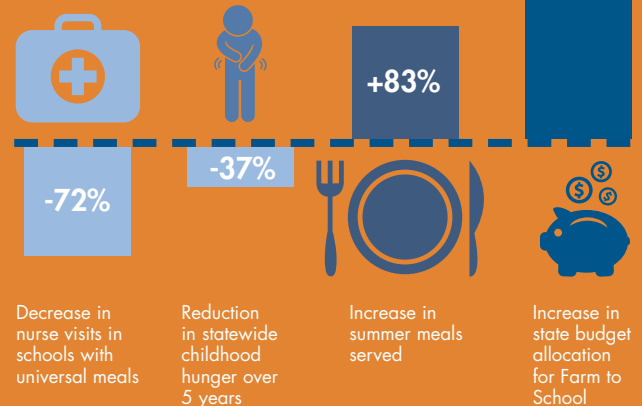
For more information, visit: vermontfarmtoschool.org



Jr Iron Chef Vermont program (Rebecca Sanborn Stone, for Vermont FEED)

By the Numbers

Farm to School Collaboration and System Change Yield Statewide Results



60

Farm to School leaders joined a process to map and understand their complex system



180

Different components influence their progress and work



4

Components are key leverage points for accelerating impact



1

Common goal: strong FTS programs in 75 percent of Vermont schools by 2025

