Exploring Experiences of Unofficial Actors in the Farm to School Policy-Making Process

Jasmine L. Scott

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Karen Vines, Chair
Kim Niewolny
Matthew Benson

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ABSTRACT

The farm to school movement is partially supported by unofficial actors in the policymaking process who promote legislation to encourage activities such as local procurement, school gardening, and agricultural education. However, farm to school legislation can vary in its level of effectiveness and implementation throughout the United States. Research shows that Virginia has a low level of support and advocacy for farm to school activities when compared to other states. Unofficial actors, such as advocates, producers, and school nutrition professionals are uniquely qualified to identify challenges, opportunities, and suggestions on improving the policymaking process, due to their experiences with farm to school. This study addressed a gap in scholarly literature as there is limited research on the role that unofficial actors play in promoting farm to school during the legislative process. In this qualitative, case-study, the Stages Heuristic Model was used as a theoretical framework to explore unofficial actors’ experiences as they participate in the agenda-setting and policy formulation stages of policy cycle in the Northern Virginia Region. The findings uncovered experiences that unofficial actors believed either prevented or made their engagement in policymaking more challenging. Opportunities and successes during these stages of advocacy were also examined. Further, participants provided suggestions to all policymaking actors to improve the process in the future. Key findings revealed the importance of themes such as collaboration, connectedness, and relationship building in the policymaking process. Additionally, unofficial actors generally found success in the “small wins" of advocacy, such as increasing farm to school awareness, as opposed to more extensive legislative outcomes.
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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

The farm to school movement is partially supported by active citizens in the policymaking process who promote legislation to encourage activities such as purchasing local foods, school gardening, and agricultural education. However, farm to school legislation can vary in its level of effectiveness and implementation throughout the United States. Research shows that Virginia has a low level of political advocacy for farm to school activities when compared to other states. Individuals such as advocates, farmers, and school nutrition professionals are uniquely qualified to identify challenges, opportunities, and suggestions on improving the policymaking process, due to their experiences with farm to school. This study addressed a gap in the academic community as there is limited research on the role these individuals play in promoting farm to school during the legislative process. In this study, a policymaking model was used as a foundation to explore individuals’ experiences as they participate in the farm to school legislative process in the Northern Virginia Region. The findings uncovered experiences that respondents believed either prevented or made their engagement in policymaking more challenging. Opportunities and successes during these stages were also examined. Further, respondents provided suggestions to all policymakers for improving the process in the future. Key findings revealed the importance of collaboration, connectedness, and relationship building in the policymaking process. Additionally, respondents generally found success in “small wins,” such as increasing farm to school awareness, as opposed to more extensive legislative outcome.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Background: Farm to School (FTS) Movement

Habits formed in the adolescent years have the potential to produce lasting impacts on our future (Anderson et al., 2003; Currie, 2005; Karoly et al., 2006). For example, increasing fruit and vegetable (F&V) consumption can support children in maintaining a healthy body mass index and lessen their chances of developing childhood obesity (Reichmann, 2009; Seguin et al., 2018; Qian et al., 2016). Adequate F&V consumption is also associated with improved academic performance (Anderson et al., 2017; Schultz & Thorlton, 2019). Throughout history, people have adopted many approaches to help children develop healthy eating habits and increase F&V consumption such as garden-based learning (Graham & Zidenberg-Cherr, 2005; Heim et al., 2009; McAleese & Rankin, 2007; Morris & Zidenberg-Cherr, 2002; Savoie-Roskos et al., 2017), dietary interventions and programs (Anderson et al., 2005; Olsho et al., 2015; Wolfenden et al., 2012; Yoder et al., 2014), selective and promotional marketing of F&V (Bezbaruah & Brunt, 2012) strategies to increase the variety of F&V options (Just et al., 2012) and Farm to School programs (FTS)(Blair, 2009; Evans et al., 2012; Hermann et al., 2006; Howerton et al., 2007; Hughes, 2007; Jones et al., 2015; Knai et al., 2006; Moss et al., 2013; Ratcliffe et al., 2011; Robinson-O'Brien et al., 2009; Twiss et al., 2003). Within this study, I will focus on the latter method, FTS.

According to Botkins & Roe (2018), FTS is any activity that "promotes the use of local foods in school meals: having school gardens, hosting field trips to farms, promoting local foods in school meals, and hosting community events" (p.126). For decades, researchers, policymakers, educators, producers, and other stakeholders have been curious about the role FTS can play in increasing F&V consumption among school-aged children (Croom et al., 2006; Hughes, 2007;
The evidence reveals that adopting a FTS program can be a step in the right direction (Capogrossi & You, 2017; Croom et al., 2006; Hughes, 2007; Joshi et al., 2006; Koch et al., 2017; Murphy, 2003; Phillips et al., 2011; Schmidt et al., 2006; Triant & Ryan, 2005). Researchers have attributed the FTS movement with boosting access and consumption of F&V (Koch et al., 2017; Yoder et al., 2014) and warding off diet-related diseases such as childhood obesity and diabetes (Capogrossi & You, 2017). Along with increasing children’s F&V, FTS activities can support a healthy lifestyle by increasing students’ willingness to try healthy food options, reducing their consumption of unhealthy products such as soda, and increasing physical activity (National Farm to School Network, 2017). Additional benefits of FTS programs include increased nutrition in school meals (Croom et al., 2006; Hughes, 2007; Joshi et al., 2006; Koch et al., 2017; Murphy, 2003; Phillips et al., 2011; Schmidt et al., 2006; Triant & Ryan, 2005), exposure to hands-on learning environments (Hoffman et al., 2017), and expanded economic opportunities for local producers (Christensen, 2003; Croom et al., 2006, Feenstra & Ohmart, 2004; Gottlieb & Mascarenhas, 2001; Schmidt et al., 2006).

Although FTS is a potential market for all local producers, including producers of lean meats and low-fat dairy (Bateman et al., 2014), the opportunities are especially prevalent for F&V producers. From 2015 to 2016, 13.7 million school-aged children in the United States struggled with obesity (Hales et al., 2017). Consuming the recommended amount of F&V is a proven method to reducing the prevalence of obesity and warding off diet-related diseases like obesity (Reichmann, 2009; Seguin et al., 2018; Qian et al., 2016). From 2007 to 2010, 60% of school-aged children did not meet the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s fruit intake recommendations, and 93% did not meet the recommendations for vegetables from 2007 to 2010.
(Kim et al., 2014; National Cancer Institute, 2015). So, while other foods are indeed a part of a healthy child’s diet, there is a special need in the school meal programs for increased F&V consumption. FTS is a method to help students’ meet their recommended consumption of F&V (Blair, 2009; Evans et al., 2012; Hermann et al., 2006; Howerton et al., 2007; Hughes, 2007; Jones et al., 2015; Knai et al., 2006; Moss et al., 2013; Ratcliffe et al., 2011; Robinson-O’Brien et al., 2009; Twiss et al., 2003) and combatting diet-related diseases (Reichmann, 2009; Seguin et al., 2018; Qian et al., 2016).

There are several concrete instances of FTS' potential to create economic opportunities for local producers and businesses. This impact is commonly described using the “multiplier effect” (Christensen et al., 2017). According to economists, the "multiplier effect" is an increase in spending that produces a ripple effect on the economy (Greenlaw & Shapiro, 2017). This effect then results in a financial increase greater than the initial amount that the consumer spent (Greenlaw & Shapiro, 2017). In FTS, the term "multiplier" refers to the indirect economic effects of purchasing from local producers (Christensen et al., 2017). The "multiplier effect" rests on the rationale that when schools purchase from local producers, producers will then need to purchase additional inputs such as seeds as fertilizers to meet increased demand (Christensen et al., 2017). As a result, this new demand for agricultural inputs has an indirect effect on the local economy (Christensen et al., 2017). As documented in the 2015 Farm to School Census, schools spent $789 million from 2013-2014 on local food (USDA, 2015). State-level case studies can provide insightful information as well. Research from Christensen et al. (2017) sought to examine the multiplier effect in Minneapolis Public Schools and the State of Georgia. The findings indicated that for every $100 spent on local procurement from FTS businesses in Georgia, $82 remained in the region (Christensen et al., 2017). This figure is higher than the $79 out of $100 that remained
regional among non-FTS business (Christensen et al., 2017). The findings for Minneapolis Public Schools produced more dramatic results in that $82 out of $100 remained in the region of participating FTS farms when compared to $70 that remained regional from non-FTS farms (Christensen et al., 2017). According to this report, participating FTS producers also purchase more inputs locally than their non-FTS counterparts (Christensen et al., 2017). For every 100 dollars of sales for FTS businesses, an additional $93 and $111 is generated in related sectors in MPLS and Georgia, respectively (Christensen et al., 2017). An economic analysis in Oregon produced similar results (Kane et al., 2011). For every $100 spent on local food, an additional $86 was generated throughout the Oregon economy (Kane et al., 2011). This data suggests that when a school purchases food locally, it has several layers of economic benefits for their local community (Christensen et al., 2017). This economic impact also extends to include the creation of new jobs and opportunities (National Farm to School Network, 2017). Additionally, for every job that was created due to FTS activities, an additional 1.43 jobs were created in the Oregon economy (Kane et al., 2011). FTS had a direct impact on job creation in food production/processing sectors such as agricultural input companies and indirect effects on the state-wide economy (Kane et al., 2011; National Farm to School Network, 2017).

The impact of FTS also extends into other areas outside of economic growth and development. In a review of 15 studies, Joshi et al. (2008) examined the impact of FTS from different angles, including student behaviors and student lifestyle changes. Ten of the studies found that students made healthier dietary decisions when served fresh, local food (Joshi et al., 2008). Interestingly, these behaviors have the potential to carry on into the students' home environment (Joshi et al., 2008). Four out of five studies that focused on dietary decisions outside of school found increased F&V consumption among FTS school students (Christensen,
Schools also noticed greater participation in the school breakfast and lunch program, with an average increase of 9.3% among the six studies (Joshi et al., 2008).

**Background: Local Procurement**

There are three major components to FTS: local procurement, agricultural and nutrition education, and school gardening (National Farm to School Network, 2020). Local procurement is defined by the National Farm to School Network (2020) as the purchasing, promotion, and serving of local food in school cafeterias. As noted by Schneider et al. (2012), "FTS is based on the premise that students will choose to eat more healthy foods if the products are fresh, locally grown and picked at the peak of flavor" (p.211). Research from the Pew Charitable Trusts & Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2016) found that when schools incorporated local food in meals, 29% of students consumed more F&V. Despite the benefits that an active FTS program can deliver, there are several challenges associated with participation and facilitation that make it difficult for producers to become or remain suppliers for the educational system. Examples of such challenges include limited school budgets, lack of school-kitchen infrastructure, and difficulty supplying nonseasonal produce (Grigsby, MacAuley, & Niewolny, 2018, p. 40). Wisconsin producers noted additional challenges such as difficulty meeting product and packaging standards, matching school demand, and relationship building with food service directors (Bateman et al., 2014). Tonti (2017) also detailed the challenge of small-scale producers remaining competitive in the food bidding process with larger, well-established food service management companies.

There are several reasons why this study concentrates on the local procurement portion of FTS. First, it’s proven potential to support local producers with increased incomes,
diversification of their markets, and facilitation of mutually beneficial relationships in their community (Christensen, 2003; Christensen et al., 2017; Croom et al., 2006; Feenstra & Ohmart, 2004; Gottlieb & Mascarenhas, 2001; National Farm to School Network, 2017; Schmidt et al., 2006). Secondly, incorporating local food in school meals can encourage healthy dietary behaviors among school-aged children (Blair, 2009; Capogrossi & You, 2017; Evans et al., 2012; Hermann et al., 2006; Howerton et al., 2007; Hughes, 2007; Jones et al., 2015; Joshi et al., 2006; Knai et al., 2006; Koch et al., 2017; Moss et al., 2013; Murphy, 2003; Phillips et al., 2011; Ratcliffe et al., 2011; Robinson-O'Brien et al., 2009; Schmidt et al., 2006; Triant & Ryan, 2005; Twiss et al., 2003; & Yoder et al., 2014). Local procurement has the potential to be included as part of every national, state, and local-level legislative strategy to address childhood obesity.

Third, the local procurement portion of FTS is the most policy-focused and has the most policy implications among all other FTS activities (National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, 2019). Around 61% of all FTS bills proposed between 2017 through 2018, centered around local procurement (National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, 2019). Local procurement policies also demonstrated the highest passage rate (60%) among all FTS policy sectors (National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, 2019). Finally, when schools purchase locally, it reduces negative environmental impacts caused by transportation and distribution operations (National Farm to School Network; 2017; National Resource Defense Council, 2017; Office of the New York State Comptroller, 2016). For all these reasons, I am interested in this particular sector of FTS’ and the experiences of actors who desire to improve the current system

**Purpose Statement, Overarching Inquiry & Research Questions**

The National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems
(2019) deemed that Virginia’s FTS legislation has a low level of political support and advocacy when compared to other states. According to the Stages Heuristic Model (SHM), the policymaking process depends on a mixture of official and unofficial actors (Bergeron, 2016; Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). Using the SHM as a political framework, I was able to understand the policymaking stages and role that official and unofficial actors play in crafting FTS legislation (Bergeron, 2016; Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). Unofficial actors, such as advocates (Leyda, 2011), producers (Bateman et al., 2014), and nutrition professionals (Poole et al., 2015), can provide essential perspectives and insights for crafting FTS policy through their advocacy efforts. This group of stakeholders is uniquely qualified to inform FTS policy due to their experiences and knowledge of the FTS system. This study fulfills an essential purpose in that there is limited research on the role that advocates, producers, and school nutrition professionals (SNPs) play in promoting FTS. First, documenting their experiences is key to identifying barriers and opportunities to increase their future participation in the policymaking process. Secondly, FTS legislation often ranges in its level of effectiveness (Leyda, 2011; Poole et al., 2015). Unofficial actors likely have recommendations on how to improve the process and increase their effectiveness based on their experiences. The overarching inquiry of this research is to understand the experiences and perspectives of these unofficial actors in Northern Virginia as they participate in the various stages of advocacy. The goal of this study is to recognize their political involvement and discover ways to improve the policymaking process through their insights.

I have three research questions to increase my understanding of the experiences of these stakeholders in the policymaking process:

1. What barriers and challenges do advocates, producers, and SNPs face to participate in the
FTS policymaking process?

2. What opportunities and successes have advocates, producers, and SNPs identified or experienced while participating in the FTS policymaking process?

3. What recommendations do advocates, producers, and SNPs have for strengthening the FTS policymaking process?

**Theoretical Framework**

The SHM is an applicable theory for this study as it supports the exploration of the roles of specific actors in the policymaking process, allows for flexibility, and is applicable within the public health arena (Bergeron, 2016; Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). More specifically, this framework allowed me to understand how unofficial actors such as FTS advocates, producers, and SNPs, approach, understand, and influence FTS policy enacted by official actors, also known as legislators and policymakers (Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). For this study, I focused on the first two stages of the SHM from the perspective of unofficial actors.

The SHM was first presented as a "policy cycle" in Harold Lasswell's book, The Decision Process: Seven Categories of Functional Analysis, in 1956 (Rinfret et al., 2018). The model has continuously been refined and critiqued by political theorists (Rinfret et al., 2018). The SHM is also known as the policy process model (Brewer & DeLeon, 1983; DeLeon, 1999; Smith & Larimer, 2009), the sequential model (Brewer & DeLeon, 1983) and the heuristic stages model (Cattaneo, 2018). Academics have since condensed the SHM into five stages; agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making or adoption, policy implementation, and policy evaluation (Anderson, 2011; Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018).

There are two classifications of actors in the legislative process: official and unofficial actors (Rinfret et al., 2018). In the SHM, official actors are legislators with a "constitutionally
defined" role to create, implement and evaluate legislation such as members of the judicial system or an executive figure such as a Governor (Rinfret et al., 2018). Unofficial actors are all-encompassing of all participants in the legislative process other than legislators such as lobbyists, citizens, and members of non-profit or non-governmental organizations (Rinfret et al., 2018). The goal of this study is to recognize the experiences of advocates, producers, and SNPs, who are all classified as unofficial actors in this context (Rinfret et al., 2018). Through this study, I gained an understanding of these experiences through the first two stages of the policymaking process – agenda setting and policy formulation.

Within this context, a public problem is an issue that affects society on a considerable scale (Rinfret et al., 2018). Childhood obesity is an example of such a priority that official actors address at every level of the government. Additionally, Section 243 of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act creates the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) FTS program, thereby, establishing local procurement as a national priority as well (Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010). Because designing helpful legislation is an approach to addressing public problems (Rinfret et al., 2018), many societal issues are associated with opportunities for official and unofficial actors to make a change. Within my study, I was interested in advocates’ experiences in promoting FTS and explored the challenges and successes associated with their advocacy. I was also interested in identifying unofficial actors’ recommendations for improving the policymaking process, as a result of their participation, or potential lack thereof.

The agenda-setting stage of the SHM includes identifying a public problem, forming a resolution, and bringing those resolutions to governmental officials (Cattaneo, 2018; Kingdon, 2003; Rinfret et al., 2018). Rinfret et al. (2018) explained that most legislation gets caught up in the agenda-setting stage of the policymaking process, and it is up to unofficial actors to draw
attention to the issue for it to become a governmental priority. After identifying a public issue and making recommendations to official actors, unofficial actors work to bring attention to their issue and compromise on certain elements of their proposed solutions during the policy formulation stage (Benoit, 2013).

The next stage within the SHM is policy formulation (Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). Because people interpret and experience phenomena differently, they develop attitudes to formulate a range of solutions for a problem (Rinfret et al., 2018). It is up to all policy actors to determine a course of action for issues that are a part of their legislative agenda (Cattaneo, 2018). The policy formulation stage is an opportunity for official actors to generate this range of solutions to address public problems (Dye, 2008; Sidney, 2007). Official actors will use this time in the policy-making process to weigh out various options and alternatives and consider the implications of each decision (Sidney, 2007). Benoit (2013) describes this stage as the time when unofficial actors articulate their concerns to official actors. Unofficial actors may use advocacy strategies to bring attention to their issues and suggest solutions or compromise during policy formulation (Benoit, 2013). This stage is also the time in which official actors narrow their set of recommendations to a final approach (Sidney, 2007).

The final stages of the SHM include decision-making or adoption, policy implementation, and policy evaluation (Benoit, 2013; Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). In the decision-making stage, official actors select between all policy options (Benoit, 2013; Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). During policy implementation, official actors allocate funds and develop the supportive infrastructure needed for the success of the policy (Benoit, 2013; Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). Finally, during the policy evaluation stage, analysts uncover the intended and unintended consequences associated with the enactment of the policy
The five stages of the SHM are interconnected and non-linear (Figure 1; Benoit, 2013). There is also a potential overlap with multiple stages occurring at the same time (Benoit, 2013; Cattaneo, 2018). This loose integration of the development flow is a vital characteristic to consider as policymaking is often known as a complex process that may or may not occur in an orderly fashion (Benoit, 2013). A review by Bergeron (2016) found the SHM to be a reliable model for health practitioners looking to engage in the policymaking process. It is especially helpful in identifying how these practitioners would influence the development of a public health policy (Bergeron, 2016).

![Figure 1 Benoit’s Interpretation of SHM (Benoit, 2013). Used with permission.](image)

The SHM can help researchers understand policymaking in the FTS arena (Benoit, 2013; Cattaneo, 2018; Kingdon, 2003; Rinfret et al., 2018). From 2002 to 2018, 453 pieces of direct
FTS legislation were proposed (National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, 2019). Out of this total, official actors adopted 146 bills and 63 resolutions (National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, 2019). Nationally, the most common bill is one that secures funding to implement FTS programming (National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, 2019). From 2017 to 2018, official actors introduced 85 pieces of FTS legislation (National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, 2019). There was a 31% enactment rate among these bills and resolutions (National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, 2019). The term enactment means that a bill was adopted, and official actors can now move into the policy implementation phase (Benoit, 2013). Out of these the 85 bills and resolutions, 50 of them relate to local procurement. These 50 pieces of local procurement legislation noticed a 46% enactment rate (National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, 2019).

The current FTS legislative make-up in Virginia includes four pieces of legislation that celebrate FTS, authorize the development of a state FTS website, and establish an FTS task force (National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, 2019). These pieces of legislation combined are considered a low level of political support and advocacy by the National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems (2019). In other states, several additional legislative layers of support increase local procurement (National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, 2019). This support includes local preference laws, local procurement incentives, and funded coordinator positions, which facilitate the working relationship between schools and producers (National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, 2019).
Conceptual Framework

My overarching research inquiry is to understand the experiences of FTS advocates, producers, and SNPs in Northern Virginia as they participate in the FTS policymaking process. My study focuses on the agenda-setting and policy formulation stages of SHM because these are times when unofficial actors, are allowed the most influence and activity (Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). In this study, I used the SHM to identify the challenges and successes associated with unofficial actors’ experiences in informing FTS policy. I also inquired about their recommendations to improve the policymaking process in the future. In my conceptual framework (Figure 2), the large circle reflects the agenda-setting and policy formulation stages of the policy cycle in which official and unofficial actors have experiences. The smaller circle on the top left of the larger circle represents the challenges associated with participating in the legislative process. I explored this point of inquiry through Research Question 1. The smaller circle on the top right of the larger circle represents the successes of unofficial actors in the policymaking process. I explored these experiences and perspectives with Research Question 2. Lastly, the smaller circle on the bottom center of the larger circle reflects the recommendations each actor has for improving the FTS policymaking process. I recognized these suggestions through Research Question 3. These efforts and experiences to promote FTS could lead to potential outcomes such as the development of supportive local procurement laws (Cawley & Liu, 2008; Eyler et al., 2012; Goddeeris, 2013; Martinez, 2016; Schultz & Thorlton, 2019) and removing barriers to FTS participation (Azuma & Fisher, 2001; Bagdonis et al., 2009; Bateman et al., 2014; Dimitria et al., 2012; Tonti, 2017).
Overview of Research Methodology

Because researchers have thoroughly documented many positive aspects of FTS (Blair, 2009; Evans et al., 2012; Hermann et al., 2006; Howerton et al., 2007; Hughes, 2007; Jones et al., 2015; Knai et al., 2006; Moss et al., 2013; Ratcliffe et al., 2011; Robinson-O'Brien et al.,
This research utilized a case study methodology that allowed me to gain insight from various actors within the Northern Virginia FTS system. I used qualitative research methods to gain an in-depth understanding of policymaking experiences from multiple viewpoints. I also utilized secondary data, including FTS literature and reports, to establish a methodology for exploration. These secondary data sources include the 2015 Farm to School Census (USDA, 2015), 2019 Farm to School Program Participation data set (Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Tech, 2018), and 2018 Virginia Farm to School Evaluation Report (Grigsby et al., 2018).

I was especially interested in discovering the results of unofficial actors’ advocacy efforts and learning about their work for more accessible FTS systems. These policies then go on to affect both producers of local foods and educational staff members who work within the procurement system. This work is necessary to replicate the positive elements of increasing F&V consumption (Croom et al., 2006; Hughes, 2007; Joshi et al., 2006; Koch et al., 2017; Murphy, 2003; Phillips et al., 2011; Schmidt et al., 2006; Triant & Ryan, 2005) in every corner of Virginia. The impact of this study is that the findings will be added to the body of literature on FTS programming and provide a specific outlook on the FTS advocacy in Northern Virginia. These results could potentially provide official actors, i.e., legislators, with valuable information to guide future decision-making throughout the procurement system.

**Need for Current Research**

The proposed study was essential for several reasons. One is that there is limited literature related to the role unofficial actors play in promoting FTS. I will explore this area by providing insight from three FTS stakeholder groups who are all unofficial actors in the SHM
(Rinfret et al., 2018). These groups of unofficial actors include FTS advocates, producers, and SNPs. Each of these parties plays an integral role in making local procurement a viable solution to improve meal quality, address child nutrition, and foster economic opportunities for local and regional producers. Within this study, FTS "advocates" are individuals who politically organize for the establishment or passage of legislation that would promote FTS activities. Producers are owners or co-owners of local food enterprises who supply or intend to supply their produce to the K-12 markets. Finally, SNPs are individuals within the educational system who play a leadership role in facilitating the district's food service program or overseeing schools’ purchasing decisions. I used the word “professional” to include all individuals whose position is to direct educational food service programs. Examples of the professional titles that could fall within this group of unofficial actors include school nutrition directors, procurement officers, nutrition specialists, or coordinators. Though the job titles are labeled differently, “SNP” will be used to describe individuals with a professional function to influence school food options. This set of unofficial actors is critical to FTS legislation for several reasons. First, the FTS literature is missing documentation on how advocates, producers, and SNPs navigate challenges and identify successes in the policymaking process.

Secondly, by gaining a better understanding of their experiences, I had greater insight and context to understand their recommendations for improving advocacy efforts in the future. It is important to note that FTS legislation often ranges in its level of effectiveness (Leyda, 2011; Poole et al., 2015). Therefore, research was needed to explore unofficial actors’ participation and recommendations for improving the FTS policymaking process. Qualitative research methods were especially helpful in this instance because interviewees expanded upon their experiences and provided more insight than if participating in a quantitative study.
Benefitting Audiences

Such research will benefit many unofficial actors. As noted by Poole et al. (2015), research is a useful tool to guide, develop, and strengthen policies that genuinely speak to the needs of constituents. Consequently, federal and state official actors are likely to benefit immensely from this research. These official actors will likely benefit because they will have the documented perspectives needed to encourage participation in the FTS policymaking process. Official actors also benefit from continuing to use FTS activities to address governmental priorities such as childhood obesity. Subsequently, all FTS stakeholders will benefit when unofficial actors identify barriers and opportunities to inform FTS policy. Their insight uncovers recommendations for improving the FTS policymaking process, which will hopefully lead to the development of applicable legislation in the future. Over time, primary and secondary school students in Virginia will also benefit through improved health and wellness associated with increased access to local, fresh foods resulting from stronger FTS programs.

Definitions

Farm to School (FTS) – as described by Botkins and Roe (2018), FTS is any activity that "promotes the use of local foods in school meals, having school gardens, hosting field trips to farms, promoting local foods in school meals, and hosting community events" (p.126). The “FTS” acronym is a reference to all farm to school programs and activities.

FTS Advocates - individuals who politically organize for the establishment or passage of legislation that would promote FTS in the K-12 market.

Geographical preference- also known as “mandated preference, refers to language in policies that is advantageous for producers of food within the state or within a certain distance of foods’ place of origin” (Benson & Niewolny, 2013; Martinez, 2016).
Local procurement - purchasing, promotion, and serving of local food in school cafeterias (National Farm to School Network, 2020).

Mandated preference- also known as “geographical preference, refers to language in policies that is advantageous for producers of food within the state or within a certain distance of foods’ place of origin” (Benson & Niewolny, 2013; Martinez, 2016).

Micro-purchase- as presented by Grigsby et al. (2018), the threshold for small or "micro" purchases is different for each school district, but this term describes the maximum amount of funds schools’ have to purchase local food without special approval. Buyers looking to make a micro-purchase can often-times bypass the regulations associated with the formal food-bidding process (Tonti, 2017).

Official actors - legislators with a "constitutionally defined" role to create, implement and evaluate legislation such as members of the judicial system or an executive figure such as a Governor (Rinfret et al., 2018).

Public policy - any plan by legislators to address societal problems that affect society on a considerable scale (Rinfret et al., 2018).

Producer - owners or co-owners of local food enterprises who may supply or intend to supply their produce to the K-12 markets through FTS programs

School Nutrition Professionals (SNPs)- individuals in the education system who play a leadership role in facilitating the district's food service program, along with potentially overseeing food purchasing decisions.

Unofficial actors – all other participants in the legislative process, such as lobbyists, citizens, and members of non-profit or non-governmental organizations (Rinfret et al., 2018).
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Few food and agriculture-related initiatives come with as many benefits as FTS programs. Along with the programs’ potential to improve adolescent health and nutrition, FTS effects reach far into the corners of economic development for producers and positive educational implications for students (Roche et al., 2015). Activities that bridge gaps between producers and educational initiatives are gaining in popularity and influence (Roche et al., 2015). The state of Virginia is of no exception to this trend. In 2019, Virginia First Lady, Pamela Northam, Secretary of Education, Atif Qarni, and Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry, Bettina Ring, set a goal to increase annual state-wide local food purchases to at least $22 million by 2022 ("Virginia First Lady Announces Farm-to-School Goal, Connecting Schools to Virginia Growers,” 2019).

As I reviewed the FTS literature, five prominent themes emerged. They are: (1) federal legislative foundations & considerations for FTS (2) FTS or local procurement laws and prevalence of FTS activities, (3) references to legislation and recommendations to remove barriers to FTS participation, (4) states' political potential to establish and strengthen existing programs, and (5) literary explorations and resources into Virginia FTS programming. These five themes connect back to my research and demonstrate that legislation can have a positive or negative impact on FTS programming. The themes also provide insight into the effect that state-level political activity can have on FTS programming. Finally, the literature presents an opportunity for future research to explore further the role that FTS advocates play in fighting for supportive local procurement legislation.

In my search for applicable articles, I used Virginia Tech’s online resources and Google Scholar to compile a review of the literature. Below is a compilation of the terms I used to search
Federal Legislative Foundations & Considerations for FTS

Through the years, a legislative foundation allowed FTS to evolve into a national movement for adolescent health and wellbeing (Cawley & Liu, 2008; Eyler et al., 2012; Goddeeris, 2013; Food and Nutrition Service, 2012; Martinez, 2016; Schultz & Thorlton, 2019; USDA’s Office of Community Food Systems, 2017). Two significant pieces of federal legislation that provided the national infrastructure for FTS to exist is the National School Lunch Act of 1946 which established the National School Lunch Program and the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 which expanded school meals to include the School Breakfast Program (Food and Nutrition Service, 2012). The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 was the first policy to establish a preference for local food purchases and references FTS’ capacity to increase students’ access to F&V (Food and Nutrition Service, 2012). The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, which is also known as the 2008 Farm Bill, proved to be especially meaningful in the FTS movement (Food and Nutrition Service; USDA’s Office of Community Food Systems, 2017). This Act allowed all schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program to implement a “geographical preference” for local food (Food and Nutrition Service, 2012; USDA’s Office of Community Food Systems, 2017). In this context, geographical preference refers to language in policies that is advantageous for producers of food within the state or within a certain distance of foods’ place of origin (Benson & Niewolny, 2013; Martinez,
Currently, the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service’s FTS teams provide administrative and technical assistance for implementing these programs by facilitating relationship building and identifying local suppliers for schools (Food and Nutrition Service, 2019).

There are also many instances when FTS is supported through federal funding (Food and Nutrition Service, 2012; Food and Nutrition Service, 2019; Martinez, 2016). Examples include the $501.5 million allocated in the Agricultural Act of 2014 and a grant system established by the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 that set aside 5 million dollars annually for FTS programming (Martinez, 2016). The Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 funding is in the form of grants ($100,000 or less) that USDA can allocate for food service equipment, training, or carrying out FTS activities. The Food and Nutrition Service, a federal agency in the USDA, is one such example of governmental agencies supporting various stakeholders in promoting local procurement through their FTS Grant Program (Food and Nutrition Service, 2019). Since 2013, the agency has provided up to 5 million dollars annually in competitive grants to support FTS programming (Food and Nutrition Service, 2018). In July 2019, this figure increased, and the Food and Nutrition Service distributed over $9 million through their FTS Grant program (Food and Nutrition Service, 2019).

A review of childhood obesity legislation from 2006 to 2009 contained several implications for FTS policies in the future (Eyler et al., 2012). During this three-year period, Eyler et al. (2012) found that state official actors introduced 283 bills about school food policy across the United States. Out of these 283 bills, 108 were FTS related (Eyler et al., 2012). The FTS bills noticed a 31% enactment rate (34) (Eyler et al., 2012). The findings uncovered a variety of enactment rates among FTS related topics (Eyler et al., 2012). Therefore, some sectors of FTS noticed higher enactment rates than others (Eyler et al., 2012). The researchers’
methodology for determining this relationship included reviewing state-level childhood obesity legislation, identifying the enactment rate for each subtopic, and using the enactment rates to determine positive/negative correlations of adoption (Eyler et al., 2012). Bills that revolved around health and nutrition education curriculum is an example of a topic with a high enactment rate (Eyler et al., 2012). Official actors were less likely to adopt bills with a tax component for items such as soda and snack foods (Eyler et al., 2012). Eyler et al. (2012) noted that these findings could relate to the level of regulatory support needed to pass the FTS legislation. For example, nutrition education legislation, which requires a low level of regulatory support, is more likely to be passed than legislation needing high levels of regulatory support such as taxation (Eyler et al., 2012). These findings are helpful for official actors who intend to gauge the likelihood of their FTS bill being adopted in the future.

Along with childhood obesity legislation, there is political support, which is especially applicable to FTS. A review from Martinez (2016) recognized prominent federal, state, and local legislation that supports local procurement in the United States. One example is The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which formally established the USDA Farm to School Program (Martinez, 2016). This legislation included funding for “FTS grants, training and research” (Martinez, 2016, pg.5). Though there are federal funds and support in place for FTS, making individuals aware of helpful programming can present a challenge (Goddeeris, 2013). Findings produced by Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems and the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) note that only a small fraction of producers and rural business owners participate in USDA-sponsored opportunities for financial support (Goddeeris, 2013). Goddeeris (2013) noted this lack of participation is partially due to a lack of awareness of federally sponsored resources.
FTS or Local Procurement Laws and Prevalence of FTS Activities

The second most noticeable theme from the literature made connections between the presence of FTS or local procurement legislation and the prevalence of FTS activities (Nicholson et al., 2014; Schneider et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2017). Schneider et al. (2012) explored whether FTS was more common in public elementary schools situated in states with FTS legislation or states without FTS legislation. The results suggest that FTS was more prevalent in states with applicable legislation and initiatives than schools without legislative support (Schneider et al., 2012). Though the laws themselves were perceived as rather weak by the authors, they did suggest that additional and stronger legislation could increase state-wide FTS participation (Schneider et al., 2012).

A few years later, a similar study from Nicholson et al. (2014) sought to understand whether there is a correlation between state FTS laws and access to F&V in U.S public schools. The results indicated that F&V access was greater in schools situated in states with FTS laws, with 13% of this relationship attributed to the presence of a FTS program (Nicholson et al., 2014). Nicholson et al. (2014) also determined that even when a school has not directly adopted a FTS program, divisional superintendents are still influenced by surrounding districts’ implementation of FTS (Nicholson et al., 2014). Over time, this influence on other administrators may indirectly increase students’ access to F&V (Nicholson et al., 2014). Turner et al. (2017) examined a similar correlation as it relates to schools having gardens or using garden-grown produce in school meals. While no association spoke to the presence of a garden, there was a relationship between state laws associated with school gardens and using local food in nutritional services (Turner et al., 2017). The authors cited reasons such as parent engagement and participation as potentially stronger indicators of whether a school would adopt a gardening
References to Legislation and Recommendations to Remove Barriers to FTS Participation

Another theme that emerged within the literature revolved around policies or structural recommendations that work to establish, strengthen or address obstacles in the FTS programming (Azuma & Fisher, 2001; Bagdonis et al., 2009; Bateman et al., 2014; Dimitria et al., 2012; Schultz & Thorlton, 2019; Tonti, 2017). Bagdonis et al. (2009) added a new element to this conversation by considering ways unofficial actors advertise FTS. The comparative case study revolved around the inaugural FTS programs in both rural and urban areas (Bagdonis et al., 2009). The findings stressed the importance of having a "FTS champion" from the school or community, who incites and mobilizes civic engagement and action (Bagdonis et al., 2009). Another unique consideration is the potential decline in appreciation of commercial benefits for the local economy if wellness is emphasized as the prominent selling point of the FTS (Bagdonis et al., 2009). Bagdonis et al. (2009) argue that if F&V consumption becomes the focal point of the FTS movement, the sourcing of these foods becomes a secondary concern. This scenario could potentially limit students’ experiences with community food systems and weaken local producers’ stance in FTS (Bagdonis et al., 2009). For this reason, Bagdonis et al. (2009) stressed the importance of publicizing both economic implications and wellness objectives equally.

Tonti (2017) provided a more solution-based approach to increase nutrient-dense foods in schools. She recommended increasing local producers' competitiveness in the food bid process, raising the minimum for micro-purchases, and allowing schools to make multiple micro-purchases throughout the academic year (Tonti, 2017). Tonti (2017) described the current bidding process in which schools must accept the lowest possible bid in exchange for
food purchases as a challenge in local procurement. Tonti (2017) praised states that enact local preference procurement laws where local producers can still win a bid even if it is not the lowest price, as long as the bid is within a certain percentage of the lowest bid. Tonti (2017) also presented a solution that would increase producers’ competitiveness in the bidding process. This solution was in the form of financial incentives such as a tax credit that would allow producers to lower their prices (Tonti, 2017). Finally, Tonti (2017) encouraged official state actors to increase the threshold for yearly micro-purchases to encourage seasonal eating and year-long purchases. This solution is important, considering that buyers can bypass the formal food-bidding process when making a micro-purchase (Tonti, 2017). The micro-purchase system is beneficial for schools looking to equitably purchase small amounts between qualified, local vendors (Tonti, 2017).

A report titled *Farm to School Policies and Recommendations* by Azuma and Fisher (2001) details foundational school programming such as the National School Lunch Program and cites resources for producers in the FTS system. Examples of such resources include the Federal-State Marketing Improvement Program, which provides funding to marketers with unique strategies for advertising state-sourced agricultural products (Azuma & Fisher, 2001). Azuma and Fisher (2001) also reference a series of grant programs such as Rural Business Enterprise Grants, which promote the development of small businesses in rural areas (Azuma & Fisher, 2001). The report concludes with an extensive list of policy recommendations for FTS (Azuma & Fisher, 2001). Unique propositions included encouraging food directors to purchase directly from local producers, establishing grant programs for kitchen infrastructure to accommodate fresh produce, issuing additional repayments for local purchases, evaluating logistical and distributive obstacles, and mirroring federal FTS legislation at the regional level (Azuma &
Qualitative research from Bateman et al. (2014) aimed to address the issues associated with the FTS supply chain by using experiences from local producers and distributors in Wisconsin to inform policy. Bateman et al. (2014) conducted key informant interviews with Wisconsin producers and distributors to explore the obstacles associated with local procurement. Interviewees cited widespread concerns such as limited school infrastructure and discrepancies between the seasonality of produce and academic year (Bateman et al., 2014). One new obstacle that came to light was difficulty in meeting schools' product standards, such as produce quality, packaging, and food safety (Bateman et al., 2014). Bateman et al. (2014) used these insights to craft policy recommendations such as the allocation of funding towards a FTS coordinator to simplify the purchasing process and a potential revision of standards for smaller operations. Foodservice directors mentioned similar concerns about manageability in a mixed-methods study that explored the barriers of local food procurement in Maryland schools (Dimitria et al., 2012). The consideration, in this case, was the expensive liability insurance for value-added products that many small-scale producers cannot afford (Dimitria et al., 2012). Furthermore, this is an additional example that calls for a review of legislation that addresses barriers to FTS participation.

A report by Dimitria et al. (2012) includes several findings with political implications. An example of such implications is that schools with a higher percentage of students eligible for free lunch were less likely to engage in buying from local producers (Dimitria et al., 2012). Like Azuma and Fisher (2001), Dimitria et al. (2012) made a recommendation to issue additional reimbursements for free or reduced lunches to increase schools’ capacity to procure local foods. In interviews with food service directors, Dimitria et al. (2012) found that directors’ interest in
FTS and attitude towards obstacles were indicators of whether a school would establish a local procurement plan. This analysis implies that policymakers should consider the perspective of unofficial actors, such as foodservice directors, when developing policy (Dimitria et al., 2012). Such insight could support the development of a procurement system that is favorable for local producers (Dimitria et al., 2012).

A policy analysis from Schultz and Thorlton (2019) took an in-depth look at the nutritional aspect of FTS by challenging language in the proposed Fruit and Vegetable Access for Children Act of 2017. Analysts determined the Act would relax the definition of “fresh” to include minimally processed foods, such as canned and frozen vegetables (Schultz & Thorlton, 2019). One critique from Schultz and Thorlton (2019) is that it would be unfavorable to present less nutritious alternatives with higher sugar and sodium content, especially for students in low-income communities with less access to fresh foods (Schultz & Thorlton, 2019). The article concluded with a recommendation that school nurses have additional control and authority to inform FTS decision making (Schultz & Thorlton, 2019). As of 2020, the bill has not passed in the House of Representatives.

State Political Potential to Establish and Strengthen FTS Programs

Academics recognize the role that states play in supporting FTS (Cawley & Liu, 2008; Eyler et al., 2012; Leyda; 2011; Martinez, 2016; Owen et al., 2011; Poole et al., 2015; Schneider et al., 2012). Cawley and Liu (2008) noted that policy at the state-level could increase food access and introduce wellness activities for school-aged children. Martinez (2016) also details the role of state and local policymakers play in supporting local food and “farm to institution” initiatives. This support might include crafting flexible zoning laws for local markets and developing “mandated preference” policies for food produced within the state or a certain
distance of foods’ place of origin (Martinez, 2016). One relevant example from Martinez (2016) references a community in Massachusetts with a local food council in place to help facilitate relationship building between local producers and buyers.

Leyda (2011) focused on a review of FTS in the state of Iowa's food system. Leyda (2011) labeled Iowa's programming as moderately successful, which contrasts with my perspective of the state's notoriety in the agricultural industry. Like Schneider et al. (2012), Leyda (2011) echoed concerns that FTS legislation can be somewhat powerless in certain instances. Leyda (2011) referenced Senate File 601, legislation that established the Iowa FTS program, as an example of “powerless” legislation. As referenced previously, research suggests that there is a positive relationship between FTS laws and the prevalence of FTS activities (Nicholson et al., 2014; Schneider et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2017). If FTS legislation helps to encourage FTS participation and prevalence (Nicholson et al., 2014; Schneider et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2017), Leyda (2011) describing Senate File 601 as “powerless,” appears to diverge from other researchers’ findings. There are a few explanations that potentially explain this contrast in findings. First, Leyda (2011) notes that Senate File 601 did not allocate funds for the establishment of the FTS program. Leyda (2011) describes Senate File 601 as “feel-good legislation” that forms a FTS administration, without the finances to back the programming (Leyda, 2011). Also, the legislation does not contain any incentives for schools to purchase directly from local producers (Leyda, 2011). As stated earlier, the quality of policy recommendations matters as it relates to the level of political FTS support. Like many proceeding authors, Leyda (2011) issues a charge for state legislation with more leverage to encourage school procurement officers to purchase from local producers.

One of the more interesting cases of state-level promotion of FTS is one of advocacy
work in Louisiana. Poole et al. (2015) documented collaboration between an interdisciplinary National Policy Team and a "political champion" in the Louisiana State Senate to improve the health statistics of the state. During the length of this partnership, they were able to usher in Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 94 (SCR 94), which established a FTS task force between the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry and Louisiana Department of Education (Poole et al., 2015). This feat was noted as especially meaningful because the legislation was the only farm to table law that passed in Louisiana’s legislative session that year (Poole et al., 2015).

Another state-focused perspective lies in the "Preventing Obesity" guide that advocated for FTS influences in North Carolina child-care facilities (Owen et al., 2011). Owen et al. (2011) note several solutions that North Carolinian policymakers should consider for a healthier preschool system. Owen et al. (2011) encourage state participation in “farm to preschool” efforts with solutions such as swapping fruit juice for fresh fruit. The demand for fresh fruit in preschool facilities was an example Owen et al. (2011) provides of how FTS producers could easily integrate themselves in the current child-care structure. While the recommendations were specific to North Carolina, the findings are still applicable for all states. One example of this applicability is a policy proposal that called for clarifying legislative language for foods donated to educational facilities to specify whether food safety standards apply to pre-school facilities (Owen et al., 2011). Owen et al. (2011) urge official state actors to consider the promotion of joint use agreements that would legalize working relationships between childcare facilities and local farms.

**Literary Explorations and Resources into Virginia FTS Programming**

Like most of the United States, Virginia has worked to implement various FTS activities such as local procurement and school gardening into their traditional operations (USDA, 2015).
According to USDA’s Farm to School Census, 57% of surveyed schools in Virginia participated in at least one FTS activity with another 23% implying that they had intentions to start FTS programming in the future (USDA, 2015). Researchers determined that the average percentage of total food costs that Virginia schools spent on local food purchases was about 3% (USDA, 2015). Approximately 47% of all responding districts included that they were interested in increasing the amount of local food provided in their school meals (USDA, 2015).

The Virginia Resource Guide is a tool for evaluating legislative opportunities in the state (Benson & Niewolny, 2013). The handbook serves as a comprehensive resource for stakeholders and unofficial actors of the Virginia FTS system. It includes a background of Virginia FTS policy, relevant recommendations, and lists key organizations, such as Virginia Farm Bureau, that support FTS initiatives (Benson & Niewolny, 2013). This guide references state FTS legislation such as House Joint Resolution 95 (2010) that recognizes every second week of October as "Virginia Farm to School Week" (Benson & Niewolny, 2013). House Joint Resolution 95, along with House Resolution 1655, encourages several celebratory events and programs across the nation (Benson & Niewolny, 2013). In the past, these promotional programs served as impactful gateways to more permanent FTS systems and partnerships (Benson & Niewolny, 2013). This guide features several organizations such as Virginia Farm Bureau and the National Farm to School Network that led the FTS movement through advocacy and policy development (Benson & Niewolny, 2013).

An evaluative report produced by Grigsby et al. (2018) also included several foundational results with implications for this study because they are specific to the FTS climate in Virginia. These results provide a perspective on the producers and interest in FTS, current expenditures, and participation, along with perceived benefits and challenges. All survey results and responses
are specific to the local procurement portion of FTS programming in Virginia and refer to the 2016-2017 school year (Grigsby et al., 2018). The first notable statistic was that while only 12% of producers had previously marketed to K-12 schools, 50% of them were interested in doing so in the future (Grigsby et al., 2018). K-12 schools were the highest-ranking market of interest for producers, with 44% percent indicating that they were willing to produce specific products if a contractual agreement was in place (Grigsby et al., 2018). These results suggest that there is a significant opportunity to increase local procurement in Virginia and establish agreements for mutually beneficial exchanges.

The Grigsby et al. (2018) report also included considerable data about the current procurement climate. Virginia K-12 schools spent approximately 15.4 million dollars on local foods, which respondents most commonly defined as food grown in Virginia or within a 100 to the 250-mile radius from the foods’ place of origin (Grigsby et al., 2018). Among the 105 responding school divisions, 78 of them indicated that they purchased or used local food (Grigsby et al., 2018). Lunch was the most popular meal for local food, followed by breakfast (Grigsby et al., 2018). Schools also used local food in meals for the Summer Food Service Program, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, and to provide snacks to students (Grigsby et al., 2018). Out of the FTS participating school divisions, the most common percentages on local food expenditures were 1-5% of their budget (21 schools), 0-1% (13 schools), and 5-10% (10 schools) (Grigsby et al., 2018). The typical responses concerning how often schools made a purchase per school year were "several times per school year" (31%), "weekly" (19%), and "several times per month" (14%) (Grigsby et al., 2018). There were also figures for determining which elements influence local producers' competitiveness in the bidding process (Grigsby et al., 2018). Only around a quarter of participating divisions stated a geographic preference in their
bidding operations (Grigsby et al., 2018). Most participating divisions (39) had a micro-purchase threshold under $10,000 and with 44 divisions having a threshold of around $3,000 to 3,500 for micro-purchases. (Grigsby et al., 2018). This portion of findings, combined with Virginia producers' interest in K-12 markets, presents yet another opportunity for growth. Out of schools that purchased locally, the majority of schools acquired less than 5% of their food from local sources (Grigsby et al., 2018). These statistics present a need to question how to increase the percentage of local food in meals and the frequency of making local purchases. There is also space to consider whether schools should or could decrease their threshold for micro-purchases.

Finally, this report included figures that speak to the challenges associated with local purchases in Virginia. The top-cited perceived problems for local purchasing by SNPs were the "seasonality of foods," "lack of local food," and "complicated nature ordering procedures, delivery, and GAP certification verification" (Grigsby et al., 2018, p. 38). There were also challenges SNPs connected with using local foods such as lack of time for both directors and kitchen staff, funds, local vendors along with the complicated nature of the delivery system (Grigsby et al., 2018). Fortunately, this stakeholder group ranked training for kitchen staff to prepare local, fresh produce as third in their level of interest (Grigsby et al., 2018). This piece of information is encouraging as gaining new culinary skills could address challenges kitchen staffers experience when working with fresh foods. The limitations around school funding and seasonality were also mirrored by producers who cited confusion about school marketing requirements (Grigsby et al., 2018). These findings present an opportunity to explore how producers and SNPs overcome these obstacles, along with examining the role of FTS advocates who potentially push for additional funding and resources for local procurement.
Summary

Throughout the review of literature, I gained an understanding of the federal supports in place for FTS (Cawley & Liu, 2008; Eyler et al., 2012; Goddeeris, 2013; Martinez, 2016; Schultz & Thorlton, 2019), state policies and resources for FTS stakeholders and unofficial actors (Benson & Niewolny, 2013; Cawley & Liu, 2008; Eyler et al., 2012; Grigsby et al., 2018; Leyda, 2011; Owen et al., 2011; Poole et al., 2015; Schneider et al., 2012), and the positive impacts of strong FTS legislation (Azuma & Fisher, 2001; Bagdonis et al., 2009; Bateman et al., 2014; Dimitria et al., 2012; Nicholson et al., 2014; Schneider et al., 2012; Schultz & Thorlton, 2019; Tonti, 2017; Turner et al., 2017). A major takeaway is that supportive FTS legislation does encourage producer participation (Nicholson et al., 2014; Schneider et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2017). If producer participation has any impact on the amount of local procurement in K-12 schools, knowing that supportive legislation increases participation is especially meaningful for accomplishing my study purpose. Finally, research from Grigsby et al. (2018) is encouraging and reveals that Virginia producers are interested in marketing to K-12 schools. Fortunately, Benson & Niewolny (2013) indicate that there is legislation in place to encourage that interest. Legislation like House Joint Resolution 95 that established "Virginia Farm to School Week" is an example of legislative support in the state (Benson & Niewolny, 2013).

Before reviewing the relevant literature on FTS, I expected that individuals would be working to address challenges in the FTS system (Azuma & Fisher, 2001; Bagdonis et al., 2009; Bateman et al., 2014; Dimitria et al., 2012; Schultz & Thorlton, 2019; Tonti, 2017). Unexpected themes I uncovered included the positive impact of supportive FTS legislation on FTS activities (Nicholson et al., 2014; Schneider et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2017) and states' potential for encouraging local procurement (Cawley & Liu, 2008; Eyler et al., 2012; Leyda, 2011; Owen et
al., 2011; Poole et al., 2015; Schneider et al., 2012). The state-level FTS legislation/advocacy scenario in Louisiana was described as a success by Poole et al. (2015), while a similar effort in Iowa with Senate Bill 601 was described as "powerless" by Leyda (2011). This contrast in experiences led me to believe the quality of recommendations and policies matters and has an impact on whether implemented solutions have a positive impact on the local procurement system. The varying effectiveness between the situations referenced in Leyda (2011) and Poole et al. (2015) also made me question whether unofficial actors’ participation would have improved the policymaking process.

While reading, I developed a curiosity for the role FTS advocates play in identifying and developing solutions that make that positive difference. Like in the scenario described by Bateman et al. (2014) in Wisconsin, the perspective of producers can be used to develop impactful policies. Because SNPs can provide a unique viewpoint of the challenges surrounding FTS (Grigsby et al., 2018), it is useful to marry those perspectives with those of producers for a more holistic view of how to improve the FTS agenda-setting and policy formulation processes. The SHM provides the theoretical framework needed to explore advocates, producers, and SNPs’ experiences when informing FTS policy (Bergeron, 2016; Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018).
Chapter Three: Methodology

Purpose Statement, Overarching Inquiry, & Research Questions

The National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems (2019) deemed that Virginia’s FTS legislation represents a low level of political support and advocacy when compared to other states. According to the SHM, the policymaking process depends on a mixture of official and unofficial actors (Bergeron, 2016; Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). Using the SHM as a political framework, I was able to understand the policymaking stages and role that official and unofficial actors play in crafting FTS legislation (Bergeron, 2016; Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). Unofficial actors, such as advocates (Leyda, 2011), producers (Bateman et al., 2014), and nutrition professionals (Poole et al., 2015), can provide essential perspectives and insights for crafting FTS policy through their advocacy efforts. This group of stakeholders is uniquely qualified to inform FTS policy due to their experiences and knowledge of the FTS system. This study fulfills an essential purpose in that there is limited research on the role that advocates, producers, and SNPs play in promoting FTS. First, documenting their experiences is key to identifying barriers and opportunities to increase their future participation in the policymaking process. Secondly, FTS legislation often ranges in its level of effectiveness (Leyda, 2011; Poole et al., 2015). Unofficial actors likely have recommendations on how to improve the process and increase their effectiveness based on their experiences. The overarching inquiry of this research is to understand the experiences and perspectives of these unofficial actors in Northern Virginia as they participate in the various stages of advocacy. The goal of this study is to recognize their political involvement and discover ways to improve the policymaking process through their insights.

The research questions, the basis for inquiry, and data collection methods are detailed in
Table 3-1. I have three research questions to increase my understanding of the experiences of actors in the FTS policymaking process:

1. What barriers and challenges do advocates, producers, and SNPs face to participate in the FTS policymaking process?

2. What opportunities and successes have advocates, producers, and SNPs identified or experienced while participating in the FTS policymaking process?

3. What recommendations do advocates, producers, and SNPs have for strengthening the FTS policymaking process?
Table 3-1. Basis for research questions, research questions, and data collection methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basis for Research Questions</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Collection Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unofficial actors have unique involvement in FTS (Dimitria et al., 2012) and the ability to inform policy based on their experiences (Bateman et al., 2014). These experiences have potentially presented barriers and challenges to participate in the policymaking process.</td>
<td>What barriers and challenges do advocates, producers, and SNPs face to participate in the FTS policymaking process?</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews and online survey questions for unofficial actors related to barriers and challenges to participate in the policymaking process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unofficial actors have unique involvement in FTS (Dimitria et al., 2012) and the ability to inform policy based on their experiences (Bateman et al., 2014). These experiences have potentially presented opportunities and successes in the policymaking process.</td>
<td>What opportunities and successes have advocates, producers, and SNPs identified or experienced while participating in the FTS policymaking process?</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews and online survey questions for unofficial actors related to opportunities and successes in the policymaking process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unofficial actors have unique involvement in FTS (Dimitria et al., 2012) and the ability to inform local procurement policy based on their experiences (Bateman et al., 2014). Actors may potentially have recommendations for other stakeholders and legislators based upon their experiences in the policymaking process.</td>
<td>What recommendations do advocates, producers, and SNPs have for strengthening the FTS policymaking process?</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews and online survey questions for unofficial actors requesting their recommendations to improve the policymaking process.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theoretical Framework**

I used the SHM as the theoretical framework for my study. This model allowed me to explore the role unofficial actors such as FTS advocates, producers, and SNPs play in the
policymaking process (Bergeron, 2016; Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). SHM is organized in five stages: agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making or adoption, policy implementation, and policy evaluation (Anderson, 2011; Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). I limited my research to the first two stages of the SHM: agenda-setting and policy formulation. I focused on these two stages because researchers describe agenda-setting and policy formulation stages as times when unofficial actors are allowed the most influence and activity (Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). The agenda-setting stage of the SHM includes identifying a public problem, forming a resolution, and bringing those resolutions to governmental officials (Cattaneo, 2018; Kingdon, 2003; Rinfret et al., 2018). Policy formulation is the stage where unofficial actors articulate their concerns to official actors, use advocacy strategies to bring attention to the issue, and suggest solutions or compromise (Benoit, 2013). This framework allowed me to gain an understanding of the policy-making experiences of three unofficial actor groups in Northern Virginia.

**Philosophical Assumptions & Interpretive Framework**

The philosophical assumptions that were most applicable to this study are ontology and epistemology. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) describe ontology as what people believe about the nature of their reality. Through my research, I intended to capture various perspectives and angles of reality to construct a more diversified view for future readers of the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that when studying individuals, qualitative researchers investigate with the intent of reporting these multiple realities. Each respondent, from the FTS advocate, producer, or SNP, experiences the FTS policymaking process differently due to their various goals and roles in the educational food system. Using the ontological approach was appropriate as I explored and reported those views from different angles of the FTS policymaking process.
Epistemology is also a necessary philosophical assumption for this study. While ontology refers to the researcher’s perception of their reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), epistemology refers to how the researcher knows that reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Merriam & Tisdell (2015) describe epistemology as the nature and development of knowledge. Essentially, this philosophical assumption is the study of how we know what we know (Lincoln et al., 2011). The background questions that I referenced in the Interview Protocols -Appendix A, Appendix B, and Online Survey- Appendix C, ask interviewees to describe their role and length of participation in the FTS system. These background questions helped me understand how interviewees’ experiences gave them a framework to develop their “reality” and participation in FTS. Epistemological assumptions also emphasize practices that build trust and rapport within a community (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which was helpful when forming new relationships and interacting with unofficial actors.

Because a large portion of this study revolved around identifying successes and navigating challenges within the policymaking process, the pragmatic framework was applicable. Within this framework, a researcher considers “what works” and upholds solution-based thinking (Patton, 1990). Researchers who hold this worldview utilize various sources of data and write recommendations for practical application (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I implemented this framework by collecting data from diverse actors in the FTS system in various locations in Northern Virginia.

**Research Design**

A case study design was the most appropriate format to answer the overlying research purpose of documenting the experiences of FTS advocates, producers, and SNPs during the policymaking process. This kind of research revolves around a "case" set in a real-world context,
program, or phenomenon that is bounded by place and time (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2017). Yin and Davis (2007) describe the case study as a method to explore phenomena while considering contextual factors that likely impact or influence the case. This kind of methodology provides space to study FTS policymaking in depth when the circumstances and context of those circumstances are not easily separated (Yin, 2017). Secondary data sources including the 2015 Farm to School Census (USDA, 2015), 2019 Farm to School Program Participation data set (Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Tech, 2018), and 2018 Virginia Farm to School Evaluation Report (Grigsby et al., 2018) helped provide an overview of local procurement in Northern Virginia.

The type of case study used in this research was a single-case, embedded case design. To explore local procurement throughout the Northern Virginia region, I studied more than one unit of analysis, which I label as “subunits” within the case (Yin, 2017). The research purpose revolves around local procurement in a specific region. The embedded subunits are all FTS advocates, producers, and SNPs who participated in my study (Virginia Department of Education, 2019). McClintock (1985) and Yin (2017) noted that researchers could identify subunits using cluster techniques or grouping. I used Virginia Department of Education’s grouping for assigning SNPs to identify the 19 localities of Northern Virginia. I then used self-reported local procurement data (USDA, 2015; Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Tech, 2018) to identify the subunits of analysis. Using the embedded case design allowed me to make an extensive analysis of the experiences of interviewees in the local procurement system (Yin, 2017).

**Data Collection Instrument Development**

As referenced in Table 3-2, I developed a set of interview questions that connected with
the SHM and the overarching research questions. In Research Question 1, I asked unofficial actors to identify the challenges they have encountered while participating in the FTS policymaking process. Participants were also asked to identify barriers that may be limiting their current success or effectiveness in the policymaking process. Research Question 2 revolved around official actors’ successes during the policymaking process. This set of interview questions also explored the results associated with their efforts in the policymaking process. Finally, Research Question 3 explored what unofficial actors perceive as opportunities in policymaking. This set of questions included asking interviewees to provide recommendations for other actors in their stakeholder group (FTS advocates, producers, and SNPs). Research Question 3 also called for unofficial actors’ recommendations to legislators on improving the FTS policymaking process. Interview scripts to be used with key informant interviews for advocates, producers, are in Appendix A, Appendix B, respectively. The online survey protocol is in Appendix C.
### Table 3-2. Research questions, interview questions, and theoretical connections table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Theoretical Connections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What barriers and challenges do advocates, producers, and SNPs face to participate in the FTS policymaking process?</strong></td>
<td>Please identify any barriers and challenges, if any, that prevent you from participating in the FTS policymaking process.</td>
<td>Agenda Setting &amp; Policy Formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Please describe any barriers and challenges, if any, that potentially limit your success or effectiveness in the FTS policymaking process.</td>
<td>Agenda Setting &amp; Policy Formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Please describe how you navigated through these barriers and challenges in the past.</td>
<td>Agenda Setting &amp; Policy Formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What opportunities and successes have advocates, producers, and SNPs identified or experienced while participating in the FTS policymaking process?</strong></td>
<td>Please describe any opportunities and successes, if any, while informing or crafting a legislative agenda around FTS.</td>
<td>Agenda Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Please describe any opportunities and successes, if any, in voicing your concerns around FTS to legislators.</td>
<td>Policy Formulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To your knowledge, how have the results of your efforts impacted your school or community?</td>
<td>Agenda Setting &amp; Policy Formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What recommendations do advocates, producers, and SNPs have for strengthening the FTS policymaking process?</strong></td>
<td>What recommendations do you have for other (advocates, producers, or SNPs) for strengthening the FTS policymaking process?</td>
<td>Agenda Setting &amp; Policy Formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What recommendations do you have for legislators for strengthening the FTS policymaking process?</td>
<td>Agenda Setting &amp; Policy Formation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Socioeconomic Climate & Justification

This study revolved around local procurement in the 19 localities that make up Northern Virginia (Virginia Department of Education, 2019). Virginia Department of Education uses this grouping of counties for assigning SNPs (Virginia Department of Education, 2019). The Northern Virginia region consists of Arlington, Clarke, Culpeper, Fairfax, Fauquier, Frederick, Loudoun, Orange, Madison, Page, Prince William, Rappahannock, Shenandoah and Warren counties along with independent cities, Alexandria, Falls Church, Manassas, Manassas Park, and Winchester (Virginia Department of Education, 2019).

This region of localities was a thought-provoking case for several reasons, with one being the rural-urban divide between localities. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is a federal office within the Executive Branch which defines a metro area as a region that consists of 50,000 or more population, and a micro area containing an urban core of at least 10,000 (but less than 50,000) population (Office of Management and Budget, 2010). According to these standards, Arlington, Fairfax, Fauquier, Frederick, Loudoun, and Prince William counties and the city of Alexandria within the Northern Virginia region are urban (United States Census Bureau, 2017). Clarke, Culpeper, Madison, Orange, Page, Rappahannock, Shenandoah, and Warren counties, along with independent cities, Falls Church, Manassas, Manassas Park, and Winchester are rural, according to OMB standards (United States Census Bureau, 2017).

Secondly, the region also has a broad representation of racial backgrounds. The most common racial categories within this region are White (Not Hispanic or Latino) (68.72%), Hispanic or Latino (13.49%), and Black or African American (9.95%) (United States Census Bureau, 2019a). Residents who fall within the White racial category range from 93.90% in Page County to 32.20% in Manassas Park (United States Census Bureau, 2019a). For Hispanic or
Latino residents in Northern Virginia, this statistic ranges from 40.1% in Manassas Park to 2.1% in Page County (United States Census Bureau, 2019a). The representation of Black and African American residents ranges from 23% in the city of Alexandria to 2.1% in Page County (United States Census Bureau, 2019a).

Socioeconomic conditions in the Northern Virginia region also contributed to the value of this region for exploration. This region contains Loudoun County, Virginia, the wealthiest county in the nation (United States Census Bureau, 2019b). The median household income for Loudoun County is $136,268 per year as compared to Page County with $47,951 per year (United States Census Bureau, 2017). To put this in context, the median national household income in the United States is $61,937 (United States Census Bureau, 2019b). The median household income in Virginia is $72,577 (United States Census Bureau, 2019b). So, this region contains localities above and below the national and state levels (United States Census Bureau, 2019a; United States Census Bureau, 2019b). The region also varies in its representation of residents under age 65 who possess health insurance with 3.7% of Falls Church residents to 16.6% of Manassas City residents in this age group uninsured (United States Census Bureau, 2017). There is also a slight variation of residents who fall below the poverty line with only 3.6% of Falls Church residents to 15.3% of Winchester City residents living below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2017). This poverty threshold for one, two, three, and four member-household in the United States is $12,784, $16,247, $19,985, and $25,701, respectively (United States Census Bureau, 2018).

Finally, the area also possessed a range of FTS participation levels, which provided a diverse subset of scenarios for exploration. According to the latest Farm to School Census data, most localities in the region were participating in some form of FTS (USDA, 2015). According
to the self-reported amounts of locally sourced food, the local procurement ranged from 100% in Frederick County to 0.8% in Loudoun County (Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Tech, 2018). Because the amounts were self-reported, it is possible that some values do not reflect the actual procurement level.

According to Lyson (2016), the mean per capita income had a statistically significant impact on FTS rates in the region. The Northern Virginia region, specifically, was selected for exploration as the area contains five out of twenty of the wealthiest localities in the United States (Jeffery, 2019; United States Census Bureau, 2019b). These localities include Loudoun County ($136,268), Falls Church City ($124,796), Fairfax County ($111,574), Arlington County ($117,374) and Prince William County ($103,445) (Jeffery, 2019; United States Census Bureau, 2019b). If financial resources are vital to doing FTS well, then Loudoun County, especially, could be a statewide, if not a nationwide standout. Because county administrators collect local tax revenue through the collection of property taxes and residents’ income, more affluent communities have more financial resources than poorer communities (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2019). Greater financial capacity could potentially improve a schools’ infrastructure and ability to even participate in FTS programming. Despite touting the highest median house household income in the nation (United States Census Bureau, 2019b), Loudoun County only sourced 0.8% of its’ food locally in the 2016-2017 school year (Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Tech, 2018) which is an opportunity for great improvement.

**Sample Technique & Criterium**

For this study, I used two techniques to identify my sample of participates for semi-structured interviews and online surveys. I used a form of non-probability sampling known as expert sampling to identify FTS advocates, producers, and SNPs. According to Trochim and
Donnelly (2001), this kind of purposive sampling is useful to reach your target populations quickly and when a representation of the general population is not of concern to the researcher. Expert sampling relies on the assembly of people with expertise or experience in an area (Trochim & Donnelly, 2001). Each informant plays a specific role in supporting the FTS movement and, therefore, was selected based upon their experiences and knowledge of the educational procurement system.

I also used another method of sampling to identify interviewees known as snowball sampling. Researchers use this form of sampling to identify people who fall within your selection criteria and asking them to recommend others who also function in a similar capacity (Trochim & Donnelly, 2001). This method was especially useful when identifying FTS advocates from multiple agencies and producers who desire to participate in local procurement efforts but have been unable to do so. Table 3-3 provides the criterium I used to select a viable sample.
### Table 3-3: Sample Criterium

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Role</th>
<th>Criteria Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| FTS Advocates (5-8 participants)       | -Organize meet, or work for political or social action in FTS  
-Work includes politically organizing to establish, educate, strengthen or "advocate" for FTS laws and initiatives for the state of Virginia  
-Associated with collective professional body or advocacy organization (i.e., Virginia Farm Bureau, Virginia PTA, etc.)                                      |
| Producers (5-8 participants)            | -Owner or co-owner of a farming operation  
-Producers have history any FTS activity including but not limited to:  
-Being a current supplier of produce including F&V, meat, seafood or dairy products including liquid milk to K-12 schools in Northern Virginia  
-OR  
-A producer with intentions to market produce to K-12 schools; actively taking or taken steps to become a supplier of local food  
-Facilitating agrotourism, school field trips, and agricultural education |
| School Nutrition Professional (SNP) (1-3 participants) | -Work in Northern Virginia School Districts  
-The professional function includes organizing, planning, and facilitating food service programs in K-12 schools  
-Oversees schools’ food purchasing decisions (i.e., nutrition professional, procurement officers) |

**Case Selection & Recruitment**

**Case Selection.** Data collected by the Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Tech provided information on the state’s FTS participation in 2018 (Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Tech, 2018). This data informed the selection of my entire recruitment sample along with the three localities I selected for initial data collection (Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Tech, 2018). This report provided details on 8 out of 19 localities in the
Northern Virginia Region (Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Tech, 2018). The data set was provided to me by Virginia Department of Education’s FTS Specialist (T. Grigsby, personal communication, November 8, 2019). Table 3-4 is a combination of information that was included in the Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Tech’s 2018 Farm to School Survey (Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Tech, 2018), along with 2017 U.S. Census Data (United States Census Bureau, 2017). Using self-reported amounts for total food expenditures and total local expenditures, I calculated the percentage of costs each school division allocated towards local food as compared to their overall food service budget (Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Tech, 2018).

I produced a similar table, Table 3-5, using the 2015 Farm to School Census (USDA, 2015) and 2017 U.S. Census Data (United States Census Bureau, 2017) for localities not included in Tables 3-4. Table 3-5 provides insight into local procurement for six more localities in Northern Virginia (United States Census Bureau, 2017; USDA, 2015). Blank cells signify that there was no self-reported amount for that county/city. I included fourteen out of the nineteen localities that make up the Northern Virginia region in Tables 3-3 and 3-4. I used these fourteen localities as my overall recruitment sample. Out of the fourteen localities, I selected three to study for initial data collection according to their self-reported procurement levels. Due to a lack of local procurement information, I did not include the remaining five localities in this study.

Out of these fourteen localities represented in Tables 3-3 and 3-4, seven are considered urban with a population of over 50,000 residents, and twelve of them are deemed rural with less than 50,000 residents (United States Census Bureau, 2017). The median household income of this set ranges from $129,588 in Loudoun County to $46,1400 in Page County (United States Census Bureau, 2017). The percentages for self-reported local procurement rates ranged from
100% in Frederick County to 0.8% in Loudoun County (USDA, 2015; Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Tech, 2018).

Table 3-4. Northern Virginia FTS Participation & Demographics 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Division</th>
<th>Rural or Urban</th>
<th>Total Food Expenditures</th>
<th>Total Local Food Expenditures (Including Liquid Milk)</th>
<th>Self-Reported Percentage of Total Expenditures Allocated on Local Food</th>
<th>Median Household Income (MHI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shenandoah County</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$100,000.00</td>
<td>$50,00.00</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>$53934.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winchester City</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$806,390.00</td>
<td>$200,000.00</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>$49330.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warren County</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$1,002,712.57</td>
<td>$224,539.93</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>$65,353.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairfax County</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>$25,900,000</td>
<td>$4,960,835</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>$117,515.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rappahannock County</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$174,063.86</td>
<td>$15,000.00</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>$62,541.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange County</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$709,139.58</td>
<td>$15,867.42</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>$67,196.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page County</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$600,000.00</td>
<td>$12,000.00</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>$46,140.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loudoun County</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>$8,000,000.00</td>
<td>$60,000.00</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>$129,588.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3-5. Northern Virginia FTS Participation & Demographics 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Division</th>
<th>Rural or Urban</th>
<th>Total Food Expenditures</th>
<th>Total Local Food Expenditures</th>
<th>Self Reported Percentage of Total Expenditures Allocated on Local Food</th>
<th>Median Household Income (MHI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frederick County</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>$5000</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>$71,037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manassas City</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$1,345,000</td>
<td>361,000</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>$77,551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fauquier County</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>$1,628,880</td>
<td>278,836</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>$94,775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fauquier County</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$1,409,310</td>
<td>235,000</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>$69,693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Arlington</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>$2,220,680</td>
<td>205,000</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>$112,138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison County</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$325,800</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>$52,287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falls Church City</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>$114,795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince William County</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>$15,897,200</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>$101,059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexandria City</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>$93,270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manassas Park City</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>$79,131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarke County</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>$72,129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Community Selection.** I organized the fourteen localities into three groups according to their local procurement percentage rate: high, medium, and low. The high-level procurement group includes the localities with a procurement rate of over 20%. The medium-level procurement group includes localities with procurement rates between 10-19.9%, and the lower level procurement group includes the localities with the bottom five procurement rates between...
0-9.9%. The 100% self-reported local procurement rate from Frederick County appears to be an outlier and potentially inaccurate. Despite having such a high self-reported procurement rate, data collection from Frederick County was not excluded from the data collection phase. Yet, I did exclude this county as an outlier when determining the localities for initial analysis. Table 3-6 displays these procurement groups in order of their self-reported local procurement rates.
Table 3-6. Northern Virginia FTS Procurement Level Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Division</th>
<th>Self-Reported Percentage of Total Expenditures Allocated on Local Food</th>
<th>Procurement Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frederick County</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shenandoah County</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manassas City</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winchester City</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warren County</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairfax City</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fauquier County</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culpeper County</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arlington City</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rappahannock County</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison County</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange County</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page County</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loudoun County</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(USDA, 2015; Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Tech, 2018).

To collect a diverse subset of responses, I focused on one locality from each procurement level group as a starting point for contacting interviewees. Excluding Frederick County as an outlier, the highest, median, and lowest self-reported amounts come from Shenandoah, Culpeper,
and Loudoun counties. These are the subunits I selected for the initial data collection. This subset of localities was thought-provoking for several reasons. One interesting dynamic is the range of MHIs between these localities. This subset of localities allowed me to compare responses from Loudoun County, the wealthiest county in the United States, to Shenandoah County, the county with the fourth-lowest MHI out of the fourteen represented localities in Northern Virginia. Shenandoah County also falls $8,003 below the median national MHI in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2017; United States Census Bureau, 2019b) and $18,643 below the median household income in Virginia (United States Census Bureau, 2017; United States Census Bureau, 2019b). Despite falling below the nation and state averages for MHI (United States Census Bureau, 2017; United States Census Bureau, 2019b), Shenandoah County has a greater self-reported local procurement rate than both Culpeper and Loudoun counties (USDA, 2015; Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Tech, 2018). Finally, these localities represent both rural communities (Shenandoah County & Culpeper County) and an urban community (Loudoun County) in the findings (United States Census Bureau, 2017). During the data collection process, I contacted Shenandoah, Culpeper, and Loudoun County Farm Bureau branches first when identifying potential FTS advocates. Because I utilized snowball sampling to recruit other FTS advocates, this was the only action I took to ensure these localities were the initial starting points for exploration.

**Semi-Structured Interview Participants – Advocates.** The Virginia Farm to School Resource Guide (Benson & Niewolny, 2013) provides a list of FTS Resource Organizations that I used to identify FTS advocates. Examples of listed organizations include the Virginia Farm Bureau, Virginia Department of Education, and Virginia Food Systems Council (Benson & Niewolny, 2013). My starting point for recruiting advocates was emailing the counties’
respective Virginia Farm Bureau chapter leadership to identify individuals working to support local procurement in the FTS program. If I could not reach the appropriate contact via email (Appendix D), I attempted to call them using the phone script (Appendix E). If I was unsuccessful with that approach, I called representatives at the Virginia Congress of Parents and Teachers (Virginia PTA). If I could not identify someone from either of these approaches, I then called Loudoun County’s Rural Economic Development Council. Other organizations that served as starting points for identifying advocates include Real Food for Kids and the School Nutrition Association.

**Semi-Structured Interview Participants – Producers.** I asked FTS advocates to identify local producers interested in or currently working with schools to provide food for FTS programs. I contacted the person they identified via email and then used snowball sampling to identify other producers to interview as needed. If I could not reach the appropriate contact via email (Appendix F), I attempted to call them using the phone script (Appendix G). When I identified more than one producer, I used a random number generator to determine which producer to contact. I then used snowball sampling to identify other producers to interview until I achieved data saturation.

**Online Survey Participants – SNPs.** The Virginia Department of Education (2019) provided the contact information of an SNP for each school division in Virginia, which I used to select an interviewee for the SNP unofficial actor group. The contact information included the name, phone number, email, and location of the SNP representative. A Google search for the respective localities’ SNP leads to the same information on the Virginia Department of Education’s (2019) website. I used this database as my starting point for emailing and calling at least one SNP for each county. If I could not reach the appropriate contact via email (Appendix
H), I attempted to call them using the phone script (Appendix I). In localities with multiple 
SNPs, I worked to identify and send the online survey to whoever served as a “director” over the 
nutritional program. After reaching out to the 14 counties within my case, I was only able to send 
the online survey to four SNPs.

**Research Methodology**

A semi-structured interview is a series of open-ended questions that I used in this study to 
retrieve valuable data. This type of discussion is in the middle, between structured and 
unstructured (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). All the items are flexibly worded, or the interview is a 
mix of more and less structured questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This format allowed me to 
respond to the situation at hand, to delve into the emerging worldview of the respondent, and 
explore new ideas on the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). One subsection of semi-structured 
interviews is key-informant interviews, which analysts use to gain perspective on an issue and 
potentially combined with other forms of data such as observations or secondary data such as 
documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I used this to pose adjustments, comments, and follow up 
questions as necessary. I provided the interview protocol for advocates and producers in 
Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively. The online survey for SNPs is provided in Appendix 
C. Before scheduling interviews with advocates and producers or sending the online survey to 
SNPs, I provided them all with their consent forms via email. The consent forms are included for 
FTS advocates, producers, and SNPs in Appendix J, Appendix K, and Appendix L, respectively.

This method of data collection was appropriate for a few reasons. First, this interviewing 
format allowed informants to provide in-depth responses and specific information that pertains to 
FTS policymaking. Secondly, the structural aspect called for a list of pre-identified questions to 
ensure that I addressed all research questions. Finally, this method is relatively flexible in that it
allowed for follow up questions that provide additional detail or a change in the flow of
conversation.

After transcribing and analyzing the results, I sent the interviewee’s transcript via email
to confirm that my summations truly represent their thoughts. This process is the member
checking strategy, which is also known as respondent validation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This
validity method constitutes requesting feedback from interviewees to ensure that you have
accurately represented the essence of what they said, along with minimizing your own bias and
interpretation of the findings (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126–127; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I asked
that they respond within one week to make me aware of any needed changes to the transcript. If
a participant indicated that I did not inaccurately describe their dialogue, they had an opportunity
to revise their statements. This post-interview email communication that was sent to participants
is displayed in Appendix M. SNPs were also given a transcript of their survey responses and had
the same opportunity to revise their statements.

In this project, I also used secondary data sources including the 2015 Farm to School
Census (USDA, 2015) and 2019 Farm to School Program Participation data set (Virginia
Department of Education & Virginia Tech, 2018) to confirm that localities in Northern Virginia
were participating in FTS and gain an estimate of local procurement in each community. These
sources of data helped me compare procurement levels between localities in the region (USDA,
2015; Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Tech, 2018). I also used the 2018 Virginia
Farm to School Evaluation Report (Grigsby et al., 2018) to confirm that challenges exist in FTS
and provide a preliminary overview of those opportunities for improvement.

**Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Limitations**

While writing and organizing the beginning stages of the study proposal, the World
Health Organization deemed the spread of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) as a global pandemic. During this time, health officials, along with governmental leaders, strongly encouraged American citizens to self-separate, if possible, which is referred to as “social distancing” to slow the spread of the disease. This guidance, along with “stay-at-home” orders from local and state leaders, resulted in numerous changes in how I collected data from research participants. While I still used semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data from FTS advocates and producers, those meetings occurred via telephone. All participants received electronic copies of their respective consent form and provided verbal consent prior to starting the interview.

Many schools also closed their physical buildings and moved classroom instruction to online formats to protect students and staff members from contracting the disease. This disruption in traditional operations resulted in short-term food security for children who rely on the school breakfast and lunch meals. These circumstances forced many SNPs to prioritize addressing food security needs among school-aged children while working from home and potentially limited their capacity to participate in non-essential functions. Because of these conditions, all semi-structured interviews were presented as an online survey where SNPs provided qualitative responses to questions using the Qualtrics Online Survey platform. SNPs received consent information prior to beginning the survey. Consent was implied by SNPs selecting yes in response to the question “Do you agree to participate in this study” prior to the start of the survey. If the participant agreed to terms presented within the consent form, they were directed to respond to interview questions. If the participant did not agree to the consensual terms, they were thanked for their time and could exit the webpage.
**Data Analysis**

For this project, I conducted, recorded, and transcribed all interviews. During the interviews, I took research notes on distinct insights or ideas that I believed would help me understand the study findings. After transcribing the interview, I provided participants with their respective transcripts and asked that they review the accuracy of their statements within one week of receipt. SNPs were given the same opportunity to revise the statements they made during the online survey. I did this step by compiling SNPs’ online survey responses and sending it to them via email. I stored all documentation such as transcripts, recordings, and interviewee identifiers on a password-protected, university-sponsored Google Drive. This Google Drive was only accessible to my academic advisor and me.

I was unable to ensure the anonymity of the FTS advocates and SNPs’ position because there are a limited number of these actors per county. FTS advocates and SNPs concerned about being identified were not included in the study. Because there are multiple producers in each county, I was able to maintain their anonymity. All potentially identifiable information for producers was removed or redacted from the transcriptions. All participants in this unofficial actor group were assigned a pseudonym (producer 1, producer 2, etc.) to maintain their anonymity. After completing the requirements to fulfill my masters’ degree, I permanently deleted all interview responses from computer files and records.

I worked with a second coder to identify codes and determine potential themes during the analysis process. During this process, the second coder and I independently read the transcripts twice before coding for emerging themes. We then identified codes that appeared within the responses and added a label such as a word or phrase that could fit into a larger thematic segment. We then arranged a time to compare notes, codes, and potential themes. During our
meeting, we engaged in a thematic analysis, which included discussing various similarities and differences in the interpretation of the responses. Collectively, we identified which codes fell within larger overarching themes for each research question. Then, we organized the information until eight overarching themes remained. Within qualitative research, actions such as coding, organizing themes, and interpreting the data are all a part of the data analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within this phase, I began with a set of data to transform into an account or narrative after analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After transcribing the data, I noted significant statements that come from the discussion. Along with emerging codes, pre-identified themes derived from previous inquires with experts and reviews of literature were also included. I then constructed a list of about 25-30 codes that then got reduced to eight thematic segments and finally reproduced in the form of a discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The results of this study can inform future decisions that relate to FTS activities in Virginia where applicable. Because the initial exploration revolved around specific "cases," the results and recommendations are especially applicable to localities in Northern Virginia. Therefore, it is up to the reader from other localities to decide which pieces are most useful for their area. The information can still help identify and solve challenges in similar programs. While the context of this research is in Northern Virginia, there may be information that can be useful to the state of Virginia's food systems. There are likely opportunities for unofficial actors in the state to get more involved in the FTS policymaking process.

**Data Saturation.** According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), redundancy is the criterion for sampling saturation. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) describe saturation as the point where researchers receive broadly similar responses to interviews so that no new information materializes. Because it was impossible to know when I would reach saturation (Merriam &
Tisdell, 2015), I simultaneously engaged in both data collection and analysis to recognize when the responses for FTS advocates and producers become redundant. As a benchmark, I committed to interviewing nine FTS advocates, nine producers, and three SNPs across the region for a total of twenty-one interviews. If I had determined that I didn’t reach data saturation across the three units of analysis, I would have conducted another round of interviews for the advocate and producer unofficial actor groups. Because I determined that I reached saturation after twenty-one interviews, I concluded data collection at that point.

**Trustworthiness**

According to Trochim and Donnelly (2001), the credibility of a study is only as strong as the perception of participants that the research results are accurate, actual, and believable. Because qualitative researchers’ goals should be to present results that represent viewpoints from participants, respondents alone are the only qualified parties to access how closely the data matches their perspectives (Trochim & Donnelly, 2001). The unofficial actors selected to participate were highly qualified to speak to their experiences or lack thereof in the FTS policymaking process. All FTS "advocates" were individuals connected to organizations with a legislative agenda devoted to FTS in Virginia. All selected producers were operating or desired to operate in Northern Virginia FTS. Finally, the participating SNPs all worked within the study localities’ educational district and played an integral role in guiding food purchasing decisions.

**Credibility.** The construct of credibility has a positive relationship with internal validity, which is mostly achieved through triangulation, followed by member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Patton (2015) notes that there are four different types of triangulation: “data triangulation-of data sources,” “investigator triangulation- among different evaluators,” “theory triangulation- of perspectives to the same data set” and “methodological triangulation – of
methods.” Qualitative researchers use data triangulation to gain the perspectives of different kinds of people to explain the phenomenon and validate the findings (Carter et al., 2014). Because my study draws upon responses from three unofficial actor groups from different localities in Northern Virginia, I implemented data triangulation in the research process as that is a method of gaining various perspectives of local procurement. During the interviews, I took notes on distinct quotes or insights I believed would help me interpret the data in the future. Finally, I engaged in a peer review process throughout the study. Peer review is the assessment of colleagues who review the data for validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Because I was under the guidance of a graduate thesis committee, the peer review process occurred throughout the entire research process.

**Dependability.** Part of what makes a study dependable is its repeatability, which researchers also refer to as reliability (Trochim & Donnelly, 2001). The goal of reliability is to minimize bias in such a manner that if another researcher conducted the same study, using the same methodology, they would find similar data (Yin, 2017). Because I identified my initial research localities, provided key informant interview questions, and outlined my methodology, future qualitative researchers could encounter similar results in Northern Virginia. Considering that the findings are impacted by limitations such as COVID-19 restrictions and working within an academic timeframe, future researchers could uncover additional information around this topic. I provide the interview questions and logic behind developing in the Data Collection Instrument Development section. I explained how my potential bias and perspective on FTS influenced the research in the Reflexivity Statement below. Finally, I worked with a second coder who is familiar with qualitative research to identify emerging codes and themes in the transcripts. Working with a second coder helped me incorporate another researcher’s perspective
in the data analysis process.

**Transferability.** According to Trochim and Donnelly (2001), transferability is the degree to which findings can be generalized or applied to other settings. Qualitative researchers can improve transferability by providing a detailed description of the case and acknowledging any assumptions during the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When equipped with a comprehensive description, future researchers will have the information they need to identify “shared characteristics” and applicable findings (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 32). Because this study is qualitative, the results will be most suitable for unofficial actors in the Northern Region of Virginia. Yet, it is still possible that findings will be insightful for others in other parts of the state, or country. I worked to increase transferability by providing details on the case and relevant themes.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability is often used interchangeably with the word “objectivity” within qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This concept is the degree to which peers could confirm study results (Trochim & Donnelly, 2001). Qualitative studies assume that each researcher brings their perspective to the project, which I described through my reflexivity statement (Trochim & Donnelly, 2001). Researchers can also enhance confirmability through triangulation (Trochim & Donnelly, 2001). I have acknowledged that this study depends on data triangulation because I collected information from three unofficial actor groups. I also used a voice recorder to document the advocates’ and producers’ responses verbatim, which increased confirmability. SNPs had their responses documented, verbatim via the online survey.

**Reflexivity Statement**

As a 26-year-old, African-American, female, second-year graduate student at Virginia Tech, I understand that my values and experiences influence the research process. Through this
reflexivity statement, I intend to illustrate how my background shapes my research and view of the world. By revealing my motivations, I intend to reduce my bias and amplify the voices of actors who participate in and are impacted by FTS policies and programming. In my view, the primary purpose of FTS programming is to infuse opportunities and education for healthier decision making.

Agricultural production has always been a part of my personal and professional life. I spent much of my childhood on my grandparents' tobacco farm, which gave me an interest in agricultural entrepreneurship. My experiences as an undergraduate student in agricultural education, having a professional career with the USDA, and participating in agricultural organizations such as MANRRS (Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences) helped to fuel this passion. Because of my background, I am inclined to explore ways of "re-introducing" agriculture to individuals disconnected from the production process. I believe FTS initiatives are unique approaches that do just that.

I also believe that being African American provides a unique viewpoint to my research. Throughout my entire academic career, I have sought out new ways of encouraging minority interest in agriculture. I expect to always involve myself in work that promotes minority health, nutrition, and well-being. Because FTS programs work to include more high-quality, nutritionally dense foods in the school lunch program, I see it as a reliable avenue for introducing agricultural and nutritional content to today's youth. With the use of qualitative methods, I plan to uncover challenges that inhibit quality FTS participation from improving the nutritional quality of foods that are available for all youth.
Chapter Four: Results

The purpose of this research was to understand the experiences and perspectives of advocates, producers, and SNPs in Northern Virginia as they participate in the FTS policymaking process. The results of this study will help future official, and unofficial actors understand the barriers and opportunities for unofficial actors as they participate in crafting FTS laws and initiatives. The findings also uncover unofficial actors’ recommendations on how to improve the FTS policymaking process in the future. The following themes emerged while analyzing the data collected during the semi-structured interviews and online surveys: (1) Contextual challenges of FTS and FTS policymaking, (2) The prioritization and education of FTS policymaking, (3) Relationship building/ networking, (4) Awareness and education of FTS and FTS policymaking, (5) Opportunities & successes in FTS & FTS policymaking, (6) Organization of FTS community, (7) Building connections with the agricultural community, and (8) Prioritizing the FTS policymaking process. These themes, along with their corresponding research question, are cited in Table 4-1.
Table 4-1. Research Questions and Emergent Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Emergent Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What barriers and challenges do advocates, producers, and SNPs face to participate in the FTS policymaking process?</td>
<td>- Contextual challenges of FTS and FTS policymaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The prioritization and education of FTS policymaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Relationship building/ networking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What opportunities and successes have advocates, producers, and SNPs identified or experienced while participating in the FTS policymaking process?</td>
<td>- Awareness and education of FTS and FTS policymaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Opportunities &amp; successes in FTS &amp; FTS policymaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What recommendations do advocates, producers, and SNPs have for strengthening the FTS policymaking process?</td>
<td>- Organization of FTS community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Building connections with the agricultural community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Prioritizing the FTS policymaking process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In total, sixteen people agreed to participate in this research study (Table 4.2). Out of the sixteen participants, five of them qualified to participate as both advocates and producers. These individuals were involved with an advocacy organization such as Farm Bureau and had history in facilitating FTS activities in their community. These individuals are labeled as an “Advocate-Producer.” Participants who are labeled as advocates qualified based upon their experience with Farm Bureau, Virginia PTA, Loudoun County’s Rural Economic Development Council, and other advocacy organizations. Most participants who qualified as producers worked to facilitate school visits and agricultural education on their farm operation. Out of nine individuals who qualified as a producer or Advocate-Producer, only two of them engaged in local procurement. SNPs were pre-identified as eligible due to their position in the school system, which involved facilitating food service programs for K-12 schools. Excluding the five “Advocate-Producers,”
four participants qualified solely as advocates, four participants qualified solely as producers, and three participants qualified solely as SNPs. Participants who qualified as an advocate, producer, or “Advocate-Producer” were interviewed via telephone while SNPs provided their responses via an online survey.

Table 4-2. Research Participants’ Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Participants’ Descriptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 Advocates (Farm Bureau, Virginia PTA, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Producers (Facilitated Agritourism and Local Procurement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 “Advocate –Producers” (Advocate and Producer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 SNPs (Page, Madison, and Fredrick Counties)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total: 16 Research Participants</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Question 1:** What barriers and challenges do advocates, producers, and SNPs face to participate in the FTS policymaking process?

**Research Question 1 Themes:** Contextual challenges of FTS and FTS policymaking, The prioritization and education of FTS policymaking, and Relationship building/ networking.

To answer Research Question 1, “What barriers and challenges do advocates, producers, and SNPs face to participate in the FTS policymaking process?”, participants were asked to discuss experiences, if any, that prevented them from participating in the FTS policymaking process. The following themes emerged while answering Research Question 1: (1) Contextual challenges of FTS and FTS policymaking, (2) The prioritization and education of FTS policymaking, and (3) Relationship building/ networking. If participants had experiences in FTS policymaking, they were able to address factors that may potentially limit their effectiveness
during that process and discuss how they navigated through those challenging times. Findings uncovered that some participants had little to no participation in the FTS policymaking process and highlighted what prevented them from participating. Participants who had relevant experience were able to uncover challenges in FTS policymaking and how they were able to navigate through barriers.

**Theme: Contextual challenges of FTS and FTS policymaking**

Four subthemes emerged within the Contextual challenges of FTS and FTS policymaking theme: (1) Various interpretations of FTS, (2) Understanding and accommodating school needs and standards for FTS, (3) Schools’ budget constraints for FTS and (4) Contextual challenges in FTS policymaking. While some of the noted challenges are associated with FTS policymaking, most are related to FTS. This section reveals the elements of FTS that unofficial actors find challenging and potentially discourage their participation in the policymaking process. Participants also provide important context for understanding limitations to FTS advocacy.

**Various interpretations of FTS.** While answering the interview questions, some respondents revealed their understanding of FTS or cited the broad nature of the topic. When I asked Advocate-Producer Helen to describe her participation in FTS, she acknowledged various sectors of FTS and identified the areas where she does and does not have experiences. Her explanation of her FTS participation was described as: “…bringing students on the farm, supporting, financial support of the Future Farmers of America Association, that we have, but the school farm to school production, nothing.” One participant referenced the broad nature of FTS while providing their recommendations on how to improve the policymaking process. For example, Producer 2 expressed, “You say farm to school…it’s such a broad topic, and whether it's agritourism, whether it's people that are just producing, you know, food for a cafeteria…”
While conducting the semi-structured interviews, I did not provide clarification on my interpretation of FTS unless asked. The broad nature of FTS, and therefore, FTS policymaking, reveals that participants likely had varying definitions and explanations of what constitutes FTS. While citing challenges in the FTS policymaking process, Brian mentioned the need for a commonly agreed-upon definition of FTS in the agriculture community:

I think two is getting all of us within the agriculture industry, kind of on the same page in terms of what specifically that farm to school movement looks like and what involvement each of us has in terms of making things happen…

**Understanding and accommodating school needs and standards for FTS.** During the semi-structured interviews, it appeared that many participants had responses that spoke to the challenges in the FTS system versus FTS policymaking. While initially, I interpreted these responses as a slight diversion or misunderstanding of the question, these perceived barriers in the FTS system could be characteristics that prevent people from participating in the policymaking process. I decided to interpret the following responses as descriptions of the FTS system that make the FTS policymaking process challenging. If participants perceived these cited issues as “unchangeable,” it is possible these characteristics prevent them from participating in the policymaking process. One example of a challenge from the FTS system came from Producer 1, who desired a smoother process for supplying local foods:

It seems that if there are more sort of artisanal producers that might not have the types of equipment...to make more of like the equipment and distribution and packaging, and you know, however, they want that to be easier...to make more resources available to producers who are engaging...would be nice, you know...

Producer 4 cited that small-scale producers might experience difficulty in meeting high
quantities of food:

….I think that there's just a lot of opportunity for discussion yet on that...how a school
district...they want to be able to get, you know, a certain amount and that makes it easy
and seamless for their delivery in their school system. And a lot of times, producers can't
produce that amount depending on the size of the producer.

Another heavily cited challenge revolved around tailoring student visits to a farm to the school
division’s standards of learning (SOL) and articulating the educational value of FTS. Dana
noted:

Then there are issues that we've run into with transportation and time away from school,
and so you have to be a little more creative sometimes, not creative, but a little more
direct actually in relating how a farm experience or a direct farm experience can relate to
standards of learning for different grade levels.

While the cited concerns ranged from meeting schools’ educational standards to addressing high
demand from a small-scale production, the challenging nature of FTS may prevent unofficial
actors from participating in the FTS policymaking process.

**Schools’ budget constraints for FTS.** When asked about the barriers to participating in
FTS policymaking, or about conditions that may limit their effectiveness in that process, a few
respondents referred to school budgetary restraints and the premium prices for local foods. SNP
Virginia cited “my local procurement policy purchasing thresholds” as a factor that limited her
effectiveness in FTS policymaking. Like the challenges mentioned above, I considered many
references to budget constraints and policy as factors that make participating in the FTS system
difficult. My interpretation extends so that factors that make FTS complex make participating in
the policymaking process difficult too. Advocate Justin notes the following about the costly
nature of local food and participating in FTS:

Well, the biggest limit to it is the cost. You and I spoke once before the, you know, the people producing these products, whatever they may be, demand a premium and the school system demands to pay the least they can pay, so, it’s hard to get those two people together and to meet in the middle to provide a locally sourced product for as cheap as you can get something from a big box store, or the likes, you know, a big food distributor.

Advocate-Producer Jacob echoes a similar concern but from a producer’s perspective:

That would be the biggest challenge that I would see from a producer standpoint is, you know, you need to produce at a profitable level, and schools that they're not getting a return on their investment for purchasing more expensive local food, then it's just not gonna work.

While these barriers seem to apply directly to participating in the FTS system, experiencing limitations with purchasing local food or trouble returning a profit are factors that could discourage unofficial actors from seeking change in a complex system. Also, participants could have been unaware of policies or initiatives that could address some of their budgetary challenges, such as a governmental subsidy or a geographical preference initiative.

**Contextual challenges in FTS policymaking.** While some participants seemed to cite challenges that they experience while participating in the FTS system, others provided responses that spoke more directly to the barriers in the FTS policymaking process. Advocate Brian noted that consistently facilitating the policymaking process was a challenging aspect:

One is that, you know, consistently working with volunteers and to get volunteers on the
same page and to really influence coordinated action amongst folks that you know, are very busy, that farm on their own, that have a lot going on in their personal lives. It's sometimes difficult to really influence them into action in a coordinated manner.

One unique perspective came from Advocate Jenna, who cited COVID-19 restrictions as a factor that limited her effectiveness in policymaking:

Unfortunately, I think that what's limited us at the moment is the huge shift in a COVID-19 focus. We had been on a path to put our coalition together and do some really good work, and we set that to the side as we came into the COVID-19 space.

Another perspective comes from Producer 2, who believed that being a small-scale producer might limit their influence in the policymaking process:

I would say some scale just being, well, this is more on our side of things too, but I think it's difficult to have the labor we need sometimes to handle a big group or just get the same…I guess you could call it respect that some of maybe a larger operation might get, cause we're kind of small like I said. So yeah, probably just kind of getting our foot in the door. Being a small guy’s a little bit difficult sometimes.

Advocate-Producer Jay, who had policymaking experience relating to both agricultural education and local procurement, cited that the agricultural community was more receptive of some sectors of FTS than others:

It's a whole lot easier, I think, to market and promote and be successful with the ag education side of things than maybe it is for the local procurement of product in my experiences. Some of the industries like the apple industry and things that are a larger scale where they can have some industry-wide assistance, and you've got lobbyists and folks working on behalf of the, say fruit growers or associations, and those types of
things are easier to get into some of the school systems just because they're already scaled up to be able to handle it.

The challenges cited above were just a few examples of circumstances that participants felt limited their effectiveness and participation in the FTS policymaking process. These concerns, combined with the perceived challenges in the FTS system, may deter current and future unofficial actors from pursuing change in the policymaking process.

Theme: The prioritization and education of FTS policymaking

Two subthemes emerged within the Prioritizing FTS policymaking and lack of agricultural literacy and appreciation theme: (1) Prioritizing FTS policymaking and (2) Lack of agricultural literacy and appreciation. The following sections revealed the importance of education in the FTS policymaking process. The informal education between policymaking actors tied heavily with the noted need for increased agricultural literacy among official actors. Within this section, participants also acknowledged their limitations of time to educate themselves and official actors on FTS policymaking.

Prioritizing FTS policymaking. Some participants noted that they had little to no experience or need to participate in FTS policymaking and therefore were unable to cite barriers and challenges during the process. When asked about his participation in the policymaking process, Producer 3 said, “This is our first time being involved in the discussion of farm to school.” While Producer 3 cited the lack of opportunities to participate, Producer 4 noted, “…from our perspective, I don't know that there was really much of a need for working on policy at the local level because we had incredible support in the school system.” In these instances, it’s easy to understand why someone may not prioritize the policymaking process due to a lack of exposure or need to participate. Other perspectives around prioritizing FTS
policymaking revolved around the investing effort to learn about the opportunities to engage in the process. One example of this perspective is provided by Producer 3, who said:

Well, yeah, I guess it's not so much that they [opportunities] have not been presented, and there is no opportunity; they very well could be that I haven't taken advantage of set opportunities just because I might've not had the opportunity to be informed about them. Advocate-Producer Matt provides a similar response: “I would say, you know, you do kind of have to learn where the opportunities to be involved in that are.” Therefore, if someone is not willing or does not have the capacity to be educated on opportunities in the policymaking, that limitation can be a barrier to participation.

Other participants cited a lack of time or the time-intensive nature of policymaking as a reason why they were unable to get involved. When asked about barriers and challenges to participating in FTS policymaking, two SNPs, Virginia and Patty, cited a lack of time as a reason why they were unable to get involved. As Producer 4 said, “I think it's always time, you know, and that's a...you know, an issue each one of us has. We only have so much time, and where are we going to put our priorities?” Two participants noted two aspects of advocacy that they found to be especially time-intensive - organization and education. Advocate Denise noted the challenge in organizing and identifying fellow advocates:

I would say limiting effectiveness in this...in this situation is really about getting the right people in the room at the right time to have the hard discussions. It took almost a year to pull together a subcommittee for the workforce, which means that it also took a year to bring together a subcommittee that could dive into what farm to school has to offer and where the policies need to be implemented to make it more feasible for local producers to get their products into schools.
Advocate-Producer Jay considered the educational aspect of FTS policymaking as a time-consuming process:

This [advocacy] requires a significant investment of time on the advocate's part and educating the administration and folks within the school systems or local and state-level policymakers, and seeing like opportunity and being able to explain to them what opportunities exist outside of what has traditionally always been done.

Respondents had varying experiences in prioritizing FTS policymaking. While some expressed that they had no prior experiences in FTS policymaking, others noted challenges in identifying where they could be involved or mentioned that the process was time-intensive, especially during times that involved organizing and educating official actors.

**Lack of agricultural literacy and appreciation.** Some participants viewed a lack of agricultural literacy and appreciation for the agricultural industry as something that limited their ability to be effective in the policymaking process. Advocate-Producer Helen expressed concern around misconceptions about the agricultural community:

…I saw it in a recent publication that I was kind of appalled. It said you don't need a lot of knowledge; you just need to work hard. There is some knowledge. There's some common sense. It may not be you're going to sit down, and you're going to write a computer program, that type of knowledge, but it's application of so many things, putting them together and that's not necessarily appreciated by our culture.

Something especially noteworthy about Helen’s desire for agricultural literacy was that she played a role in being a part of the policymaking solution. One way in which she navigated through these challenges was through education. Helen notes, “We, [Farm Bureau Board], move more towards the educating of legislators, both state and national, to give them the expert
opinion on different initiatives that are coming forth.” This desire for appreciating the agricultural community is reflected in Advocate Jenna’s perspective, who had this to say when asked about recommendations on how to strengthen the policymaking process:

I think, also, just a greater recognition and support of the important role that agriculture plays in our local communities…also adds an additional benefit to the conversation is just that holistic awareness of the important role that agriculture plays in the state of Virginia.

While the majority of participants call for agricultural literacy within their recommendations, a perceived lack of education or appreciation for agriculture may likely discourage participation in the policymaking process. As reflected in the “Prioritizing FTS Policymaking” section, the educational aspect of policymaking can be especially time-intensive. It is possible that participants did not have the time to invest in educating various actors in the policymaking process.

**Theme: Relationship building and networking**

The final theme that emerged concerning Research Question 1 revolved around how participants navigated through these barriers and challenges in the past. The most prevalent method of working through challenges involved building relationships with fellow advocates and allies. Advocate Brian expressed how partnering with the Virginia Parent Teacher Association (PTA) organization played a part in Farm Bureau’s advocacy:

Yeah. I think the big thing for me is just making connections and growing it. Network within that, specifically, as kind of an example, I guess...we've worked on several programs in the Loudoun County area to get more farm to school programs in the schools and then also to increase educational programming across the County. It's been a major challenge in that, you know, the audience that we're, we're talking to doesn't necessarily
come from a production background or an agricultural background, or really have, you
know, a great understanding of what agriculture is, but we found some success in one,
drawing upon resources through Farm Bureau and other state organizations, having the
local support of groups like PTA and some other local coalitions.

Advocate Jenna, who is the Vice President of Advocacy for Virginia PTA, echoed a similar
response when asked about navigating through challenges: “we will continue to bring together
interested parties and to build a coalition of support from across multiple impacted stakeholders.”
Further, Advocate Jenna goes on to describe Virginia PTA’s desire to develop a working
relationship with outreach programs such as Virginia Cooperative Extension:
….we've reached out to Virginia Tech Extension services and have been looking at
putting together an Agriculture Education Coalition so that we can have a more holistic
corversation across all of the different interested parties, from school nutrition services to
their Virginia Tech Extension agents, to our agriculture education teachers, so that we
can have a holistic conversation about ways that we can really work together to continue
to drive some important legislative change.

Advocate Denise also noted the benefits of collaborating with Virginia PTA:

Working with the local PTA and the advocacy through the PTA at the state level brought
a lot of our local concerns to light that were also statewide concerns, and having the
support of a parent teacher organization at the state level has been great.

It is important to note that allyship did not always come through networking between
organizations but between individuals. When asked how she navigated through barriers and
challenges in the past, Advocate-Producer Helen expressed, “So, it is trying to find the person,
i.e., the principal, that has an interest. I found a librarian in the county school system that is an
advocate, and I go through her…” Therefore, we see evidence of networking and relationship building occurring via an organization and one on one basis.

**Research Question 2:** What opportunities and successes have advocates, producers, and SNPs identified or experienced while participating in the FTS policymaking process?

**Research Question 2 Themes:** Awareness and education of FTS and FTS policymaking, Opportunities & successes in FTS & FTS policymaking

Research Question 2 asks, “What opportunities and successes have advocates, producers, and SNPs identified or experienced while participating in the FTS policymaking process?” Two themes emerged while answering this research question: (1) Awareness and education of FTS and FTS policymaking and (2) Opportunities and success in FTS & FTS Policymaking. During this series of questions. I asked participants to describe and recall experiences where there were able to provide input on a legislative agenda or speak with a legislator about FTS. Furthermore, I asked them to identify how the impact of their work impacted their local schools and communities.

**Theme: Awareness and education of FTS and FTS policymaking**

Three subthemes emerged within the Awareness and education of FTS, and FTS policymaking theme: (1) Increased awareness of the FTS agenda, (2) Opportunities to educate, and (3) Opportunities to take a position. Within this set of responses, unofficial actors discussed the rewarding aspects of participating in the FTS policymaking process. These experiences often included opportunities to increase awareness of FTS, educate, or take a stance on a political issue. Within these sections, unofficial actors reflect on the “small, incremental” wins that are made while advocating for larger legislative outcomes.

**Increased awareness of the FTS agenda.** One of the most prominent effects of FTS
advocacy was an increase of FTS awareness among official actors such as legislators. When asked to describe the impact her advocacy had affected her community, Advocate Denise said:

First off, again, I go back to awareness. We have now created a platform for conversation. I think during our most recent school board elections because of our push for farm to school, it changed the dialogue for the candidates that were running for office in our rural areas.

Along with school board candidates, including FTS initiatives into their talking points, Advocate Denise also cites how working with Virginia PTA brought local concerns around FTS, to light in the Relationship building/ networking section. Advocate Jenna recalled an experience where the primary objective was to pass a budget amendment to support food procurement specialists in Virginia. While the budget amendment did not pass through the Virginia General Assembly, the experience did increase awareness around the complexities of FTS:

Well, at this time, it's hard, this particular, like I said, we had the budget amendment that went in, it didn't make it through this time. We did raise a tremendous amount of awareness. There was a lot of questions asked when we came in to meet with our legislators on these particular issues. They recognize that it creates a great economic circle where the foods that we are bringing into our school cafeteria helped to support our local economy. The school cafeteria is our, the largest restaurant in most counties and so it provides a great economic cycle as well. So, we did receive positive support in our conversations with all of the legislators, but we haven't seen any new legislation or policy passed yet.

Opportunities to educate. While some participants cited FTS policymaking as an opportunity to increase awareness of FTS, others viewed these experiences as opportunities to
educate and advocate for a specific initiative with their representatives. Advocate-Producer Matt viewed his participation in Virginia Farm Bureau as an opportunity to educate official actors about the agricultural community:

So working through a group like Virginia Farm Bureau...if a legislator wants to know more about any particular ag industry, they reach out to Farm Bureau, Farm Bureau can connect them to someone to help them learn directly from the source....how the ag community is affected.…

As noted earlier in the “Lack of Agricultural Literacy and Appreciation” section, Advocate-Producer Helen expressed a similar role: “Advocating is more on the legislative side is really that education and keeping in touch with and giving feedback to legislators throughout the year, not just at the legislative period of time.” Part of these advocates’ role in the policymaking process revolved around serving as subject matter experts for official actors who are interested in learning more about agriculture.

**Opportunities to take a position.** Along with investing time to educate legislators, some participants noted their experiences and successes while taking a position on specific issues and initiatives in FTS. Advocate Jenna recalled this experience of advocacy for agricultural education and school gardening:

Well, when we went to the General Assembly this past year, every year, the Virginia PTA has a Capitol Day, and we take a packet of information on a wide range of issues that we hope to see progress made to support our students and included in our package this year, we met with over a hundred legislators at the state level, and then we went to do Hill Day with National PTA. And again, we had a package that reached every elected member, House of Representatives and Senate member, sharing our concerns related to
farm to school. And in that packet, we asked for, the standards of quality to include school nutrition integration specialists. So, what I had just mentioned, we asked that the guidelines for curriculum, guidelines be expanded to incorporate agriculture education and hands-on experience in school gardens. We had asked for there to be an Agriculture and Forestry Representative on the Advisory Committee for Career and Technical Education. And then we had also supported, amending facility standards to provide spaces for school gardens because that opportunity to have hands-on education with school gardens, is a great dovetail into bringing those locally grown foods into the cafeteria.

Advocate-Producer Matt described his experience in taking a position with fellow advocates in the dairy industry:

I do think legislators have heard from dairy and ag organizations, but the biggest one would be allowing whole milk in schools. So, we have kind of expressed that concern that it should be allowed, that, you know, latest dietary guidelines show whole milk is good for kids, and they certainly like to drink it more.

When asked to describe opportunities to voice concerns around FTS to legislators, Advocate Dana relayed his experience in advocating for a state-funded curriculum specialist position for agricultural education:

You know, we have not only worked with the department but also with legislators on the same piece just sharing the importance of what that position at DOE [Department of Education] does and the need for that to be filled….

Among the participants of this study, the FTS policymaking process was viewed as an avenue for increasing awareness of FTS among official actors, educating their legislators, and advocating
for specific legislative outcomes.

**Theme: Opportunities & successes in FTS & FTS policymaking**

Three subthemes emerged within the Opportunities & successes in FTS & FTS policymaking theme: (1) FTS policymaking as opportunity to collaborate, (2) Opportunities to connect with legislators, and (3) Enacting change in FTS without policymaking. This theme reveals unofficial actors’ desire to connect with official actors and allies with mutual goals. As previously reflected in the Relationship building/networking theme, building partnerships and connections were vital activities for unofficial actors during the various stages of advocacy. Finally, participants documented how they enacted change outside of the legislative process.

**FTS policymaking as an opportunity to collaborate.** As described in the Relationship building/networking section, working with allies was a method that participants used to navigate through barriers and challenges in the policymaking process. Unofficial actors also viewed these times as an opportunity to collaborate with other organizations in which they shared mutual interests. When asked about opportunities and success while crafting a legislative agenda, Advocate Brian said:

> We were able to create some resolutions for the Virginia PTA around farm to school programs and local procurement of foods and increases in educational programming for agriculture within the school system. So, I think that's a huge success in getting another group on board.

Advocate Denise viewed the collaborative policymaking process similarly:

> We've also found room to collaborate with, for example, bringing together, the PTA and the state Farm Bureau to align and say these are our mutual interests. So that's been very impactful. It's created a relationship that hopefully, yearly, we'll continue to support farm
to school.

When I interpreted these responses, I concluded that participants view success in a way that isn’t always tied to a specific legislative outcome. Instead, success to unofficial actors can include building a new relationship or identifying an ally in the FTS policymaking process.

**Opportunities to connect with legislators.** Often, advocates and producers found opportunities to express their concerns around FTS either by connecting through their advocacy group or by inviting the legislator to their farm. Advocate Brian recounted the following experience that allowed for thoughtful dialogue between official and unofficial actors:

> So, I think of an example recently when we had an urban legislator meeting in which they were probably about ten legislators from Northern Virginia that came out simply to have lunch, to spend time with us and listen. So those conversations were extremely valuable, and first, building a relationship that, you know, later on, will hopefully lead to some more honest, transparent conversation between us.

Producer 4 cited an experience where they had direct access to a legislator; however, did not feel the need to express any concerns about FTS due to their positive experiences:

> You know, we've had several legislators visit the farm, you know, from time to time. I'd say we had [redacted], who's our Representative. She was here last fall. I mean, we've definitely had...so, you know, we've definitely had folks out here, but I don't think that's ever been, again, I know it's not been like a topic for us [FTS] because we've had that incredible support.

In the “Contextual challenges in FTS policymaking” section, Advocate Jenna cited COVID-19 restrictions as factors that limited her effectiveness in policymaking. Shortly afterward, she described how current events also presented an opportunity to talk about food safety and
I do believe that, as we're seeing the impacts of COVID-19, there's a huge opportunity to talk about food security and the important role that our local economies can play in food security and ensuring that students have access to healthy, nutritious foods that are not just healthy and nutritious, but also locally grown and can support our local farmers during this economic hard times.

**Enacting change in FTS without policymaking.** While some participants looked to their legislators and the policymaking process for change in the FTS system, others took a more direct approach to enact change. One example of advocacy outside of the policymaking process is explained by Advocate-Producer Jay, who said:

At the local level, you know, certainly had multiple schools get grants through the Ag in the Classroom Foundation to implement various ag education at the local level, you know, we put on teacher workshops on a yearly basis at the local level and in general, have 25 to 50 teachers a year participate in those ag education workshops, so they learn to teach across the curriculum…

Like Jay, Helen also expounded upon how her Farm Bureau Board worked to support FTS that didn’t involve policymaking: “But what we do is, as a Farm Bureau Board, we do support financially. We give money. I give $20,000 a year to the local FFA program to encourage that [agricultural education].” Therefore, it is necessary to note that advocates did not always look to legislative change for improving the FTS system and agreed to support directly through donations or free workshops to educators.

**Research Question 3:** What recommendations do advocates, producers, and SNPs have for strengthening the FTS policymaking process?
Research Question 3 Themes: Organization of FTS community, Building connections with the agricultural community, and Prioritizing the FTS policymaking process

Finally, Research question 3 asked, “what recommendations do advocates, producers, and SNPs have for strengthening the FTS policymaking process?” Three themes emerged among the responses for Research Question 3: (1) Organization of FTS community, (2) Building connections with the agricultural community, and (3) Prioritizing political engagement. Participants were asked to formulate recommendations to strengthen the FTS policymaking process. While some recommendations were applicable to fellow unofficial actors, others were more relevant for official actors.

Theme: Organization of FTS community

While the reasons behind the suggestion varied, many participants recommended and called for stronger organization among the FTS community. One potential motivation behind organizing comes from Advocate-Producer Helen, who suggests, “….once there is someone that finds a good pathway, share it. So that we all don't have to reinvent the wheel.” Advocate Jenna viewed organization as an opportunity to share experiences among the FTS actors and said, “I do think that there's an opportunity for like I said, for coming together as a group to share successes, opportunities, and challenges, and by doing that, it can build some additional support.” Producer 2 believed that organization was needed to provide a consistent legislative message and position: “I think it's important that we're all on the same page. That maybe there's a group, almost like a board per se, that could represent us because I think it's so difficult to [advocate alone], you know?” Advocate-Producer Jacob found value in organizing specifically for the advancement of FTS:

I would say ensuring that there's partnering organizations that that's their primary focus,
you know, I know there's organizations that I'm a part of that dabble in that, but maybe there could be a need for specific organizations to focus on that specific topic [FTS].

Other participants, such as Advocate Brian and Advocate-Producer Matt, discussed how organizing with a larger advocacy body could increase the effectiveness in the FTS policymaking process. Advocate Brian detailed the importance of joining an organization that works to create legislative change and identifying other actors within similar concerns:

Yeah, so I think, a couple of things, one is get involved with some sort of advocacy group. So obviously for me, Farm Bureau has been a huge tool in connecting me with folks to advocate with and to advocate for. So I think, you know, having the backing, having the support, having a name like Farm Bureau, or, you know, any other agriculture group attached to your message or something else, that's extremely important. And then two is to find local people that are either having the same issue or that are understanding the same vision as you because a lot of times, you know, when we go out something alone, it's difficult to accomplish, but if we have one kind of support of an organization's name and that too, you know, the backing of, of like-minded folks, it's a lot easier.

Advocate-Producer Matt described how joining an advocacy group will increase the likelihood of unofficial actors’ voices being heard by official actors:

...the reason I said twofold is you can get more power out of your voice if you join up with an organization. So, from the ag side, you know, like Virginia Farm Bureau or working with the Agribusiness Council, because those two organizations in Virginia particularly have an established reputation. So that will kind of get them...not their only ones heard, but it'll get your opinions heard by more legislators or probably in a more effective manner.
The cited benefits of political organization in the FTS community include having the opportunity for representation, sharing experiences, and having the backing of an established organization with a reputation in the policymaking community.

**Theme: Building connections with the agricultural community**

Two subthemes emerged within the Building connections with the agricultural community theme: (1) Community & agricultural engagement and (2) Agricultural literacy & FTS appreciation among official actors. These responses reveal that unofficial find value in genuine connections that are built upon long-standing engagement in the agricultural community, especially with producers. Many participants discussed the value of seeing a farm operation firsthand and expressed a willingness to educate their legislators on agricultural topics. This set of recommendations is related in that engaging with the agricultural community likely leads to more agricultural literate and appreciative official actors.

**Community & agricultural engagement.** Another theme among the set of recommendations was a call to legislators to increase their engagement with the agricultural community. Advocate-Producer Helen believed that this engagement could occur with legislators initiating conversation with unofficial actors and said, “talk to the people. Don't always have them come to you or asking to get on your agenda when you're too busy to really talk…” Advocate-Producer Jay described the importance of connecting with the FTS community to construct more relevant and appliable policies:

You know, with a problem that the legislators need to be cognizant of is they need to have a great understanding of the production within their communities or within their region or their state and they need to make sure that they've got contacts to the appropriate folks within the ag community to get a full understanding of that production
because you can plan an initiative to say have all strawberries in Fairfax County schools, but there's not enough strawberries grown in the state of Virginia probably to supply all the strawberries needed in Fairfax County public schools…

Like Producer 4 indicated in the “Opportunities to Connect with Legislators” section, Brian explained how farm and school visits could be used as potential outlets for producers to connect with official actors:

I know in Farm Bureau and some other ag groups, a lot of producers have found, or has developed some really positive relationships with legislators by simply inviting them to their farm and having them come out and tour the farm and see their operation and it’s the same thing with, with food to school programs in terms of being able to visit local schools and seeing how producers are engaged with their local school systems, and then also, being able to reach out and see other examples of places where things are working.

Advocate Dana explained how important it was that legislators connect with the agricultural community by making farm visits and taking the time to see the effect of FTS, firsthand:

So, I think a lot on the same vein, just you know, as agriculture is such a huge part of the industry in Virginia and the private industry in Virginia, you know, if they, if they've not had a chance to see it, you know, that that's a huge connection point, to come out and see it and understand it and, and recognize the importance of what's happening. And then also, you know, that hopefully will open some doors to how do we, how do we connect on smaller scales even, as well, if it's trying to find support for getting locally sourced food into school systems, if it's trying to find support for larger-scale programs that would bring students to farms or bring farms to students, you know, I think all those are important and seeing it firsthand, I think it makes a huge difference.
Agricultural literacy & FTS appreciation among official actors. Many participants believed that official actors lacked literacy and appreciation for agriculture, which potentially limited their effectiveness in FTS policymaking. Producer 2 called for more agricultural literacy among official actors:

I think a lot of legislators struggle to even understand farm life that much. So, I think I would probably recommend that if they're not, you know, not to pretend like, you know, what really happens on a farm, to actually get out there. Be a little hands-on. See where the food's coming from.

When asked about how legislators could improve the FTS policymaking process, Advocate Justin encouraged official actors to educate themselves on FTS:

Well, I think I would encourage them to, to see what it's all about and to learn about the process as to how it works and where the food actually comes from and who it helps when you pay a little more for it and if the dollars stay right in your community, you're not sending some national chain and, you know, ten states away from where you live, and it might help members of your state more. So, it might be worth funding it a little bit more for those things.

Advocate Jenna expressed a desire for “greater recognition and support of the important role that agriculture plays in our local communities.” Producer 3 explained the value of younger generations’ connection and appreciation to agriculture:

I believe in the importance of posting opportunities for agritourism or agritainment or farm to school in order to teach the younger generations about agriculture and not only knowing where your food comes from and eating healthier but also just learning a sense of supporting your local agricultural community and understanding that there's a
difference in food that comes from the opposite side of the world compared to seeking out opportunities to appreciate the individuals that are producing food in their own communities.

If speaking with an official actor on FTS, Advocate-Producer Jacob expressed that he would advocate that FTS was worth the financial investment:

…just emphasizing the importance of farm to school and how it can help communities and I know that a lot of, I guess, a lot of funding is, is provided to the schools to purchase food and sometimes local food is more expensive and so there has to be some sort of incentive either coming from policy or need to be driven by the community, or maybe a local philanthropist could donate money to help subsidize that additional cost.

While some participants called for connection through more direct means such as official actors making farm visits, others desired more initiative on the legislator’s side. These recommendations revolved around official actors taking the time to educate themselves on agriculture and FTS in order to make more informed decisions.

**Theme: Prioritizing the FTS policymaking process**

Two subthemes emerged within the Prioritizing the FTS policymaking process theme: (1) Prioritizing political engagement and (2) Prioritizing the financial backing of FTS. To enact sustainable legislative change in FTS, both official and unofficial actors will need to prioritize the FTS policymaking process. While some unofficial actors believed that this prioritization began with educating themselves, others called on official actors to make room in their platform for FTS. Another set of participants believed that addressing fiscal challenges was vital to improving the policymaking process in the future.

**Prioritizing political engagement.** The final theme within the series for
recommendations was about the prioritization of political engagement and the financial backing of FTS in the agricultural community. As reflected in the prioritization and education of FTS policymaking section, unofficial actors consider the policymaking process to be time-intensive. Many participants called for education amongst themselves to prioritize changes within FTS policymaking. Advocate-Producer Jacob recommended that unofficial actors educate themselves on the opportunities in the policymaking process:

I mean, I would say that the biggest thing is just knowing what policy is currently out there and you know, what changes needed or not needed, and again, I think you, you can't develop a process for changing policy if you don't know exactly what you're changing. So that would be the number one thing to fully understand.

Advocate-Producer Matt recommended a more direct approach to political engagement by saying, “…just learn how to contact your representatives. I mean, it's something that we all need to be aware of how to do. Technology has allowed us to have a lot more access to them.”

Advocate Jenna’s recommendation for political engagement called for more FTS representation among state-level actors:

I think it's critical that the Virginia Board of Education have an Agriculture and Forestry representative on the Advisory Committee for Career & Technical Education and look at opportunities to align the curriculum guidelines for the standards of learning so that there is a focus on farm to school and agriculture education.

Prioritizing political engagement was a common recommendation among participants; however, this participation looked different depending on their experiences in the policymaking process.

**Prioritizing the financial backing of FTS.** Other participants communicated the importance of having the financial backing to support FTS and examining the economic
backdrop of FTS. While no specific actors are specified within the excerpts below, I assumed that this set of recommendations applied to both official and unofficial actors in the policymaking process. Advocate-Producer Jay had expressed a need to explore the financial complexities of FTS:

Well, folks need to be cognizant of the economic, especially, or less so on the ag education side, but, but even still to a point there, but on the, especially getting local food into schools, they have to be cognizant of the economics of the situation. You know, the school systems have a budget that they have to operate under for nutrition programs, and they need to be able to get your product at a competitive price in order to work, or there has to be some grant funding or something to make up the difference.

Advocate Jenna provided twofold reasoning for examining the financial foundation of FTS:

I also think it's really critical that we look at funding. The school nutrition, integration, and procurement specialists for each region, so that we can support local economic activity and increase the quality of locally sourced food served in school cafeterias.

This set of recommendations was especially applicable for addressing the school budget constraints that unofficial actors viewed as a barrier to participating in the FTS policymaking process. Future actors will need to balance these concerns with producers’ need to return a profit to ensure long term success in the FTS system.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this research was to understand the experiences and perspectives of advocates, producers, and SNPs in Northern Virginia as they participate in the FTS policymaking process. The results revealed what unofficial actors in the FTS policymaking perceive as obstacles and opportunities. Participants also explained how they navigated through challenging experiences in the past. The findings also uncovered unofficial actors’ recommendations for improving the FTS policymaking process in the future. The findings will help future policymaking actors address challenges during the policymaking process actors by examining unofficial actors’ experiences and suggestions. The SHM was the theoretical framework, which served as the basis for asking the research questions and exploring unofficial actors’ experiences in policymaking.

The findings uncover that unofficial actors perceive contextual challenges of FTS such as prioritization, and limitations like lack of time as barriers that limit their effectiveness in the FTS policymaking process. Most participants cited some form of collaboration or relationship building as a method for overcoming obstacles in this process. The findings also reveal what unofficial actors consider to be opportunities and successes while constructing FTS policies. Unofficial actors described these experiences as opportunities to collaborate, increase awareness of FTS, educate, take a position, and connect with other policymaking actors. Participants also expressed that their successes did not necessarily depend on a specific legislative outcome. Instead, participants defined success by incremental wins, such as identifying a new ally in the policymaking process. Also, the results reveal what changes unofficial actors would like to see in the policymaking process. These suggestions included calls for organizing specifically around
FTS, building connections with the agricultural community, and lastly, prioritizing the FTS legislative agenda.

**Discussion of Findings**

**Barriers and Challenges in the FTS Policymaking Process.** Research Question 1 sought to address “what barriers and challenges do advocates, producers, and SNPs face to participate in the FTS policymaking process?” Three themes emerged while answering this research question: (1) Contextual challenges of FTS and FTS policymaking, (2) The prioritization and education of FTS policymaking, and (3) Relationship building/networking.

Within the SHM, agenda-setting and policy formulation stages of SHM are times when unofficial actors are allowed the most influence and activity (Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). Therefore, this study uncovered many barriers to participating in these two stages. A set of barriers within the finding are organized into two themes: (1) Contextual challenges of FTS and FTS policymaking and (2) the prioritization and education of FTS policymaking. Participants’ approaches for navigating through these challenges are detailed in the Relationship building/networking section. The Contextual challenges of FTS and FTS policymaking theme was organized into four subthemes that include the (1) Various interpretations of FTS, (2) Understanding and accommodating school needs and standards for FTS, (3) Schools’ budget constraints for FTS and (4) Contextual challenges in FTS policymaking. Many contextual challenges in FTS are documented in the FTS literature, such as difficulty accommodating school needs and working around school budget constraints (Bateman et al., 2014; Grigsby, MacAuley, & Niewolny, 2018, p. 40). While unofficial actors’ perspectives of challenges in the FTS are included, this research revolves around challenges within the FTS policymaking process. Such challenges include the variation of FTS definitions, COVID-19 restrictions, and
difficulties associated with proposing various components of FTS. Research from Eyler et al. (2012) acknowledged that bills revolving around “health and nutrition education” were more likely to be adopted among official actors. This perspective was echoed by Advocate-Producer Jay, who cited difficulty in his past experiences of advocacy for local procurement legislation. While Eyler et al. (2012) believed that this variation in difficulty was due to certain legislation needing higher levels of regulatory support, Advocate-Producer Jay highlighted the various levels of support and advocacy among the agricultural community. The SHM provided the framework for understanding unofficial actors’ contributions to the policymaking process (Bergeron, 2016; Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018), and the findings of this research provide context to understand barriers that make their participation more difficult.

As noted by Rinfret et al. (2018), most legislation gets caught up in the agenda-setting stage of the policymaking process. Therefore, it is up to unofficial actors to draw attention to the issue for it to become a governmental priority (Rinfret et al. 2018). The findings reveal that many unofficial actors have not yet prioritized identifying how they can improve the FTS system. Participants who had FTS policymaking experiences describe the challenging elements in the early stages of the SHM. This set of challenges are organized into two subthemes: (1) Prioritizing FTS policymaking and (2) Lack of agricultural literacy and appreciation. Participants identified that several elements of the policymaking process were time-intensive and challenging to prioritize. These time-consuming components include identifying opportunities to get involved in policymaking, organizing with unofficial actors, and educating official actors. In the policy development phase on the SHM, official actors weigh out various policy options and consider the implications of each decision (Sidney, 2007). Unofficial actors’ educational contributions may help official actors weigh out various decisions in the policy development
stage of the SHM. This informal education connects significantly with the subtheme of agricultural literacy and appreciation. Many participants noted a lack of agricultural literacy from official actors’ while answering the interview questions or providing recommendations to strengthen the FTS policymaking process. Participants noted that when official actors struggled to the impacts of their decisions on the agricultural community, it limited their ability to make legislative change. The findings reveal that education can and is being used as a tool for developing agricultural literacy.

Unofficial actors’ method of navigating through barriers and challenges ties very closely with the agenda-setting stage of the SHM. During this stage, unofficial actors work to identify a public problem (Cattaneo, 2018; Kingdon, 2003, p. 3-4; Rinfret et al., 2018). Within this context, the public problem was strengthening the FTS system. During this stage, unofficial actors also worked to identify other allies within the FTS system with shared interests and challenges. The participants noted collaborations with individuals in the school system as well as organizations, such as Virginia PTA. Advocate Jenna also expressed interest in developing a relationship with outreach programs such as Virginia Cooperative Extension. In the SHM, unofficial actors also work to bring attention to their issue (Benoit, 2013), which is echoed in Advocate Denise’s experience when she noted that collaboration with Virginia PTA brought more attention to Loudoun County Rural Economic Development Council’s concerns around FTS.

**Opportunities and success in the FTS policymaking process.** Research Question 2 asked, “What opportunities and successes have advocates, producers, and SNPs identified or experienced while participating in the FTS policymaking process?” Two subthemes emerged when analyzing participants’ responses to this question: (1) Awareness and education of FTS and FTS policymaking and (2) Opportunities & successes in FTS & FTS policymaking.
As noted above, unofficial actors work to draw attention to their concerns during the agenda-setting stage of the FTS policymaking process (Rinfret et al. 2018). One interesting finding reveals that many unofficial actors considered increased awareness of FTS as one of the successes they experienced in the FTS policymaking process. It is necessary to note that their success in FTS policymaking did not always depend upon the passage of new legislation. Unofficial actors also viewed outlets to express their opinions are opportunities. Within the SHM, official actors weigh out various policy options in the policy development phase (Sidney, 2007). Participants highlight similar experiences and note that they viewed educational visits with their legislators as opportunities in FTS policymaking. This educational component was an essential step in helping official actors work through various decisions. Further, the agenda-setting stage also revolves around unofficial actors bringing their resolutions to official actors (Cattaneo, 2018; Kingdon, 2003, p. 3-4; Rinfret et al., 2018.) This component of the SHM aligns with participants who viewed FTS policymaking as an opportunity to articulate their concerns to official actors or advocated for legislative outcomes such as Advocate Dana’s backing for a state-funded curriculum specialist.

As noted above, when unofficial actors network and build relationships in the policymaking process, it tied closely with the agenda-setting stage of the SHM. This connection revolved around identifying allies with shared interests, problems, and legislative agendas. Study participants described these collaborative experiences as opportunities to connect with their legislators and fellow unofficial actors. The findings revealed that collaborating with other organizations was considered a “win” in the FTS policymaking process. Participants also viewed identifying a new ally as a successful experience. Again, unofficial actors considered these collaborations to be significant, even though it did not directly tie to the passage of legislation.
Unofficial actors also viewed FTS policymaking as an opportunity to connect with their legislators. The agenda-setting and policy formulation stages are both opportunities for unofficial actors to communicate their concerns or potential resolutions to official actors, (Benoit, 2013; Cattaneo, 2018; Kingdon, 2003, p. 3-4; Rinfret et al., 2018). Participants of this study shed light on the different ways in which unofficial actors built connections with official actors. While Advocate Brian discussed how an urban legislator meeting encouraged dialogue between policymaking actors, Producer 4 brought up that a legislator paid a direct visit to their farming operation. The participants’ experiences will help future FTS policymaking actors understand how collaboration and connection occur within the agenda-setting and policy formulation stages.

**Recommendations for Strengthening the FTS Policymaking Process.** Research Question 3 asked, “What recommendations do advocates, producers, and SNPs have for strengthening the FTS policymaking process?” Three themes emerged among participants’ responses: (1) Organization of FTS community, (2) Building connections with the agricultural community, and (3) Prioritizing the FTS policymaking process.

The first set of recommendations from participants was a call for more organization in the FTS community. This suggestion ties closely and would possibly strengthen the agenda-setting stage of the SHM. Because the agenda-setting stage includes identifying a public problem (Cattaneo, 2018; Kingdon, 2003; Rinfret et al., 2018), future unofficial actors will need to identify and organize with others with mutual interests and problems. The participants cited many reasons for additional organization within the FTS community. The rationale included having an outlet for sharing ideas, stronger representation, and greater effectiveness in the policymaking process. Participants like Advocate-Producer Matt believed that this vision for FTS organization should occur within a large collective body, such as a Farm Bureau. Many
participants expressed that connection to a larger organization would increase the likelihood of unofficial actors’ voices being heard by official actors. To improve the FTS policymaking process, unofficial actors will need to identify future allies with common legislative agendas and determine a way to organize for a united voice in political spaces.

The second set of recommendations revolved around building better connections and relationships in the agricultural community. Because unofficial actors interact with official actors in both agenda-setting and policy formulation stages of the policy cycle (Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018), building connections to the agricultural community is an essential step for long-term success. Many participants noted that these connections could occur informally and cited farm visits as outlets for building new relationships. As described by Advocate Dana, unofficial actors found value in legislators gaining familiarity with FTS by viewing production sites, first-hand. Building connections with the agricultural community also potentially lends itself to increased agricultural literacy and appreciation among official actors. Within the policy formulation stage of the policy cycle, official actors consider the implications of various policy decisions (Sidney, 2007). Having a deeper appreciation and understanding of agriculture may help official actors make more applicable decisions for their constituents. For example, Advocate-Producer Jay described how legislators knowing their states’ prominent commodities could help them formulate policies that are more applicable to their respective communities. Many participants worked to increase agricultural literacy through informal farm visits and educating legislators on agricultural topics.

The last set of recommendations called for the prioritization of the FTS policymaking process. These suggestions apply to both official and unofficial actors through both agenda-setting and policy formulation stages. Many participants noted that not only was participating in
the FTS policymaking process a time-consuming experience, but identifying the opportunities to get involved presented a challenge. To strengthen the FTS policymaking process in the future, more unofficial actors will need to prioritize educating themselves on opportunities to get involved. As noted by Advocate Jenna, political engagement could also constitute having an active representative who speaks on behalf of the FTS community and advocates for their interests. Further, prioritizing the FTS policymaking process includes investing funds to ensure that FTS remains financially viable for both producers and schools. Because policy formulation is the stage in which official actors consider the implications of legislative decisions (Sidney, 2007), examining the fiscal aspects of FTS is likely a vital part of this stage. Several participants called for a more in-depth exploration into ensuring that FTS is a profitable enterprise for producers while still managing limited school budgets. Unofficial actors like Advocate Jenna acknowledged supporting FTS was a method of supporting the local economy. Emphasizing this point may become an essential selling point to get official actors to prioritize FTS policies and initiatives.

**Recommendations**

**Recommendations for Future Research.** As noted within the Limitations section, only three SNPs participated in this study. This group of unofficial actors can provide essential perspectives and insights for crafting FTS policy through their advocacy efforts (Poole et al., 2015). Therefore, future researchers have an opportunity to explore SNPs’ role or potential role further in the FTS policymaking process. Researchers may also benefit if they can meet with SNPs via Zoom, telephone, or face to face. Also, many participants believed that a deeper appreciation and agricultural literacy from official actors would improve the FTS policymaking process. This suggestion presents an opportunity for future researchers to explore how official
actors learn about agriculture and identify where more education is needed. There is also space to explore more deeply how informal learning occurs between official and unofficial actors. The findings reveal that the educational component is an important factor that helps official actors understand the implications of their decisions. Finally, because this study revolved around the experiences of unofficial actors while informing policy, there is space for future researchers to study the long-term impact and effectiveness of FTS policies and initiatives. This research hones in specifically on the initial phases of the SHM: agenda-setting and policy formulation (Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018). Future research is needed to explore the decision-making or adoption, policy implementation, and policy evaluation stages of the FTS policymaking process (Benoit, 2013; Cattaneo, 2018; Rinfret et al., 2018).

**Recommendations for Practice.** Virginia’s FTS legislation has a low level of political support and advocacy when compared to other states (The National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, 2019). It is important to note that the findings in this study uncover contextual challenges as to why this may be the case. Further, the study revolves specifically on the experiences of unofficial actors situated in the Northern Virginia counties participating in FTS. This context provides a range of implications for future policymaking actors in this locality to consider.

The Northern Virginia region contains five out of twenty of the wealthiest localities in the United States (Jeffery, 2019; United States Census Bureau, 2019b), and the mean per capita income can positively influence FTS participation (Lyson, 2016). Many unofficial actors in the study were located in Loudoun County, which touts the highest median house household income in the nation (United States Census Bureau, 2019b). Despite this correlation, many participants seemed to lack direct advocacy experience for FTS activities or indicated that they needed more
education on FTS and FTS policymaking. This finding implies that there is a need for more education on FTS in the agricultural community. It is also likely that this study did not provide a comprehensive view of all participants’ FTS advocacy, as there are varying definitions of what constitutes FTS in the agricultural community. Until there is more cohesion around FTS in Northern Virginia, unofficial actors may continue to struggle to make significant progress in the agenda-setting stage.

Many of the collaborations referenced throughout the interviews occurred between state-level organizations. Yet, there is an opportunity for unofficial actors to organize at the national level for FTS. State-level unofficial actors should consider working with national leaders in FTS, such as the National Farm to School Network and USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service. These national leaders are valuable for guidance, effective FTS advocacy strategies, and educational materials to share throughout the network. Collectively, these organizations could consider offering political advocacy training specifically around FTS. Because the findings reveal that FTS is a time-intensive process, all parties must prepare for a long-term collaboration. Future advocates will likely experience a lag in between promoting FTS, to experiencing the benefits of educating official actors and building mutually beneficial relationships.

At the state level, there are opportunities for internal education on FTS throughout unofficial actors’ respective organizations. The more education and training unofficial actors receive, the better educators, and therefore, advocates they can be for FTS. It is also vital that education hones-in on the economic benefits of FTS for local producers and the state economy. Unofficial actors must emphasize that the investing and allocating funds towards FTS, is an investment in the overall Virginia economy. State organizations may also consider maintaining and forming new relationships to pass legislation that requires significant support from the
agricultural community. Bills that call for an allocation of funds tend to require additional effort from unofficial actors (National Farm to School Network & Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, 2019). Because working with fellow allies was a method for navigating through challenges in FTS policymaking, unofficial actors will need to extend their partnerships to organizations that may not revolve around political advocacy. This networking could include collaborations with non-profit organizations such as the Virginia Food System Council, outreach organizations such as Virginia Cooperative Extension, and governmental agencies such as the Virginia Department of Agriculture and the Virginia Department of Education. Interactions with other organizations with mutual interests also provide additional outlets for producers to form relationships with others participating in FTS and identify allies for overcoming future obstacles.

At the regional level, Advocate-Producer Jay emphasized that constructing relevant and appliable policy begins with official actors building relationships with the agricultural community. These relationships should include increasing awareness of the regionality and seasonality of the foods specific to the Northern Virginia region. It is also vital that future advocates extend invitations to county-level SNPs to participate in the policymaking process. The findings imply that this set of unofficial actors is disconnected from the legislative process, hence the limited information they were able to supply in the online survey. Further, there is also an opportunity for state-level FTS specialists and coordinators to advocate for regional-level coordinators, especially in the counties that experience a low level of participation in FTS.

Participants of this study also provided suggestions on how to improve the FTS policymaking process in the future. One set of recommendations called for more engagement with the agricultural community, which included more agricultural literacy and appreciation. Producer 3 expressed the importance of investing in younger generations and noted the benefits
of FTS, such as “knowing where your food comes from,” “eating healthier,” and “supporting your local community.” It is possible that agriculturally literate students grow up to become agriculturally literate adults. These adults may one day grow up to become official actors who understand and once experienced the benefits of FTS first-hand. Therefore, all unofficial and official actors must prioritize protecting and strengthening the FTS system for current and future generations. The benefits of FTS are well documented (Capogrossi & You, 2017; Croom et al., 2006; Hughes, 2007; Joshi et al., 2006; Koch et al., 2017; Murphy, 2003; Phillips et al., 2011; Schmidt et al., 2006; Triant & Ryan, 2005; Yoder et al., 2014). So, it is likely that the more we invest in the FTS system now, the more benefits policymaking actors will experience in the future.

Further, many participants called for the organization in the FTS. Such organization can occur within a larger body such as Farm Bureau in the form of a committee. It is also possible for a FTS committee or organization to exist independently. The challenges associated with starting an independent organization include the time-intensive nature of establishment and building a reputation. Either way, long term success in FTS policymaking depends on unofficial actors coming together to focus specifically on change within the FTS system. This engagement should also include extending more opportunities for SNPs to get involved in the policymaking process or generating solutions for FTS. If their participation in FTS policymaking is not possible, the findings reveal that policymaking is not the only avenue in which unofficial actors strengthen the FTS system in the Enacting change in FTS without policymaking section.

**Limitations**

This study is a starting point for understanding the experiences of unofficial actors in the FTS policymaking process. Yet, there are limitations to the findings. First, not all participants
who qualified as advocates had direct involvement in supporting FTS legislation. Most advocates qualified based on their experience with an organization with a legislative agenda to support FTS initiatives such as Ag in the Classroom with Virginia Farm Bureau. Because many participants seemed to lack direct advocacy experience for FTS activities, the findings are only reflective of their limited experiences. Because I identified Virginia Farm Bureau as my starting point for identifying advocates, most participants are participating members of this organization. Thus, the results are heavily influenced by their experience with this organization. It is also likely that this study did not provide a comprehensive view of all participants’ FTS advocacy, as there are varying definitions of what constitutes FTS in the agricultural community. The participants likely had a range of interpretations of what constitutes FTS. Therefore, it is possible that the participants had experience advocating directly for FTS, but never explicitly defined their activities in this way. Secondly, only three SNPs in Northern Virginia provided their responses via an online survey. These responses were minimal as they all indicated that they had no FTS policymaking experience. Because SNPs responded online, it was impossible to replicate the flow of a face to face conversation. This format limited my ability to ask follow-up questions and seek clarification from this set of unofficial actors. As noted in the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Limitations section, state-wide COVID-19 restrictions have limited SNPs’ capacity to participate in non-essential functions. “Stay at home” orders and social distancing requirements also limited my ability to interact with participants. All interviews with participants occurred via telephone, and again, limited the flow of conversation that only transpires in a face to face conversation. Although the COVID-19 pandemic created several limitations in this research, it also presented an opportunity to talk about food safety and food security throughout the United States. Many participants noted the implications of operating in a COVID-19 environment, and
how it has limited their ability to make changes within the FTS system. However, these circumstances have likely restricted my ability to uncover perspectives that would have been beneficial to this study.

**Summary**

This study explored the experiences of advocates, producers, and SNPs as they participate in the FTS policymaking process. I used the SHM as a theoretical framework to understand the stages of the policymaking and contributions of policymaking actors. The findings from this study uncovered experiences that unofficial actors identified as either a barrier or opportunity in the FTS policymaking process. Participants also provided recommendations, based on their experiences, on how to improve the policymaking process for future generations. This study reveals that unofficial actors found the contextual challenges of the FTS system, such as school budget restrictions, as a barrier to participating in FTS policymaking. Although contextual challenges of the FTS system do not directly apply to obstacles in FTS policymaking, I inferred that problems in the FTS system at least discourage unofficial actors from participating in FTS policymaking. Contextual challenges of FTS policymaking, such as educating official actors, were also cited as barriers in the FTS policymaking process. The time-intensive nature of the FTS policymaking process also proved to be a barrier to participation. Many participants disclosed that they worked through these challenges by networking and building relationships with other unofficial actors who shared common goals and interests. Secondly, participants identified several experiences that they either viewed as an opportunity or success in the FTS policymaking process. Some of these experiences revolved around increasing awareness, advocating for a specific legislative outcome, or educating other policymaking actors about FTS. Additional successful experiences revolved around identifying other organizations with shared
interests and connecting with official actors about FTS. Lastly, the participants provided a series of recommendations for both official and unofficial actors that would strengthen the FTS policymaking process. Some participants desired more political organization from unofficial actors where FTS efforts can be a focal point of advocacy. Another set of recommendations called for official actors to build a stronger connection with the agricultural community. Participants described this relationship-building as increased engagement with producers and heightened agricultural literacy. The final set of recommendations called for all policymaking actors to prioritize FTS and FTS policymaking. This study highlighted the importance of collaboration and connectedness in the FTS policymaking process. Often, working collectively allowed unofficial actors to achieve their goals more efficiently and advocate with greater resiliency than they could alone. The findings also reveal that unofficial actors found success in the “small wins,” such as connecting with a potential ally or increasing awareness for FTS. Therefore, achievement in FTS policymaking did not depend on the passage of legislation, but of the building of relationships. Many students, parents, producers, and communities will likely benefit from FTS in the future. The goal of this study is to acknowledge the contributions of current policymaking actors supporting the FTS movement while aiding the policymaking actors of the future.
References


Reichmann, V. (2009). Does Fruit and Vegetable Intake Decrease Risk for Obesity in Children and Adolescents? *Undergraduate Honors Theses, 8.*


Appendices
Appendix A - Semi-Structured Interview Protocol – FTS Advocates  
(IRB #20-155)

The interviewee will follow a standard protocol for each session that includes:

- Welcome, eligibility screening, and opening remarks
- Informed consent form review
- A reminder of interview procedures
- Questions and answers period
- Wrap-Up

Welcome, Eligibility Screening, and Opening Remarks

Welcome, and thank you here today to share your experiences as an advocate for the FTS system. I am Jasmine Scott, a graduate student at Virginia Tech, and I will be interviewing you today. The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences and perspectives of advocates, producers, and SNPs in Northern Virginia as they participate in the FTS policymaking process. Today, we are going to focus our discussion on your experiences as an advocate for FTS in Virginia. To qualify as an advocate, you must organize, meet, or work for political or social action in FTS, politically organize to establish, educate, strengthen or "advocate” for FTS laws and initiatives for the state of Virginia, and be associated with collective professional body or advocacy organization (i.e., Virginia Farm Bureau, Virginia PTA, etc.). Does this accurately describe you?

- If “yes,” I will proceed with the opening remarks.
- If “no,” I will conclude the opening remarks.

Great! My goal for today is to ask questions and seek clarification as needed during our visit. During the interview, I will refer to different actors in the policymaking process. When I mention
"legislators," I am referring to individuals who create, implement and evaluate legislation such as a member of the judicial system or an executive figure such as a Governor, State Senator, or State Representative. When I mention "FTS advocates," I am referring to individuals who politically organize for the establishment or passage of legislation that could promote local procurement in the K-12 school market.

**Consent Form Review**

You received a copy of the consent form with your invitation to participate in the interview. Do you have any questions about this form or parts of the form that you would like to review? Are you willing to give your consent to participate in this interview? If yes, we will continue. If no, thank you for visiting with me.

**Interview Procedures**

- I will be recording this interview using an audio recorder.
- If you need to take a break at any time, please let me know, and I will give you the time you request.
- You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to, and you can stop your participation at any time if you feel uncomfortable.
- Within the next week, you will receive a written transcript of this interview. Please respond within one week, indicating any changes you need me to make. If you need additional time, please let me know. If I do not hear from you, I will assume that you were comfortable with the transcript and felt it accurately reflected our visit.
- Do you have any questions? (Answer questions)
- I am now turning on the tape recorder.
Warm-Up Questions

1. How would you describe the role you play as an advocate for FTS?
2. How long have you worked/served within this capacity?
3. Please describe your participation, if any, in the FTS policymaking process?

Research Question 1 - Interview Questions

4. Please identify any barriers and challenges, if any, that prevent you from participating in the FTS policymaking process.
5. Please describe any barriers and challenges, if any, that potentially limit your success or effectiveness in the FTS policymaking process.
6. Please describe how you navigated through these barriers and challenges in the past?

Research Question 2 - Interview Questions

7. Please describe any opportunities and successes, if any, while informing or crafting a legislative agenda around FTS.
8. Please describe any opportunities and successes, if any, in voicing your concerns around FTS to legislators.
9. To your knowledge, how have the results of your efforts impacted your school or community?

Research Question 3 - Interview Questions

10. What recommendations do you have for other advocates for strengthening the FTS policymaking process?
11. What recommendations do you have for legislators for strengthening the FTS policymaking process?
Wrap-Up

We are now at the end of the interview. I want to thank you for your time and input. Are there other comments you would like to make or questions you might have?

Are there producers in Northern Virginia that you recommend we contact for this project?

Thank you! I will provide the written transcript within the next week. If I do not receive corrections from you within a week, I will assume the transcript is accurate.
Appendix B - Semi-Structured Interview Protocol - Producers
(IRB #20-155)

The interviewee will follow a standard protocol for each session that includes:

- Welcome, eligibility screening, and opening remarks
- Informed consent form review
- A reminder of interview procedures
- Questions and answers period
- Wrap-Up

Welcome, Eligibility Screening, and Opening Remarks

Welcome, and thank you for visiting with me today about your experiences as a producer in the FTS policymaking process. I am Jasmine Scott, a graduate student at Virginia Tech, and I will be interviewing you today. The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences and perspectives of advocates, producers, and SNPs in Northern Virginia as they participate in the FTS policymaking process. To qualify as a producer, you must be the owner or co-owner of a farming operation that supplies fruits, vegetables, meat, seafood, or dairy products, including liquid milk to K-12 schools in Northern Virginia. Aspiring producers must have intentions to market produce to K-12 and be actively taking or taken steps to become a supplier of local food to K-12 schools in Northern Virginia. Does this accurately describe you?

- If “yes,” I will proceed with the opening remarks.
- If “no,” I will conclude the opening remarks.

Great! My goal for today is to ask questions and seek clarification as needed during our visit. During the interview, I will refer to different actors in the policymaking process. When I mention "legislators," I am referring to individuals who create, implement and evaluate legislation such as a member of the judicial system or an executive figure such as a Governor, State Senator, or
State Representative. When I mention "FTS advocates," I am referring to individuals who politically organize for the establishment or passage of legislation that could promote local procurement in the K-12 school market.

**Consent Form Review**

You received a copy of the consent form with your invitation to participate in the interview. Do you have any questions about this form or parts of the form that you would like to review? Are you willing to give your consent to participate in this interview? If yes, we will continue. If no, thank you for visiting with me.

**Interview Procedures**

- I will be recording this interview using an audio recorder.
- If you need to take a break at any time, please let me know, and I will give you the time you request.
- You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to, and you can stop your participation at any time if you feel uncomfortable.
- Within the next week, you will receive a written transcript of this interview. Please respond within one week, indicating any changes you need me to make. If you need additional time, please let me know. If we do not hear from you, we will assume that you were comfortable with the transcript and felt it accurately reflected our visit.
- Do you have any questions? (Answer questions)
- I am now turning on the tape recorder.

**Warm-Up Questions**

1. How would you describe the role you play as a producer in the FTS system?
2. How long have you worked/served within this capacity?

3. Please describe your participation, if any, in the FTS policymaking process.

**Research Question 1 - Interview Questions**

4. Please identify any barriers and challenges, if any, that prevent you from participating in the FTS policymaking process.

5. Please describe any barriers and challenges, if any, that potentially limit your success or effectiveness in the FTS policymaking process.

6. Please describe how you navigated through these barriers and challenges in the past?

**Research Question 2 - Interview Questions**

7. Please describe any opportunities and successes, if any, while informing or crafting a legislative agenda around FTS.

8. Please describe any opportunities and successes, if any, in voicing your concerns around FTS to legislators.

9. To your knowledge, how have the results of your efforts impacted your school or community?

**Research Question 3 - Interview Questions**

10. What recommendations do you have for other producers for strengthening the FTS policymaking process?

11. What recommendations do you have for legislators for strengthening the FTS policymaking process?
Wrap-Up

We are now at the end of the interview. I want to thank you for your time and input. Are there other comments you would like to make or questions you might have?

Are there other producers in Northern Virginia that you recommend we contact for this project?

Thank you! I will provide the written transcript within the next week. If I do not receive corrections from you within the agreed-upon time, I will assume the transcript is accurate.
# Survey Flow

## Block: Default Question Block (16 Questions)

**Start of Block: Default Question Block**

Exploring Experiences of Unofficial Actors in the Farm to School Policy-Making Process (IRB #: 20-155)

Thank you for your interest in this research project. The Qualtrics Survey Software automatically collects the IP addresses of survey participants. These IP addresses will only be accessible to Jasmine Scott and Dr. Karen Vines during the duration of this research project.

Please take an opportunity to review your Informed Consent for Human Subjects - School Nutrition Professionals form. Please indicate below whether you consent to participate in this research study. If you have questions about the details provided in your respective consent form or about this research project, please contact one of the research investigators:

-Jasmine Scott, 336-501-4869, jasscott@vt.edu
-Dr. Karen Vines, 540-231-1264, kvines@vt.edu

This research has been reviewed by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may communicate with them at 540-231-3732 or irb@vt.edu if:
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject
- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team
- You cannot reach the research team
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team to provide feedback about this research

☐ I consent to participate. (1)

☐ I do not consent to participate. (2)
Welcome, and thank you for sharing your experiences as a school nutrition professional in the Farm to School policymaking process. I am Jasmine Scott, a graduate student at Virginia Tech. The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences and perspectives of advocates, producers, and SNPs in Northern Virginia as they participate in the Farm to School policymaking process. During the survey, there are references to different actors in the policymaking process. When I mention "legislators," I am referring to individuals who create, implement and evaluate legislation such as a member of the judicial system or an executive figure such as a Governor, State Senator, or State Representative. When I mention "Farm to School advocates," I am referring to individuals who politically organize for the establishment or passage of legislation that could promote local procurement in the K-12 school market.

You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to, and you can stop your participation at any time if you feel uncomfortable.

Please proceed to the next page to begin the survey.

Q1 Please provide your first and last name.
Q2 Please describe your role as a school nutritional professional in the Farm to School system.

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Q3 How long have you worked/ served within this capacity?
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Display This Question:
If Exploring Experiences of Unofficial Actors in the Farm to School Policy-Making Process (IRB #: 20... = I consent to participate.

Q4 Please describe your participation, if any, in the policymaking process around Farm to School.

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Q5
Please identify any barriers and challenges, if any, that prevent you from participating in the Farm to School policymaking process.

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Q6
Please describe any barriers and challenges, if any, that potentially limit your success or effectiveness in the Farm to School policymaking process.

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Q7 Please describe how you navigated through these barriers and challenges in the past.

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Q8 Please describe any opportunities and successes, if any, while informing or crafting a legislative agenda around Farm to School.

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Q9 Please describe any opportunities and successes, if any, in voicing your concerns around Farm to School to legislators.

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Q10 To your knowledge, how have the results of your efforts impacted your school or community?

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Q11 What recommendations do you have for other school nutrition professionals for strengthening the Farm to School policymaking process?

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Q12 What recommendations do you have for legislators for strengthening the Farm to School policymaking process?

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Page Break
We are now at the end of the survey. I want to thank you for your time and input. Please feel free to contact me at jasscott@vt.edu or 336-501-4869 with any questions regarding the study.

Within the next week, you will receive a written transcript of your responses. Please respond within one week, indicating any changes you need me to make. If you need additional time, please let me know. If we do not hear from you, we will assume that you were comfortable with the transcript and felt it accurately reflected your views.

If there are any Farm to School producers in Northern Virginia that you recommend we contact for this project, please insert their name and email address below.

________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________

Thank you for considering completing this survey. You may exit the webpage at anytime.
Appendix D - Recruitment Email -FTS Advocates (IRB #:20-155)

Subject Line: Farm to School Study Recruitment (IRB #:20-155)

Dear (name),

My name is Jasmine Scott, and I am contacting you regarding participation in a research study titled *Exploring Experiences of Unofficial Actors in the Farm to School Policy-Making Process* (IRB #20-155). As part of my research efforts, I am interested in learning more about your experience in the policymaking process as an advocate. I am also interested in your recommendations on how to improve the policymaking process in the future.

To this end, I invite you to participate in a 30-45-minute interview in which you will have a chance to reflect upon your experiences as a farm to school (FTS) advocate. To participate as an advocate, you must organize, meet, or work for political or social action in FTS, politically organize to establish, educate, strengthen or "advocate" for FTS laws and initiatives for the state of Virginia, and be associated with collective professional body or advocacy organization (i.e., Virginia Farm Bureau, Virginia PTA, etc.). There is no financial compensation associated with participation in this study.

If you are interested in more information, I will work with you to determine the format for your interview and schedule a time for your interview. You will receive a confirmation of the interview date, an informed consent form, and the list of interview questions. I will record and transcribe each interview. Also, your name will be associated with each of your responses. The results of this study will be disseminated through scholarly outlets such as my master's thesis project and potentially included in other outlets such as academic journals.

I sincerely hope you will participate in this study. I believe your insight is needed to gain a more holistic perspective on improving the Farm to School policymaking process, especially in Northern Virginia. Please let me know if any questions arise regarding this study!

Take care,

Jasmine L. Scott, ALCE Masters Student, and Study Co-Investigator, 336-501-4869, jasscott@vt.edu

Dr. Karen Vines, Principle Investigator, 540-231-1264, kvines@vt.edu
Appendix E - Phone Recruitment Script – Advocates (IRB #20-155)

**Introduction:** Hello, my name is Jasmine Scott, with Virginia Tech. Is now a good time?

If “no”: Is there a better time when I could call you back or potentially reach you via email regarding a potential Zoom or telephone interview?

If “yes”: Great, I am contacting you regarding participation in a research study on the perceptions of stakeholders in the FTS policymaking process (IRB #20-155). I invite you to consider participating in an audio-recorded 30-45-minute interview via telephone or Zoom Teleconference in which you will have a chance to reflect upon your experiences as a FTS advocate. To qualify as an advocate, you must organize, meet, or work for political or social action in FTS, politically organize to establish, educate, strengthen or "advocate" for FTS laws and initiatives for the state of Virginia, and be associated with collective professional body or advocacy organization (i.e., Virginia Farm Bureau, Virginia PTA, etc.). Is this something that interests you?

If “no,”: I understand. Well, I appreciate you for taking the time out of your day to speak with me. I hope you have a great day.

If “yes”: I am glad to hear that you are interested in receiving more information. Could you please provide me with an email address so I can send you some materials? This email will include a recruitment email that offers more details. Please read each of the documents and let me know if you have any questions.

**Conclusion:** Thank you again for expressing interest in my research project. Please feel free to contact me at this number or jasscott@vt.edu if any questions arise. Take care.
Subject Line: Farm to School Study Recruitment (IRB #:20-155)

Dear (name),

My name is Jasmine Scott, and I am contacting you regarding participation in a research study titled *Exploring Experiences of Unofficial Actors in the Farm to School Policy-Making Process (IRB #:20-155)*. As part of my research efforts, I am interested in learning more about your experiences in the policymaking process as a producer. I am also interested in your recommendations on how to improve the policymaking process in the future.

To this end, I invite you to participate in a 30-45-minute interview in which you will have a chance to reflect upon your experiences in the Farm to School policymaking process. To qualify as a producer, you must be the owner or co-owner of a farming operation and engage or desire to engage in Farm to School activities. This participation includes but is not limited to supplying fruits, vegetables, meat, seafood, or dairy products, including liquid milk to K-12 schools in Northern Virginia. Aspiring producers must have intentions to market produce to K-12 and be actively taking or taken steps to become a supplier of local food to K-12 schools in Northern Virginia. Engagement can also include facilitating agrotourism, school field trips, and agricultural education. There is no financial compensation associated with participation in this study.

If you are interested in more information, I will work with you to determine the format for your interview and schedule a time for your interview. You will receive a confirmation of the interview date, an informed consent form, and the list of interview questions. I will record and transcribe each interview. Your identity will be protected by using a pseudo name, and I will not indicate the county in which you serve as a supplier. The results of this study will be disseminated through scholarly outlets such as my master’s thesis project and potentially included in other outlets such as academic journals.

I sincerely hope you will participate in this study. I believe your insight is needed to gain a more holistic perspective on improving the Farm to School policymaking process, especially in Northern Virginia. Please let me know if any questions arise regarding this study!

Take care,

Jasmine L. Scott, ALCE Masters Student, and Study Co-Investigator, 336-501-4869, jasscott@vt.edu

Dr. Karen Vines, Principle Investigator, 540-231-1264, kvines@vt.edu
Appendix G - Phone Recruitment Script – Producers (IRB #: 20-155)

Introduction: Hello, my name is Jasmine Scott, with Virginia Tech. Is now a good time?

If “no”: Is there a better time when I could call you back or potentially reach you via email regarding a potential Zoom or telephone interview?

If “yes”: Great, I am contacting you regarding participation in a research study on the perceptions of stakeholders in the FTS policymaking process (IRB #20-155). I invite you to consider participating in an audio-recorded 30-45-minute interview via telephone or Zoom Teleconference in which you will have a chance to reflect upon your experiences as a producer. To qualify as a producer, you must be the owner or co-owner of a farming operation and engage or desire to engage in Farm to School activities. This participation includes but is not limited to supplying fruits, vegetables, meat, seafood, or dairy products, including liquid milk to K-12 schools in Northern Virginia. Aspiring producers must have intentions to market produce to K-12 and be actively taking or taken steps to become a supplier of local food to K-12 schools in Northern Virginia. Engagement can also include facilitating agrotourism, school field trips, and agricultural education. Is this something that interests you?

If “no,”: I understand. Well, I appreciate you for taking the time out of your day to speak with me. I hope you have a great day.

If “yes”: I am glad to hear that you are interested in receiving more information. Could you please provide me with an email address so I can send you some materials? This email will include a recruitment email that offers more details. Please read each of the documents and let me know if you have any questions.

Conclusion: Thank you again for expressing interest in my research project. Please feel free to contact me at this number or jasscott@vt.edu if any questions arise. Take care.
Appendix H - Recruitment Email – SNPs (IRB #:20-155)

Subject Line: Farm to School Study Recruitment (IRB #:20-155)

Dear (name),

My name is Jasmine Scott, and I am contacting you regarding participation in a research study titled *Exploring Experiences of Unofficial Actors in the Farm to School Policy-Making Process (IRB #:20-155)*. As part of my research efforts, I am interested in learning more about your experiences in the policymaking process as a school nutrition professional. I am also interested in your recommendations on how to improve the policymaking process in the future.

To this end, I invite you to fill out an online survey that should take about 30-45 minutes to complete, in which you will have a chance to reflect upon your experiences in the Farm to School policymaking process. To qualify as a school nutrition professional, you must work in a Northern Virginia School District. Your professional function must include organizing, planning, and facilitating food service programs in K-12 schools, along with overseeing your schools’ food purchasing decisions (i.e., nutrition professional, procurement officers). There is no financial compensation associated with participation in this study.

If you are interested in more information, please select the link below to complete the online survey: ([survey link](#)). The survey introductions contain more information about this research project, along with an opportunity to provide informed consent to participate. Because you are participating as a school nutrition professional, your name will be associated with each of your responses. The results of this study will be disseminated through scholarly outlets such as my master’s thesis project and potentially included in other outlets such as academic journals.

I sincerely hope you will participate in this study. I believe your insight is needed to gain a more holistic perspective on improving the Farm to School policymaking process, especially in Northern Virginia. Please let me know if any questions arise regarding this study!

Take care,

Jasmine L. Scott, ALCE Masters Student, and Study Co-Investigator, 336-501-4869, jasscott@vt.edu

Dr. Karen Vines, Principle Investigator, 540-231-1264, kvines@vt.edu
Appendix I - Participant Phone Recruitment Script – SNPs (IRB#: 20-155)

**Introduction:** Hello, my name is Jasmine Scott, with Virginia Tech. Is now a good time?

If **“no”**: Is there a better time when I could call you back or potentially reach you via email regarding potential research participation via an online survey.

If **“yes”**: Great, I am contacting you regarding participation in a research study on the perceptions of stakeholders in the FTS policy-making process (IRB #20-155). I invite you to consider filling out an online survey that should take about 30-45 minutes to complete, in which you will have a chance to reflect upon your experiences. To qualify as a school nutrition professional, you must work in a Northern Virginia School District. Your professional function must include organizing, planning, and facilitating food service programs in K-12 schools, along with overseeing your schools’ food purchasing decisions (i.e., nutrition professional, procurement officers). Is this something that interests you?

If **“no,”**: I understand. Well, I appreciate you for taking the time out of your day to speak with me. I hope you have a great day.

If **“yes”**: I am glad to hear that you are interested in receiving more information. Could you please provide me with an email address so I can send you some materials? This email will include a recruitment email that offers more details. Please read each of the documents and let me know if you have any questions.

**Conclusion:** Thank you again for expressing interest in my research project. Please feel free to contact me at this number or jasscott@vt.edu if any questions arise. Take care.
Appendix J - Informed Consent Human Subjects - Farm to School Advocates

Title of Project: Exploring Experiences of Unofficial Actors in the Farm to School Policy-Making Process

Principal Investigator: Karen Vines
266 Litton-Reaves, Mail Code 0343
175 West Campus Drive
Blacksburg, VA 24061
540-231-1264
kvines@vt.edu

Sub-Investigators: Jasmine Scott, 336-501-4869, jasscott@vt.edu

IRB Protocol #: #20-155

I. Purpose of this Research/Project
The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences and perspectives of advocates, producers, and SNPs in Northern Virginia as they participate in the FTS policymaking process.

II. Procedures
If you agree to participate, you will participate in an interview via Zoom or telephone. You will receive the questions a few days before the interview time. I will record and transcribe each interview. I may use audio formats of the interview for University or scholarly publications associated with requirements of the Agricultural Leadership, Community Education (ALCE) degree requirements. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. I will ask that you review transcripts of the interview to ensure the accuracy of the presented information.

III. Risks
There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.

IV. Benefits
I have made no promise or guarantee of benefits to encourage you to participate. However, you may have the satisfaction of knowing that your insight will help provide a holistic perspective of Farm to School in Northern Virginia.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality
By agreeing to participate in an interview as an advocate, you agree to have your name associated with the information you provide. If, during the interview, there is information that you wish to be kept private between yourself and the interview team, please say so, and this information will not be released. I will also redact this information from the interview transcripts. Each interview will be audio recorded to record your statements accurately. I will keep all audio files will be kept on a password-protected computer. Only the researchers will have access to the files.
The Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view this study’s collected data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in the research.

VI. Compensation
There is no compensation available for participation in this project, other than your association with the project.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. Similarly, you may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

VIII. Subject's Responsibilities
I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities:

- Participation in a 30-45-minute interview; and
- Ask questions of the researcher about the study at any time.

IX. Subject's Permission
Consent to participate in the study will be provided verbally at the onset of their interview via telephone or Zoom Teleconference.

This research has been reviewed by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may communicate with them at 540-231-3732 or irb@vt.edu if:

- You have questions about your rights as a research subject
- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team
- You cannot reach the research team
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team to provide feedback about this research

If you have questions related to content and findings of this particular study, please contact one of the project investigators:

- Jasmine Scott, 336-501-4869, jasscott@vt.edu
- Dr. Karen Vines, 540-231-1264, kvines@vt.edu
Appendix K - Informed Consent for Human Subjects - Producers

Title of Project: Exploring Experiences of Unofficial Actors in the Farm to School Policy-Making Process

Principal Investigator: Karen Vines
266 Litton-Reaves, Mail Code 0343
175 West Campus Drive
Blacksburg, VA 24061
540-231-1264
kvines@vt.edu

Sub-Investigators: Jasmine Scott, 336-501-4869, jasscott@vt.edu

IRB Protocol #: #20-155

I. Purpose of this Research/Project
The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences and perspectives of advocates, producers, and SNPs in Northern Virginia as they participate in the FTS policymaking process.

II. Procedures
If you agree to participate, you will participate in an interview via Zoom or telephone. You will receive the questions a few days before the interview time. I will record and transcribe each interview. I may use audio formats of the interview for University or scholarly publications associated with requirements of the Agricultural Leadership, Community Education (ALCE) degree requirements. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. I will ask that you review transcripts of the interview to ensure the accuracy of the presented information.

III. Risks
There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.

IV. Benefits
I have made no promise or guarantee of benefits to encourage you to participate. However, you may have the satisfaction of knowing that your insight will help provide a holistic perspective of Farm to School in Northern Virginia.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality
If you agree to participate as a producer, your identity will be protected by using a pseudo name. You will be assigned a name such as producer 1, producer 2, etc., to maintain your anonymity. Also, I will not indicate the county in which you serve as a supplier. If, during the interview, there is information that you wish to be kept private between yourself and the interview team, please say so, and this information will not be released. I will also redact this information from the interview transcripts. Each interview will be audio recorded to record your statements accurately. I will keep all audio files will be kept on a password-protected computer. Only the researchers will have access to the files.
The Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view this study’s collected data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in the research.

**VI. Compensation**
There is no compensation available for participation in this project, other than your association with the project.

**VII. Freedom to Withdraw**
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. Similarly, you may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

**VIII. Subject's Responsibilities**
I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities:
- Participation in a 30-45-minute interview; and
- Ask questions of the researcher about the study at any time.

**IX. Subject's Permission**
Consent to participate in the study will be provided verbally at the onset of the interview via telephone or Zoom Teleconference.

This research has been reviewed by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may communicate with them at 540-231-3732 or irb@vt.edu if:
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject
- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team
- You cannot reach the research team
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team to provide feedback about this research

If you have questions related to content and findings of this particular study, please contact one of the project investigators:
- Jasmine Scott, 336-501-4869, jasscott@vt.edu
- Dr. Karen Vines, 540-231-1264, kvines@vt.edu
Appendix L - Informed Consent for Human Subjects - School Nutrition Professionals

Title of Project: Exploring Experiences of Unofficial Actors in the Farm to School Policy-Making Process

Principal Investigator: Karen Vines
266 Litton-Reaves, Mail Code 0343
175 West Campus Drive
Blacksburg, VA 24061
540-231-1264
kvines@vt.edu

Sub-Investigator: Jasmine Scott, 336-501-4869, jasscott@vt.edu

IRB Protocol #: #20-155

I. Purpose of this Research/Project
The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences and perspectives of advocates, producers, and SNPs in Northern Virginia as they participate in the FTS policymaking process.

II. Procedures
If you agree to participate, you will participate via an online survey. You will receive the questions a few days before the interview time. I may use your provided statements for University or scholarly publications associated with requirements of the Agricultural Leadership, Community Education (ALCE) degree requirements. The online survey should take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. I will ask that you review transcripts of the survey to ensure the accuracy of the presented information.

III. Risks
There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.

IV. Benefits
I have made no promise or guarantee of benefits to encourage you to participate. However, you may have the satisfaction of knowing that your insight will help provide a holistic perspective of Farm to School in Northern Virginia.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality
By agreeing to participate in an interview as a school nutrition professional, you agree to have your name associated with the information you provide. If, during the interview, there is information that you wish to be kept private between yourself and the interview team, please say so, and this information will not be released. I will also redact this information from the interview transcripts.

Each interview will be audio recorded to record your statements accurately. I will keep all audio files will be kept on a password-protected computer. Only the researchers and professional transcriptionist will have access to the files.
The Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view this study’s collected data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in the research.

VI. Compensation
There is no compensation available for participation in this project, other than your association with the project.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. Similarly, you may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

VIII. Subject's Responsibilities
I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities:

- Participation in an online survey; and
- Ask questions of the researcher about the study at any time.

IX. Subject's Permission
Consent was implied by SNPs selecting yes in response to the question “Do you agree to participate in this study” prior to the start of the online survey. If the participant agreed to terms presented within the consent form, they were directed to respond to interview questions. If the participant did not agree to the consensual terms, they were thanked for their time and could exit the webpage.

This research has been reviewed by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may communicate with them at 540-231-3732 or irb@vt.edu if:

— You have questions about your rights as a research subject
— Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team
— You cannot reach the research team
— You want to talk to someone besides the research team to provide feedback about this research

If you have questions related to content and findings of this particular study, please contact one of the project investigators:

- Jasmine Scott, 336-501-4869, jasscott@vt.edu
- Dr. Karen Vines, 540-231-1264, kvines@vt.edu
Subject Line: Farm to School Research Study Transcript (IRB #: 20-155)

Dear (name),

Thank you for your participation in the research study, Exploring Experiences of Unofficial Actors in the Farm to School Policy-Making Process (IRB #20-155). Attached, you will find the transcript of your responses. Please take one week from the receipt of this email (date) to review the accuracy of your transcript. If you wish to change any of your statements, I will replace those sections with your corrections. If I do not receive a response within a week of receiving this email, I will assume that the transcript is accurate. I will also send a copy of your updated transcript via email. Please let me know if any questions or concerns arise while reviewing your transcript. Thank you again for your time and participation in this study.

Take care,

Jasmine L. Scott, ALCE Masters Student, and Study Co-Investigator, 336-501-4869, jascott@vt.edu

Dr. Karen Vines, Principle Investigator, 540-231-1264, kvines@vt.edu