



# FOOD & FARM INITIATIVE

## 2018 UPDATE

In 2012, the Vermont Community Foundation launched the Food and Farm Initiative (FFI) to help connect Vermont's local food economy with the fight against hunger. Since then, the Initiative has awarded more than \$2.2 million to 20 organizations for programs that feed Vermont's children with food grown right here at home. The Initiative has had a significant impact on our local food system through its grants, partnerships, and investments. More children are eating healthy, local foods at school. More schools are procuring ingredients from farms within their communities. More farmers are succeeding, thanks to increased sales.

This success would not have been possible without the support of many donors and fundholders. Their vision, generosity, and commitment made FFI the largest and most far-reaching initiative in the Community Foundation's history. As it comes to a close, we wanted to share an update on the work of a few grantees—which offers a glimpse of the Initiative's impact as a whole.



## GREEN MOUNTAIN FARM TO SCHOOL

**Green Mountain Farm to School's (GMFTS)** mission is to strengthen local food systems in the Northeast Kingdom by promoting positive relationships between schools, farms, and communities.

In a region where an estimated 25% of residents live at or below the federal poverty line, school meals play a critical role in ensuring children receive adequate nutrition. GMFTS leveraged FFI funding to grow school meals programs across the region, ensuring schools had the support they need to feed more kids healthy, local food.

School food service directors play a key role in planning, preparing, and procuring food and often want to take their program to the next level, but lack the time and resources to do it. That's where GMFTS comes in.

"These are the people on the front lines of school nutrition," says GMFTS's Assistant Director Catherine Cusack. "They care deeply and local food matters to them, but they are just stretched so thin."

With support from FFI, Green Mountain Farm to School has built relationships with food service professionals in more than fifty NEK schools. They've worked hand in hand with them to bridge the gap to local purchasing by implementing action plans, solving logistical challenges, and building stakeholder support. Says Cusack, "Thanks to the Initiative's support, we've been able to go one layer deeper into changing school food."

## VT FEED: VERMONT FOOD EDUCATION, EVERY DAY

**Vermont Food Education, Every Day (VT FEED)** is a statewide organization dedicated to engaging 75% of Vermont schools in farm-to-school programming by 2025. Founded in 2000, VT FEED encompasses more than 500 educators, farmers, food service professionals, and policy-makers.

With FFI support, VT FEED led farm-to-school partners across the state in creating a unified, strategic plan for the future. Though they shared a common mission, these organizations had previously struggled to coordinate their efforts. VT FEED recognized the need—and the opportunity—to bring the network together to create a greater impact.

"Thanks to this funding and the focused efforts of our partners over the course of the Food and Farm Initiative, we have activated 40 organizations across the state, and each one now has a clear, defined role to play in the statewide solution," says VT FEED's Executive Director Betsy Rosenbluth. "We are all pulling in the same direction."

In an effort to drive institutional, sustainable change, VT FEED also launched a successful strategic campaign to convey the economic impact of farm-to-school programming to policy-makers and legislators. With the help of 326 local champions from every county, they were able to convince the legislature that an investment in Farm to School is worthwhile—for our kids, for the economy, and for farmers.

Over the past several years, state funding for farm-to-school programming has more than tripled, and there is a sustainable resource to support this programming for the future.

Says Rosenbluth, "The Food and Farm Initiative was with us as a partner—helping us dig deep into the strategic planning process, helping us build lasting systems, believing in the vision. Now we have the framework and ongoing resources to make the greatest collective impact."



**Hunger Free Vermont** is Vermont's statewide nonprofit dedicated to advocacy, public education, training, and outreach to end the injustices of hunger and malnutrition.

Over the past 23 years, they have developed deep expertise in navigating complex federal school meal programs. With support from FFI, Hunger Free Vermont developed resources to guide schools through the process of accessing USDA money for local purchasing. These trainings, guides, and webinars will be permanently available to all Vermont schools and regional farm-to-school organizations, so they have the tools they need to understand the ins and outs of federal meal programs.

"If you increase participation in school meal programs, the increased participation brings additional federal funding into the schools," says Hunger Free Vermont's Acting Executive Director Anore Horton. "This funding enables the purchase of more local foods and allows for increased staff time and prep time—which leads

to a better quality of meals served. When the quality of the food improves, there's greater participation in school meals, which brings in more funding, and so on. We call this the virtuous cycle."

With support from the Initiative, Hunger Free Vermont was also able to work with farm-to-school partners to convince lawmakers that all students eligible for reduced-price meals should have access to free lunch in school. Even at the reduced price, lunch was still unaffordable for many families. Now all of those children are eating healthy meals at school.

Horton believes these new, enduring resources lay the groundwork to significantly improve the lives of the next generation of Vermonters. "We now have a permanent fix for a problem that has plagued our system for years," she says. "The foundation is in place, and we can continue to improve and grow, knowing we have sustainable resources to carry this work forward."

## HUNGER FREE VERMONT



## FOOD CONNECTS

**Food Connects** is a Windham County nonprofit working to revolutionize southern Vermont's food system. Their mission is to cultivate healthy farm and food connections in classrooms, cafeterias, and communities.

With FFI support, Food Connects helped schools increase meal participation. From providing marketing materials that build excitement around cafeteria offerings to educating parents and school boards about the value of Farm to School, Food Connects helped schools significantly increase local purchasing from farmers within their communities.

"During the course of the Initiative, Windham County schools increased local purchasing by 40%," says Food Connects Executive

Director Richard Berkfield. "To local farmers, that means everything. It's a direct investment in our community."

The USDA's Food and Nutrition Service makes funds available for school meals, but each comes with its own logistical challenges. For schools, the process can be daunting and prohibitive.

"Every school is different, and there's a lot to navigate," Berkfield says. "This grant allowed us to work with individual schools at their own pace. We helped identify which programs made the most sense for each school, in terms of interest, opportunity, and capacity. When they were ready, we were there, to help take the guesswork out of things, and transform their ideas into reality."

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