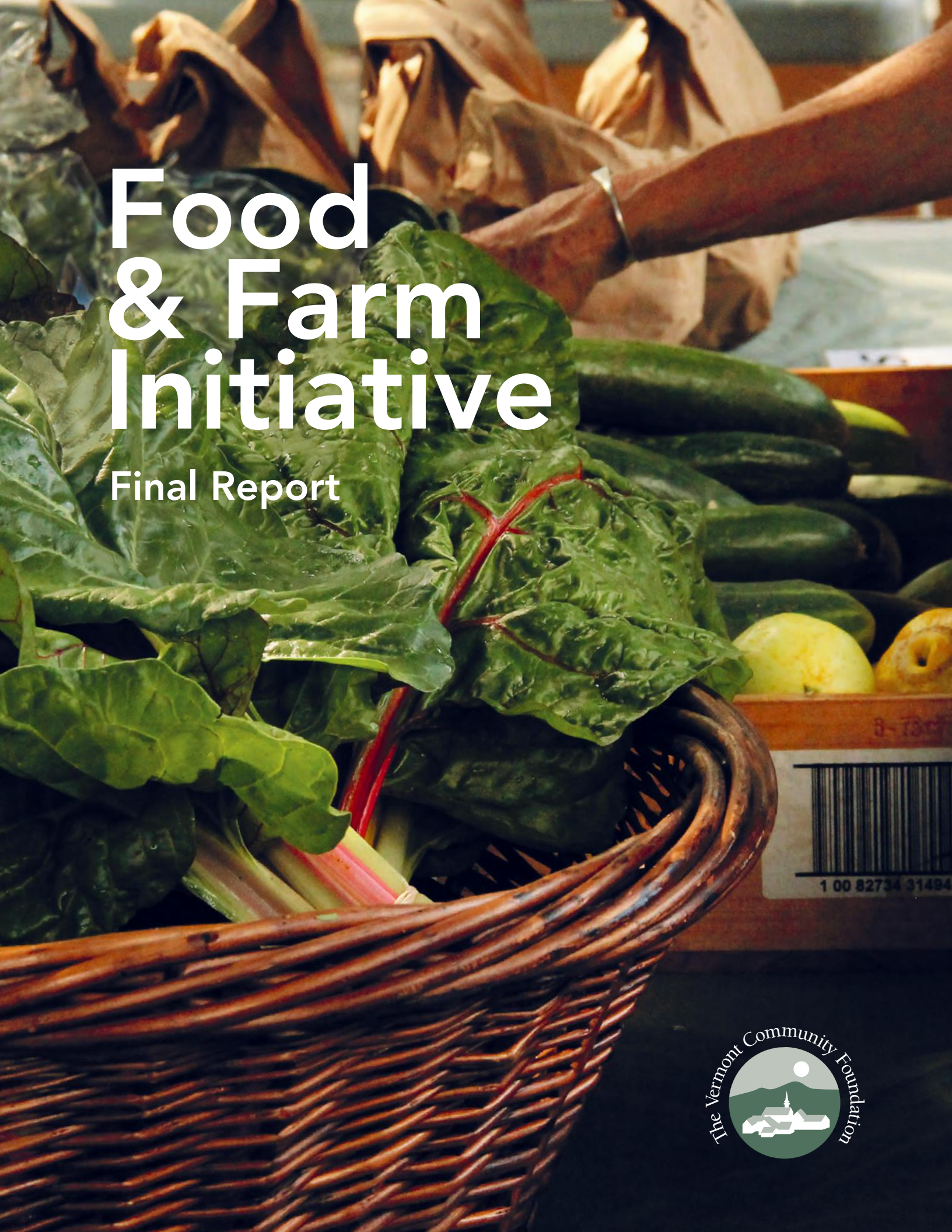
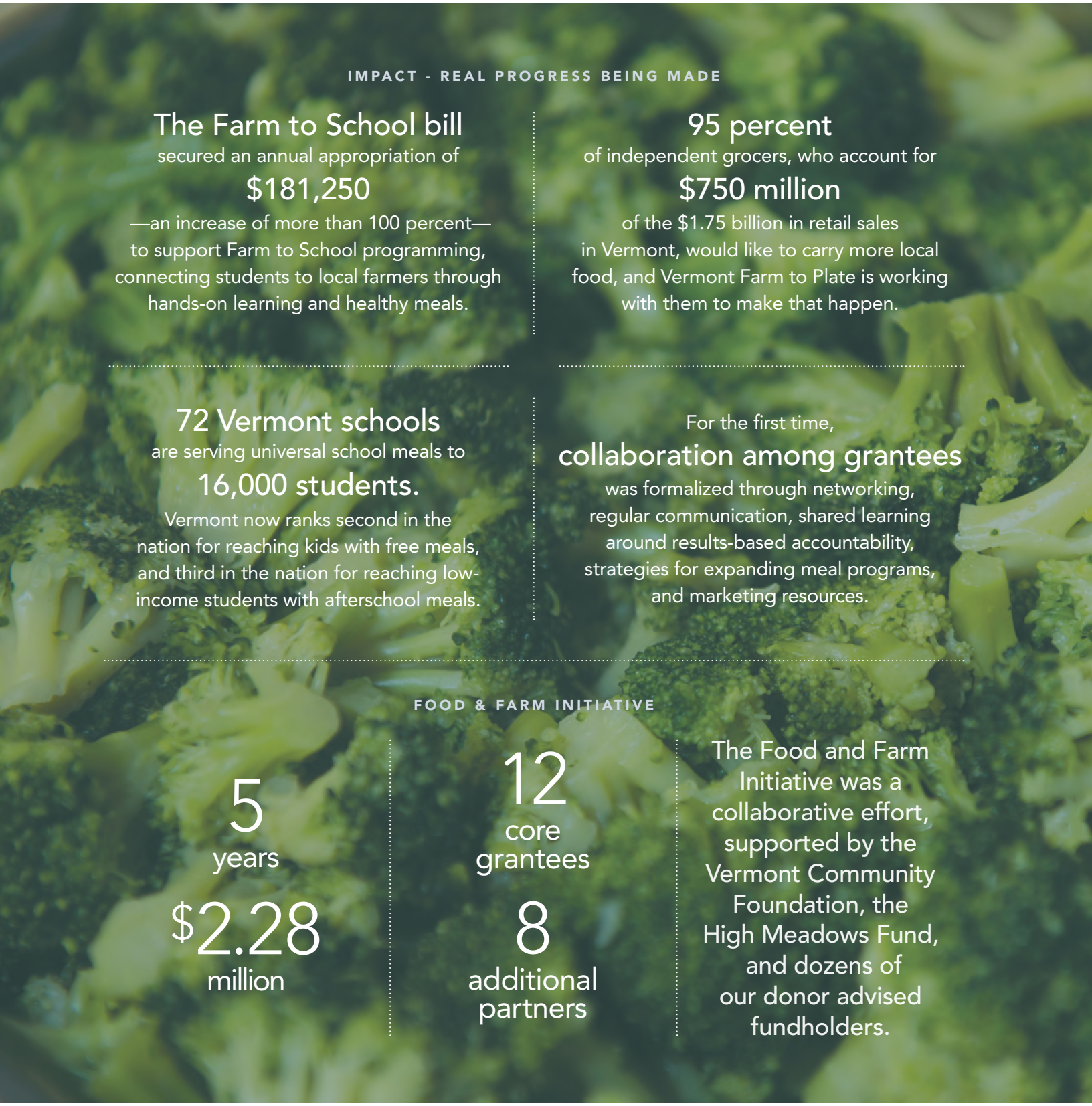


Food & Farm Initiative

Final Report

The Vermont Community Foundation



IMPACT - REAL PROGRESS BEING MADE

The Farm to School bill
secured an annual appropriation of
$181,250
—an increase of more than 100 percent—
to support Farm to School programming, connecting students to local farmers through hands-on learning and healthy meals.

95 percent
of independent grocers, who account for
$750 million
of the $1.75 billion in retail sales in Vermont, would like to carry more local food, and Vermont Farm to Plate is working with them to make that happen.

72 Vermont schools
are serving universal school meals to
16,000 students.
Vermont now ranks second in the nation for reaching kids with free meals, and third in the nation for reaching low-income students with afterschool meals.

For the first time,
collaboration among grantees
was formalized through networking, regular communication, shared learning around results-based accountability, strategies for expanding meal programs, and marketing resources.

FOOD & FARM INITIATIVE

5
years

$2.28
million

12
core grantees

8
additional partners

The Food and Farm Initiative was a collaborative effort, supported by the Vermont Community Foundation, the High Meadows Fund, and dozens of our donor advised fundholders.

About Food & Farm Initiative



In 2012, the Vermont Community Foundation launched the Food and Farm Initiative with a big idea: to increase and inspire grant making around the goal of connecting the local food movement with the fight against hunger in Vermont.

Our beautiful landscape and agricultural heritage can make it difficult to imagine that hunger and food insecurity exist here, but they are a very real presence in the lives of thousands of Vermonters. In fact, over one in four Vermont residents live on restricted incomes that may not always allow them to buy enough healthy food, and that number includes nearly a third of all children statewide.

On the other side of the equation, Vermont farmers face real challenges. Production expenses, such as feed, labor, property taxes, repair and maintenance, and electricity, have been steadily increasing for more than a decade. Between 2005 and 2014, New England farms saw a 37 percent rise in production expenses, with net income often failing as a result.

Along with many partners, we identified the opportunity to think creatively about the shifting conditions that hold these problems in place, and then we asked ourselves a question: How can philanthropy be an effective partner in the effort to keep our farms viable and ensure that all Vermonters have access to healthy food? Can we shed light on, and perhaps spark, the structural changes needed?

There are dedicated individuals and organizations across the state working on the many challenges related to making food accessible to all Vermonters; complex distribution channels, cost, seasonal availability, volume and pricing among them. The Food and Farm Initiative, made possible by the vision, commitment, and generosity of our fundholders and donors, made grants directly to organizations working to:

- incorporate more local food into school breakfast, lunch, and afterschool programs,
- increase local food offerings in wholesale markets,
- and encourage connections between Vermonters, local food producers, and farmers.

Now, we look back to evaluate our learning. The Food and Farm Initiative—our largest and most far-reaching initiative in the Community Foundation's history—granted more than $2 million to 12 core grantees and eight additional organizations over five years to support organizations working to connect Vermont farmers and local food producers with the people who live here. As we reviewed the detailed and thoughtful reports submitted by our grantees, we were encouraged to find that real progress is being made.

In this final report of the Food and Farm Initiative we will share the advancements of programmatic, policy, and systems-level work. In aggregate, the tremendous work of these grantees result in measurable changes. Not least of these is a growing awareness of and support for the local food and food access work across communities in our state. This report includes stories of local and statewide progress, as well as a call to action for what comes next for the local food system in Vermont; from schools, to food pantries, to farms and food hubs.

We thank our philanthropic leaders, as well as our program partners, for helping prove a model of collective impact can work. We also recognize and appreciate the partners in the state who are continuing to lead and support the work going forward, because the work is not yet done.

Dan Smith and Sarah Waring

Access to Local Food to All Vermonters

When we think about access to local food, many of us think of farmers' markets or making a choice to "buy local." For many Vermonters, however, local food is not readily available or accessible. In order to broaden access, we need to increase local options available at school and hospital cafeterias, businesses, and grocery stores.

While it may seem a simple proposition, price points, seasonality, service delivery models, and volume are among many factors that limit larger institutions in Vermont from purchasing more than 20-30 percent from local producers.

Working through these barriers requires education, training, innovative thinking, sustained support, and dedicated individuals committed to bringing more locally-produced, healthy foods into their kitchens and onto store shelves. A number of the Food and Farm Initiative grant recipients are helping to facilitate these connections and looking at how we can make it easier for Vermonters to access healthy meals.



Meeting Student Schedules

Breakfast After the Bell, a program that provides opportunity for students to eat breakfast after the start of the school day, is one example of how delivery models can be adjusted to better meet student schedules. Working with the **New England Dairy and Food Council**, **Hunger Free Vermont** launched a school breakfast challenge that encouraged schools to remove the logistical and social barriers that prevent kids from having breakfast at school.

The challenge resulted in new ways of thinking about where and how kids might access breakfast. At Leland and Grey Union Middle and High School, for example, offering "grab-and-go" meals in the hallway between morning classes more than tripled overall breakfast participation and increased free and reduced breakfast participation from 31 percent to 55 percent. Overall the challenge resulted in a 150 percent rise in the number of Vermont public schools serving breakfast "after the bell," with a majority of these schools seeing significant increases in student participation.

In general, as participation in programs like Breakfast After the Bell and universal breakfast increases, the amount of reimbursement received from federal school nutrition programs also rises, allowing schools to purchase more local food. In the 2017-2018 school year, Hunger Free Vermont reports that schools participating in Breakfast After the Bell and other meal service programs were able to increase local food purchasing by as much as 23 percent.

Champions for Local Food

Over the five-year period of the Food and Farm Initiative, the **Center for an Agricultural Economy** in Hardwick purchased 365,426 pounds of raw farm products, roughly equating to more than 1.1 million four-ounce servings of local vegetables. These local foods were served at schools, hospitals, colleges, and other settings where a large socioeconomic swath of families, children, and young people eat.

Among them is the Hardwick Elementary School, where local food champion and beloved "lunch lady" Val Hussey serves more than 120 children two meals a day, plus an afternoon snack during the school year. Working closely with the Center for an Agricultural Economy to increase local food purchasing, Hussey incorporates local vegetables into soups, baked goods, entrees, and the salad bar. Like many small, rural schools in Vermont, she serves a student population with 72 percent eligibility for free and reduced lunch, while simultaneously facing constant pressure on her budget. Hussey remains committed to "buying local when possible and cost effective for our local community and farmers," noting that it's more than a dollars and cents equation. "The kids are so excited they don't even know they're learning,"



she says, "but we are teaching them lifelong lessons about health and nutrition, and connecting them to Vermont's working landscape and heritage."

The Role of Independent Grocery Stores

While reaching children through school remains a priority, the reality is that most Vermonters purchase a majority of their food at grocery stores. A survey of Vermont's independent grocery stores, which together account for $750 million of the $1.75 billion in retail food and beverage sales in Vermont, shows that 95 percent of independent grocery stores want to offer more locally-sourced food. Success for these independent grocers, who have significant rural economic and community importance, relies on demonstrating how local food options can increase sales and margins for the store owners.

The **Vermont Farm to Plate Network** conducted in-store retail trainings at 17 stores, offering technical assistance on inventory control, product and seasonal displays, in-store promotions, sampling, and other tools to increase local food sales. All 17 stores where trainings were conducted saw increased sales, most notably during the summer months when tourists were looking for Vermont-made food and beverages. In this arena, Community Foundation partners, such as the High Meadows Fund, continue to support the training and technical assistance to boost market penetration for local food.



Every dollar spent on local food puts **60¢** back into Vermont's economy.



89% of Vermont schools purchase locally grown food, and **65%** are connected to a local farm or farmer.



Local food purchased by schools contributed **$1.4 million** to Vermont's economy.



38,000 children in Vermont rely on school breakfast and lunch to provide the nutrition they need to grow and thrive.





Since 2010, purchases of local food in Vermont have increased by $176 million to **$289 million** in total (12.9% of food and beverage sales).



Levers of Change: Education, Policy, Market Expansion



The long view of addressing hunger and farm viability in Vermont involves looking at systemic levers for sustained and lasting change, such as policy, education, and market expansion. The Food and Farm Initiative supported organizations who are taking this long view, working to grow support among legislators, state agencies, school administrators, families, and communities.

The development of the **statewide Farm to School Network**—involving more than 50 local leaders working to engage students and school communities with farm and food culture—was a significant achievement of the Food and Farm Initiative. Working through action teams with specific goals, the Network aims to have 75 percent of Vermont schools purchasing at least 50 percent of their food from socially just, environmentally friendly, and financially stable regional food suppliers by 2025.

A Legislative Win for Farm to School

In 2017, the state legislature voted unanimously to increase funding for Vermont's Farm to School (F2S) programming by more than 100 percent, securing an annual appropriation of $181,250. Championed by VT FEED, NOFA-VT, and the Vermont Farm to School Network, this sustained funding of farm to school programs will have far-reaching impact on our communities and state:

- **Reduces childhood hunger.** The collaborative nature of the Farm to School Network effectively connects F2S programming with organizations working to reduce childhood hunger. Between 2010 and 2015, childhood hunger rates in Vermont declined by 37 percent, and school nutrition programs were a major contributor to that success.
- **Supports the local economy.** Every dollar schools spend on local food puts 60¢ back into Vermont's economy. In the 2013-2014 school year, Vermont schools spent a total of $16 million on food, with 5.6 percent, or $915,000, going to local farms and producers. If Vermont schools doubled their current spending on local food from 5.6 percent to 11.2 percent, the contribution to Vermont's economy would be an additional $2.1 million annually.
- **Kids who are ready to learn.** Studies show that healthy, nutritious meals at school improve academic performance, and reduce absenteeism, visits to the nurse, and behavioral referrals. For the one in seven Vermont children who are food insecure, access to nutritious school meals is crucial to their health and success in school.

Less tangible, but equally important, the Farm to School Network worked to increase public awareness among legislators, school boards, and communities, recruiting 326 "champions" around the state who have influence among their peers and colleagues. These champions, along with grassroots efforts, testimony at the State House, community presentations, and one-on-one meetings with members of Vermont's House and Senate, helped build support for F2S programming that will endure for years to come.

Supporting Food Service Professionals

Education is at the heart of school nutrition programs, engaging students in health, wellness, and an understanding of where their food comes from. Food professionals and school administrators, however, are often learning right alongside the children, navigating procurement processes and USDA nutritional requirements, and developing marketing materials to build support among the broader school community.

Food Connects, NOFA-VT, and Green Mountain Farm Direct are among the organizations working to support professionals in the school system with tools, such as training on how to market local meals, technical assistance with interpreting USDA requirements, and procurement assistance.

- From 2016-2018, implementation of these programs resulted in **increased or static school meal participation** at 11 of the 26 southern Vermont schools served by **Food Connects,** with a total increase in local purchasing of $15,000.
- **NOFA-VT worked with 30 school nutrition directors** on articulating the value of local food systems and setting local purchasing goals, as well as with Camp Hochelaga, which serves young women 13-17, who may struggle with negative body image and related negative health and nutritional behaviors.
- **Green Mountain Farm Direct engaged 16 schools** in conversations about Harvest of the Month, a program that delivers ready-to-use seasonal recipes and promotional materials, and worked with food service professionals to identify the "top 10" school-friendly products available locally. It also developed 13 school action plans to boost meal participation and presented to 14 school boards to educate them on the benefits of Farm to School programming.

In areas of Vermont where as many as one in seven kids are hungry, these changes are making a real difference. At NewBrook Elementary School in Newfane, for example, Food Connects worked with the school's new chef, Chris Parker, to provide guidance around meal program requirements, student participation, and local purchasing. The school already had a garden and nutrition curriculum, but providing Chef Chris with tools to better educate his school board and community enabled him to connect the "three C's"—classroom, community and cafeteria—and increase participation by 10 percent. "More buy-in from staff and families allowed us to increase meal participation, support our local economy, and model these healthy sustainable living choices for our students," said Heather Sperling, a teacher at NewBrook.





Financial stability, farm viability

One of the best ways to measure viability of a local food system over time is by sales growth. The financial stability of **Food Hubs**, which provide small farmers and food producers with access to retail, institutional, and commercial foodservice markets, can be an important barometer of the health of our local food systems, even though these models still require philanthropic support at this stage. **Green Mountain Farm to School** in Newport, the **Center for an Agricultural Economy** in Hardwick and **Food Connects** in Brattleboro report steady sales growth:

- **Green Mountain Farm to School,** a food hub serving primarily northern Vermont, grew from $234,382 in sales revenue in 2013 to $408,631 in 2018. Over 40% of those sales, from 2015 on, were specifically to schools in the region.
- **The Center for an Agricultural Economy increased total sales** more than 300 percent, from $29,225 in 2014 to $131,172 in 2018, allowing them to bring two full production days up to scale and more than doubling the volume of local food being processed. They focus on institutional meals settings, ensuring that farm name and source were identified all the way to the end user.
- Started in 2013, **Food Connects is now a regular presence in Southern Vermont** providing local food from 65 farmers and producers to more than 115 schools, hospitals, retailers and restaurants. In the five-year period between 2013 and 2018, Food Connects increased sales of local food to Vermont schools by 47 percent, from $49,920 to $73,630 annually, and had total sales to all customers during the five-year period of more than $1.7 million.

To transform a system—such as the local food system in Vermont—it is critical to change the relationships between people who make up the system. Bringing people together, creating collective action and goals, as well as creating transactional relationships—these are all important tactics to sustain change over time.

Learning and Analysis



Since 2012, the Community Foundation has engaged in deep learning with partners, grantees and funders around Vermont's food system, and particularly food access and farm viability work. From the collective philanthropy model which the Farm and Food Initiative was built on, to the statewide Food Funders' Network, the Community Foundation has been able to help play a leadership role in raising the flag for systems change in this arena.

Stewarding a cadre of grantees—while also informing and inspiring philanthropists and donors—enabled the Foundation to think about resource flows and programmatic impact.

We are grateful for the opportunity to share some critical lessons from this work, as well as some of the imminent next steps for systems change which are ongoing.

A Call to Action

For years, the collective energy around the Farm and Food Initiative has raised the flag for local food system nonprofits, statewide networks, policy, and economic growth. What comes next?

Network building is robust in Vermont, but the backbone organizations that support the efforts need continued philanthropic support.

- The Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund is beginning to develop Farm to Plate 2.0, which will outline shared goals and action teams for 2020 and beyond. The Farm to Plate network encompasses business owners, non profit and institutional partners, farmers, food producers, and more, all moving towards a set of shared goals. Farm to Plate has become a regional and even national model for collective impact within the food system;

LESSONS LEARNED

Building trust in a network can be a powerful lever for change.

Throughout the Farm and Food Initiative, whether with smaller working groups or through the state-wide network of grantee partners, we see how building connective tissue can lead to larger actions—from program to policy.

Vermont's food supply chain is complex and interconnected.

From farmers and school lunch cooks, to institutions, trucking companies, and retail outlets, the relationships and transactions within the supply chain are critical to growing our agricultural economy.

others are learning from what Vermont has done to lift all parts of food system work at the same time. Simultaneously, local efforts—such as the Vermont Food and Health Program Inventory, the Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship Program, or the Independent Retail Grocers training—have been built by task forces within the network.

- The Vermont Farm to School network focuses on systems thinking, and complex adaptive models, as they strive to reach their statewide goal for 2025. Shelburne Farms and VT FEED, as backbone entities here, are continuing to carry the network forward into the future, well on track for their statewide goal. The network was created through a comprehensive strategic mapping process and Action Teams tackled specific projects—but perhaps even more impressive is the increasing number of schools integrating farm to school programming, planting gardens, identifying champions, and increasing professional development for teachers and food service staff.

Viable market-based solutions are vital to long-term success for our farmers and require ongoing philanthropic support to maintain;

- A Vermont Food Hub Collaborative—consisting of five Vermont food hubs and their partners, and facilitated through Vermont Housing and Conservation Board's Farm and Forest Viability program, is exploring how to increase their intra- and inter-state market expansion. By working together, and working with regional partners, the goal is to strengthen the farm viability across the state, through intermediated sales. The High Meadows Fund, a Supporting Organization of the Vermont Community Foundation, is offering support to food hubs and the Collaborative, as a part of their Farm to Market initiative. High Meadows is taking a leadership role, but is seeking funding partners to join in supporting this important work.

Despite the progress, we also recognize that Vermont's agricultural economy faces severe challenges due to generational transitions of farm ownership, climate change, degradation in soil health and water quality, as well as national market disruptions. Despite technical assistance through networks such as Vermont Housing and Conservation Board's Farm and Forest Viability program, Vermont Land Trust's Farmland Access program, and even state grant making through the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative, experts believe that new models, such as payment for ecosystem services, alternative land ownership models, or legal structures for farm succession, must be seriously explored if Vermont is to keep its agricultural economy and heritage. These new and emergent solutions will also need philanthropic funding.



Economic impact and community impact are both needed.

It takes years to build a movement, or an effective network, but constant support is needed for new economic and market-based solutions to solve our cost challenges.

Philanthropy can both illuminate a systems change approach and be a catalyst for innovation.

By inviting many partners to join in the work of the Food and Farm Initiative, the Community Foundation learned the power of convening, collective giving, and awareness raising for this work to grow our agricultural economy.

Closing

It is impossible to fully convey the systems-level changes the Food and Farm Initiative sparked, and the new relationships and approaches that continue to develop from our five-year focus on the dual goals of healthy food for all and improved viability of Vermont's farms and food enterprises.

As we enter the second year of our commitment to narrow the opportunity gap in Vermont, the Community Foundation continues to draw lessons from the Food and Farm Initiative. Lessons about fostering collaboration among core programmatic partners and alignment among funding partners. Lessons about balancing attention to policy, backbone systems networks, and community-based initiative. And lessons about how inspiring it is to enable, and re-tell, stories of connecting youngsters to healthy locally-produced food while building appreciation for Vermont's farms and food businesses. Strengthening Vermont's agricultural economy is an ongoing tactic within the "Community and Economic Vitality" focus area of our strategy for closing the opportunity gap.

We are grateful to all our partners in the Farm and Food Initiative, and are eager to continue robust systems change work in Vermont in the next five years!

How you can make a difference.

There's never been a more critical time to be part of solving the opportunity gap challenge.

If you would like to learn more about the opportunity gap, please contact:

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If you would like to learn more about ongoing Food and Farm work, please contact:

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HIGH MEADOWS FUND
at the Vermont Community Foundation

Data and statistics come from grantee program reports and the following additional sources:

Vermont Farm to Plate Strategic Plan

Vermont Farm to School Network "Growing Healthy Schools, Farms & Communities"

Vermont Housing and Conservation Board "A 2018 Exploration of the Future of Vermont Agriculture"

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