
Cultivating Virginia Farm-to-School: Growing from Grassroots ¹

“Before we can solve healthcare, we have to start with the health of the individual”... “especially at risk are our children, and this market goes a long way to exposing children to healthy eating habits.”

—Former Governor of Virginia Timothy Kaine while speaking at
The Byrd House Market on June 16, 2009

Matt Benson, Community Viability Specialist, (540) 341-7961, mcbenson@vt.edu

Eric Bendfeldt, Community Viability Specialist, (540) 432-6029, ebendfel@vt.edu

With the recent launch of First Lady Michelle Obama’s *Let’s Move* (<http://letsmove.gov>) initiative, the health of American’s children and youth has become a top priority of the White House East Wing and Office of the First Lady. *Let’s Move* encourages community leaders, teachers, doctors, nurses, moms and dads to participate in a nationwide campaign to tackle the challenge of childhood obesity. This campaign focuses on issues related to increased healthy choices, healthy schools, physical activity and accessible and affordable healthy food. As part of this campaign, President Obama signed an official Presidential Memo establishing a task force on childhood obesity including the Secretary of Agriculture, Secretary of Health and Human Services, and Secretary of Education. During the kick-off event at the White House, Will Allen, farmer and founder of Growing Power Inc. (www.growingpower.org), a national non-profit supporting people and the environments in which they live, by helping to provide equal access to healthy, high-quality, safe and affordable food for people in all communities, was a featured speaker, and talked about the need to increase the availability of good, fresh, locally grown foods.

In 2007, recognizing the problems associated with childhood obesity and the search to open additional markets for fresh farm products in Virginia, the General Assembly passed Senate Joint Resolution 347, which requested that the Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry and the Secretary of Education establish a Farm-to-School Task Force to develop a plan for implementing a Farm-to-School Program in the Commonwealth. Since then, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) and the Virginia Department of Education (DOE) have worked jointly to develop and implement Virginia Farm-to-School.

The National Farm-to-School Network defines Farm-to-School as the act that connects schools (K-12) and local farms with the objectives of serving healthy meals in school cafeterias, improving student nutrition, providing agriculture, health and nutrition education opportunities, and supporting local and regional farmers. Many agriculture and food professionals also include the act of planting and growing a school food garden as part of Farm-to-School.

¹ The authors would like to thank the many individuals and organizations who have strengthened the development of Virginia Farm-to-School as well as those individuals and organizations who reviewed this article prior to publication.

According to VDACS, Virginia schools currently spend more than \$6 million annually on fresh produce. From a recent study by the Virginia Food System Council (VFSC) completed in 2009, since the General Assembly directed the implementation of the Virginia Farm-to-School Program in 2007, there has been a 300% increase in Virginia foods served in public and private schools. Additionally, the VFSC found that Virginia public schools serve 681,505 lunches daily to nourish students and during a 180-day school year more than 122 million lunches are served. If \$0.25 a day per student lunch could be devoted to purchasing locally-grown Virginia farm products, a total of \$170,376 would be generated daily. On an annual basis, more than \$30.7 million dollars would be reinvested into Virginia communities and economy.

Identifying the need for farmers, school nutrition directors and food system stakeholders to become more aware of Virginia Farm-to-School, Virginia Cooperative Extension hosted a series of local, regional and statewide educational meetings and events during 2008 and 2009. Professionals from Maryland, Vermont, North Carolina and the National Farm-to-School Network traveled to Virginia to share stories, examples, tips, tricks and lessons learned about how to strengthen and further develop Farm-to-School programs from the ground up. VDACS also launched a [Farm-to-School website](#) for farmers, food distributors and school divisions.

In July 2009, Virginia Cooperative Extension convened and co-hosted a Virginia Farm-to-School planning summit that brought together diverse perspectives to help develop a more robust and viable Farm-to-School program. Out of this summit, a Virginia Farm-to-School Work Group was created with the purpose of sharing information about Farm-to-School and working across disciplines, agencies and organizations to implement programs and projects that would further enhance the development of Farm-to-School in Virginia.

The first activity the Work Group developed was to establish and coordinate a statewide Virginia Farm-to-School Week, November 9-13 2009, encouraging school nutrition and food service directors from across the Commonwealth to purchase local and regional Virginia foods for their cafeterias. Under the leadership of VDACS, DOE and the Work Group, over 30 school divisions participated, buying Virginia foods for their cafeterias during this Week. In total, 36 different Virginia foods were sourced including fresh fruits, veggies, meats and dairy products.

Some school divisions, such as Goochland County, spent approximately \$2,000 on foods from Virginia's farmers during the Week. Fall Line Farms (www.flf.LulusLocalFood.com), a local community food enterprise has been working with Goochland County and several other Richmond-area schools and institutions to increase the accessibility and availability of Virginia foods. Since January 2009, Fall Line Farms Co-Op has sold over \$7,800 worth of local and regional Virginia foods to Goochland County and 5 other private schools in the Richmond area. Besides selling to local schools and institutions, Fall Line Farms Co-Op also sells directly to area residents and households. Since the opening of the summer season on May 1, 2009, Fall Line Farms has served over 600 residential members with over \$200,000 in sales, from over 75 Virginia farms. Today, in the current winter ordering season of 2009-2010, Fall Line Farms Co-Op averages \$8,000 a week in direct economic activity.

In the Piedmont region of Virginia, school divisions including Albemarle County, Charlottesville City, Greene County, Madison County and Rappahannock County all participated in the Farm-to-School Week. For Rappahannock County, this was their second annual Farm-to-School event and already Madison County is planning to replicate similar events in 2010 and introduce a Virginia Farm-to-School breakfast. Rappahannock County created almost \$1,000 in direct economic impact, while Madison County created over \$1,500 in direct economic impact during the Week and their Farm-to-School events. In the Charlottesville region, the Local Food Hub (www.localfoodhub.org), a produce distribution operation and community-based service organization, worked with three school divisions and 11 different schools contributing over \$1,800 to the local farm economy during the Week. Total sales to public and private schools in the Thomas Jefferson Planning District from August 2009 to December 2009 through Local Food Hub were \$15,800. The Local Food Hub is working with administrators in the off-season to plan for the next school year. They expect that sales figures will increase dramatically. Since its inception in July 2009, the Local Food Hub has worked with over 35 businesses to distribute locally grown Virginia foods (13 different K-12 schools) and has generated over \$75,000 in direct economic activity.

In the Shenandoah Valley region of Virginia, school divisions including Allegany County, Augusta County, Botetourt County, Harrisonburg City and Rockbridge County all participated in the 2009 Virginia Farm-to-School Week. In 2008 and 2009, Harrisonburg City Public Schools used 8.2% of their produce budget (approximately \$9,150) during the year to buy lettuce, potatoes, cucumbers, tomatoes, and melons from local farmers, and an additional \$3,000 for local ground beef (approximately 1,000 lbs.), poultry, and grain.

As an outgrowth of these efforts and statewide collaboration to promote Virginia Farm-to-School programs, five public school divisions in the Shenandoah Valley (Augusta County, Harrisonburg, Rockbridge County, Staunton, and Waynesboro) agreed to procure and purchase nearly 30,000 pounds of beef locally for the 2010-2011 school year as a pilot effort, which is a commitment for 40% to 50% of the poundage they use on an annual basis. This commitment will result in more than \$75,000 being reinvested in the local farm and business community.

"I am pleased to see that interest in the Farm-to-School program is increasing among school nutrition directors in the Commonwealth. The program is still in its infancy and we have some barriers to overcome, but the progress made thus far is encouraging. I believe that the economic impact of increasing local food purchases, even if only by a small percentage, would be dramatic. This is an exciting time to be a part of school feeding", said Andrea Early, Director of School Nutrition for Harrisonburg City Public Schools.

Although Virginia Farm-to-School is experiencing significant growth in interest and implementation, many issues still need to be addressed to make it a truly viable program for Virginia's agricultural industry and school cafeterias. A few of these issues include the price difference between what farmers need to be profitable and what school nutrition and food service directors can afford for local and regional foods; infrastructure and distribution patterns that make it difficult to connect local farmers with local cafeterias; the amount of labor and equipment available to prepare school lunches; information about where to buy local and regional foods; and the seasonality differences between the growing season

and when schools are in session. Although these barriers exist, significant progress has been made to overcome these challenges and progress is likely continue.

According to a USDA memo in July 2008, the National School Lunch Program now allows institutions receiving funds through the Child Nutrition Programs to apply a geographic preference when procuring unprocessed locally grown or locally raised agricultural products. In December 2009, the USDA updated the definition of "unprocessed locally grown or locally raised agricultural products" to include practices such as cooling, size adjustment through size reduction made by peeling or chopping, and additional packaging.

A new piece of Virginia legislation, House Joint Resolution 95, (HJ95) to further strengthen and develop Virginia Farm-to-School was introduced and passed in the 2010 General Assembly session. From its first year success, HJ95, introduced by Delegate Edward Scott, has made the Virginia Farm-to-School Week an official annual event during the second week of November. Including this state legislation, there are a variety of local initiatives that can be developed and coordinated to help strengthen Virginia's Farm-to-School Program. These initiatives can include school wellness programs or local health and agriculture promotion campaigns. They can include a diverse group of individuals and organizations such as Parent-Teacher Associations, Cooperative Extension, agriculture officials, and health groups.

“One of the most rewarding things about promoting Farm-to-School in Virginia is knowing that when schools purchase locally grown products, those purchases help support agricultural jobs in the Commonwealth”, said Charles Green, Director of Marketing for VDACS.

There are several local, state and national resources available to help farmers, school nutrition directors and food system stakeholders connect around Virginia Farm-to-School. These include:

- ❖ Virginia Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services, www.vdacs.virginia.gov
- ❖ Virginia Department of Education, www.doe.virginia.gov
- ❖ Virginia Cooperative Extension, www.ext.vt.edu
- ❖ Virginia Farm Bureau Agriculture in the Classroom, www.agintheclass.org
- ❖ School Nutrition Association of Virginia, www.sna-va.org
- ❖ National Farm-to-School Network, www.farmentoschool.org

For more information about Virginia Farm-to-School, visit the Virginia Farm-to-School website or contact Leanne DuBois with VDACS at (804) 225-3663, leanne.dubois@vdacs.virginia.gov. For more information about the Virginia Farm-to-School Work Group, contact Matt Benson at (540) 341-7961, mcbenson@vt.edu. For more information about the Virginia Food System Council, contact Eric Bendfeldt at (540) 432-6029, ebendfel@vt.edu.