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Hunt Middle School students don their aprons to prepare a lunch-time taste test with food service staff.

Summary: This city-wide, community-driven initiative has incorporated local farming practices into the classroom through science, math, literacy, and nutrition curriculum and brought fresh produce and healthy eating practices into this district's lunchrooms.

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Pesto in the pizza? Zucchini carrot bread for breakfast? Kids eating it and loving it? It may be hard to believe but students in the Burlington (VT) School District (BSD) have developed a taste for fruits and vegetables that would thrill any parent.

Through a citywide and community-driven initiative, the Burlington School Food Project (BSFP), students at the district's ten schools are eating healthier foods, learning about where food really

comes from, and are connecting with local farms, their community, and the environment. BSFP's creative efforts to bring more fresh, local foods to the cafeterias and more hands-on agricultural education to the classroom have made it a model farm-to-school program.

Bringing ingredients together

Burlington, the largest city in Vermont with 45,000 residents, lies within one mile of the fertile Winooski River. Its floodplain, known as the Intervale, supports a thriving local agricultural economy. "Our 2002 annual community town meeting identified food insecurity, health issues, especially children's obesity, plus ways to promote the local farm economy as top priorities for residents," says Betsy Rosenbluth, former director of the Burlington Legacy Project, a city-sponsored program tasked with charting the city's future as a sustainable city. Approximately twenty percent of the city's children live in poverty and forty-six percent are eligible for free or reduced meals.

In 2003, a group of concerned parents, community members, and local organizations, formed the Burlington Food Council (BFC) to investigate and address these issues. With a three-year USDA Community Food Project grant, administered by BFC partners Shelburne Farms and Vermont FEED (Food Education Every Day), the Burlington School Food Project (BSFP) was born. Its goals are to:

- Build Burlington's capacity to meet the food needs of students.
- Increase awareness of and encourage healthy food choices for children and their families.
- Improve BSD access to local farms.

Local grant partners included the Burlington School District, the Burlington Legacy Project, the Intervale Center (a nationally recognized center for sustainable agriculture with twelve independent farms); Shelburne Farm's Sustainable Schools Project (SSP), the University of Vermont, and Vermont FEED (a partnership of Food Works, the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont, and Shelburne Farms). "The grant allowed us to bring together many individuals and organizations who were already tackling community food and sustainability issues. It enabled us to move collectively to the next level of system-wide change," says Rosenbluth.

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Opening classroom and kitchen doors

An original member of the Burlington Food Council, the Burlington School District soon became a key partner in

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BSFP. “We liked the idea that we would not be working in isolation trying to make a significant change in the curriculum and school food culture,” says Burlington Superintendent of Schools Jeanne Collins. Approving the participation of teachers in curriculum development was an early step. Participation by the district’s Food Service took some additional time and investigation.

“Implementing change in a school food system is a complex process,” says Burlington School Food Service Director, Doug Davis. “Cost is a concern as our Food Service receives no funding from the district. We run on a tight budget of \$1.50–\$2.00 per day per student. Many state and federal regulations also exist about where, what, and how you can purchase food. School kitchens aren’t always equipped or set up to process and prepare large quantities of fresh food. BFC’s in-depth analysis of our challenges as part of its Community Food Assessment made all the difference in our ability to participate. We felt like they wanted a partnership and we could problem solve together.” Once these issues were addressed, the School Board’s Curriculum and Policy Committee and the full Board gave their consent.

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Setting a course of action

As Dana Hudson, the Northeast Regional Lead for National Farm to School Program and Vermont FEED staff member, points out: “Long-term change in the school food system requires more than just buying local lettuce and putting it on the cafeteria menu. Classroom, cafeteria, and community all need to be linked together to make an impact. It’s important to have a wide variety of stakeholders committed to change and moving in the same direction.”

Working with the school district, BFC has developed an annual School Food Action Plan to set goals and strategies. Collins points out: “We purposely avoided creating a policy because policies can be rigid and difficult for school boards to change over time. An action plan is a flexible guide that allows us to do only what’s realistic in terms of time and money in any given school year.”

Do too many cooks spoil the broth?

Not if you’re in the Burlington (VT) School District where students from the Edmunds Middle and Elementary Schools and Lyman C. Hunt Middle School work side by side with food service staff, parents, community volunteers, and guest chefs to test new recipes for the school cafeteria menu. Taste tests have proved to be one of the Burlington School Food Project’s (BSFP) most successful food education methods and ways to integrate local produce into the school menu.

Once a month, each school’s Food and Wellness Committee meets to decide what items will be taste tested. Committee members include parents, community volunteers, teachers, school and district food service staff, and school principals. Student volunteers sign up to participate. “Students love to be involved in the taste tests,” says Linda Carroll, principal of Lyman C. Hunt Middle School. “We always have a waiting list and have to be vigilant so that everyone gets a turn in the kitchen over the course of the year.”

On the day of a taste test, student volunteers are released from their classes to help prepare a version of a recipe created by a local chef. Chef Frank Pace, Pace Catering, who regularly assists with the tests, explains his process: “I pick a simple recipe, like a spinach salad, using fresh, local ingredients and seasonal produce. The students write down the recipe, we talk about each ingredient, and I demonstrate how to use equipment such as knives or blenders properly. We work as a team with the food service staff to prepare the recipe. It’s really satisfying to see students exposed to new locally grown foods and to give them the skills to prepare them. If just one student will try a new food, chances are other students will follow that lead.”

Adult volunteers and students staff the taste test tables, offering samples to students over three or four lunch periods. Students administer a simple survey and analyze and compile results to share with the Food and Wellness Committee and the Burlington Schools Food Service staff who make a joint decision about including the item on the district-wide menu. Factors include cost effectiveness, ease of preparation by the food service staff, nutritional value, and, of course, the taste test survey results.

“Taste tests require a lot of forethought and coordination of effort because of the logistics involved in bringing additional people and fresh produce into the school kitchens. Your food service staff also has to be open to the idea,” says Burlington Schools Food Service Director, Doug Davis.

Peggy Rivers, Food Service Supervisor at Hunt Middle School, observes that small groups of four to six students in the kitchen works best: “Groups can rotate in and out with each one doing a different step of the recipe: chopping, slicing, mixing, baking. Everyone gets to participate that way.” Experience has taught Sue Thompson, Food Service Supervisor at Edmunds Middle and Elementary Schools, that it also helps to conduct a taste test on an “easy” day because breakfast or lunch still need to be prepared. “For us, that’s pizza day when we have outside delivery [of whole wheat crust, healthy pizzas], and there’s less preparation needed in the kitchen,” she says.

BSFP partner, Vermont FEED has been instrumental in assisting the district to create the infrastructure and environment for successful taste tests. Abbie Nelson, Vermont FEED Co-Director, says “Through professional development training and bringing people together, we help food service staff develop the skills and knowledge to process and integrate fresh produce into the menu, work with the district to develop relationships with local farmers for the purchase of local produce, and reach out to local chefs and other volunteers to participate in the taste tests.”

Taste tests have an impact far beyond better food in the school cafeteria. Dana Hudson, Vermont FEED, says: “Taste tests are a wonderful way to empower students; they become important partners in making changes that directly affect them. They gain self-confidence from learning to cook and from knowing that their opinions count. Students learn a new respect for food service staff when they see the amount of work involved in preparing meals. It’s also wonderful to see the sense of community that develops as students, teachers, food service staff, parents, and community volunteers all work together to improve the school food system.”

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Putting food front and center in schools

The Burlington School Food Project has blossomed into a full-fledged, citywide program that touches nearly every sector of the community. “It works because we share the same goals, each individual or organization has a special area of expertise to share, we communicate well and constantly with each other, and we are all focused on helping our children lead healthier lives,” says Abbie Nelson, Co-Director, Vermont FEED.

BFC, which guides the Burlington School Food Project and the School Food Action Plan, has grown to twenty active members from community-based organizations, non-profit groups, the school district, churches, city

government, businesses, and individuals. It also has a strong network of volunteers who can be called upon for assistance with specific projects.

"We've got an open door. Any individual or organization can participate for as long as they want. We have found that an informal coalition operating by consensus and led by a skillful facilitator (the Burlington Legacy Project staff) works best for us," observes Stephanie Clark, an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer with the Burlington Legacy Project. "We've got the flexibility to problem solve easily and quickly," she says.

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Planting seeds in the classroom and beyond

Even though the food, farm, and nutrition (FFN) connection is a natural fit for many subjects such as math, science, literacy and social studies, teachers need to learn how to integrate these concepts in a meaningful way into the regular curriculum and how to use them to meet standards." says Dana Hudson, Vermont FEED. According to Jennifer Cirillo, Coordinator of the Sustainable Schools Project (SSP), the K–5 curriculum lends itself best to the integration of FFN and sustainability issues because of the interdisciplinary nature of the courses and emphasis on collaborative learning and teaching.

Many BSD elementary and middle school teachers have participated in for-credit professional development courses offered by Vermont FEED or Shelburne Farms' Sustainable Schools Project that help them design curriculum units and connect them with community resources. SSP has offered three years of in-school curriculum development assistance on sustainability issues focused on energy, economics, ecology, and environment, including FFN concepts, in the Champlain and Lawrence Barnes Elementary Schools.

Ginger Farineau, Healthy Living (Family and Consumer Science) teacher at Edmunds Middle School, credits a Vermont FEED professional development course with learning new ways to introduce FFN into her classes and to collaborate with other teachers: "In my class, students cook local produce using utensils, such as spoons, that they make in design and technology education class. They learn about the history and cultural meaning of food in social studies class. It makes for a full circle of connected learning opportunities." Her in-class taste tests have expanded into community dinners prepared and catered by her students. Her students even started a sprout company to learn about the business elements of farming and, for a while, sold sprouts to the Burlington Schools Food Service.

In conjunction with the Burlington Legacy Project and SSP, Champlain Elementary School fourth and fifth grade teacher Colleen Cowell and colleague introduced the Legacy Card. Cowell learned about this concept for helping students explore their community and its resources while on an exchange to Japan with Shelburne Farms. "This past year, we focused on FFN by introducing students to fifteen to twenty neighborhood businesses that use or make local Vermont products. During the year, with their teachers, parents, or volunteers, students visit the businesses and ask targeted Legacy Card questions such as, 'What are five local foods in the store and where do they come from?' Businesses stamp the cards as students visit. At the end of the year, we have a celebration and invite the business owners to hear what students have learned," explains Cowell.

Food, farm, nutrition, and sustainability issues are also built into student extracurricular activities such as a week-long summer science camp run by Cowell with Lawrence Barnes Elementary School teacher, Anne Tewksbury-Frye, and SSP staff. During the weeklong camp, fifteen to twenty K–5 teachers earn three credits and learn how to integrate FFN into their curricula (next year's focus will be sustainability). They then teach what they've learned to the many elementary school students who attend the camp. Participating teachers return to their schools with a curriculum unit tied into grade level expectations, such as food cycles for second graders or healthy bodies for fourth graders.

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Testing for taste

Students' education about healthy and local food extends right into the cafeteria, which also serves as a laboratory for change. Says Davis, "Many children are already experiencing food insecurity and depend on the school for two meals a day. My priority is to ensure that no child goes home hungry. You can't take away everything familiar at once and replace it with unfamiliar foods. You can, however, start slowly by introducing healthier foods with a whole grain bun or breading and side foods such as tomatoes and lettuce rather than changing the center of the plate food—the chicken patty or hamburger—which tends to be kids' comfort food."

Over the past four years taste tests conducted by students from Edmunds and Hunt Middle Schools (working with food service staff and community volunteers) have proved to be an excellent way to introduce students to healthy new dishes and local produce. "Students have to be involved in the decision-making. There's no point adding foods they won't eat," notes Dana Hudson of Vermont FEED which has helped the district orchestrate the taste tests. (Link to sidebar article.)

Taste tests have been so successful that the school menu now reads like that of a good restaurant. Sue's Minestrone, Veggie and Hummus Wraps, and Vermont Apple-Berry Crisp are featured on a regular basis. More ethnic foods reflecting the community's diversity will be added in the future. Taste tests have also helped introduce students to fresh Vermont produce through salad bars as a full lunch or side selection to hot lunches in the high school, the two middle schools, and the elementary schools. Soon, all district schools will have salad bars. Plans for sandwich and hot food bars featuring fresh produce are also underway. With the help of student and community volunteers, fresh produce from local farms, including the Healthy City Farm, operated by twenty-five at-risk high school students, is processed and frozen during the summer at the district's food services facilities so students can enjoy pesto, zucchini, kale, green beans, strawberries, and other local produce throughout the year.

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Building a network of volunteers

By opening its doors to the community, BSD has added a talent bank of parents, volunteers, community educators, and businesses to the school roster and has strengthened its ties with the community. "Students are cooking in the classroom with Chef Justin, investigating turnips with Farmer Rachel, and learning how to tend school gardens with master gardeners. They are exposed to an amazing range of knowledgeable people from the community," says Jennifer Sutton, Community Outreach Coordinator, Hunt Middle School. "Helping keep children healthy and fed is a compelling reason to volunteer. Everyone can contribute in some way to this program."

Parents and volunteers receive training at Shelburne Farms to lead guided school tours at the Intervale farms, chaperone class excursions into the community, and help prepare community-wide dinners held several times a year at various schools. School-based Food and Wellness Committees plan taste tests, raise funds for food-related activities, and monitor school food initiatives. School-based community dinners, which often attract 150-200 participants, facilitate community engagement (and increased volunteerism) by celebrating local produce, showcasing students' FFN and sustainability projects, and savoring the community's diverse culinary traditions.

Bonnie Acker, a parent, local artist, and a BFC founding member, explains her passion for BSFP: "Whether you're chopping food with children for a cooking class or teaching them about food through art, it's like sitting down at the family table sharing a meal. You get to hear and talk about issues that concern them. It's more than food; it's food for the soul."

Burlington businesses, which are essential partners in the undertaking, participate in creative ways. Caroline Homan, who is a full-time food educator at City Market/Onion River Cooperative, a BFC member organization, says: "My position reflects the importance we assign to improving the quality of food in our schools and in the community. Our co-op members can also fulfill their membership obligation by volunteering with the BSFP. For example, they've worked with students on healthy snack classes, in-school taste tests, and after school cooking classes." City Market also holds fundraisers to ensure that schools have a supply of fresh produce and equipment for classroom food activities and taste tests and donates equipment to the school cafeterias.

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Sustaining growth

The success of BSFP isn't measured in increased percentage points on standardized tests. Its success lies in creating an effective community-school partnership that helps nurture students' healthy decision making and critical thinking skills, fosters an in-depth understanding of their community, and teaches them ways to make it more viable. Signs of the BSFP's on-going success include:

- BFC continues to attract members and volunteers interested in tackling food and sustainability issues.
- By linking the Burlington School Food Service directly to local farmers and local distributors, the Food Service has tripled the amount of local produce purchased between 2003 and 2006. More than 1,000 pounds of local tomatoes, 600 pounds of local zucchini, over 600 pounds of carrots and 400 pounds of local basil were used in school meals in 2006. The figures continue to rise.
- BFC members were instrumental in advocating for passage of a Vermont legislature bill (H.456) that offers mini-grants as "seed money" to increase the use of local products in school cafeterias, to expand FFN education, and to support the infrastructure needed to process local foods in school cafeterias.
- The value of BSFP has been underscored by over \$100,000 in contributions from new funders such as Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, Ben & Jerry's, ALCES Foundation, Gardener's Supply, American Flatbread, the Brennan Foundation and generous individuals. These contributions have ensured BSFP's forward movement now that the USDA grant has ended.
- New initiatives are underway including a recently piloted Food Ambassador Program in which middle school students share discoveries about fresh foods and local produce with elementary school students. BFC and local chefs are helping to organize a junior "Iron Chef" competition to spark students' interest in cooking and culinary careers.

"We're proud that our students eat better and healthier food on a daily basis, make healthier choices about food, and know where their food comes from. They know that a carrot's not just a carrot, it's a Vermont carrot, and that it's grown by a farmer right from the local community," says Superintendent Collins. "Students can take the lessons they've learned locally about food, farming, nutrition, and sustainability and apply them not only throughout their lives, but anywhere they choose to live."

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Lessons learned

- Don't be afraid to open the doors of the school to the community. "I'm awed that so many community agencies and members are willing to give their time and expertise to the schools. Schools tend not to reach out and ask for help even though the community is there waiting to be engaged," observes Superintendent Collins.
- Systems change in public education requires multiple levels of participation and cooperation –from students, school administration, teachers, food service, community-based organizations, government agencies, to universities and so on. "To be effective you have to build on what's already there in the schools – the existing curriculum and the capacity of the food service, school staff, and the PTO," says Betsy Rosenbluth, former director of the Burlington Legacy Project.
- Understanding the logistics, financial pressures, and operations of the school food service is essential to establishing a solid working partnership with the school to change the type and quality of food offered. A creative food service director can find ways to meet many cost objectives through annual contracts with local farmers, cooperative purchasing and other means. The director is also key to gaining the cooperation of the local school food service staff and to effecting real change in the school food system.
- Start small, but think big and commit to long-term change. Frederick Lane, Chair of the Burlington School Board Finance Committee, notes: "Every state has some agricultural presence, such as cooperative farms, a state agricultural agency or

farming organization that can help you explore options for getting more local food into the schools and for educating students about food and nutrition. Making a change in the quality of school food requires time and planning. It has to be built into the fabric of the food service program and the schools. It's not a one or two year project."

- Treat all stakeholders as equal partners and make sure that everyone benefits in some way from the process, especially if external funding is available advises Abbie Nelson, Co-Director, Vermont FEED. "For example, food service workers, who might be an overlooked group, need professional development training opportunities. School food service departments need adequate resources for equipment, volunteers to help process fresh local foods, and training to integrate local fresh food into the cafeteria."
- A coordinating body like the Burlington Food Council is essential to keeping the program on target and moving ahead. "The group needs to be very strategic in its approach," says Betsy Rosenbluth. "The reason that people continue to come to BFC meetings after four years is that there is a clear agenda, a clear work plan, and people have a clear sense of what the next step is and who is responsible for accomplishing it."
- Be inclusive as possible. The ability to be creative, find solutions, and expand the program increases exponentially with the number of partners in the undertaking. Partners often come from unexpected sources, says Angela McGregor, SSP Educator. "For example, we hadn't expected the City Parks and Recreation Department to be interested. They wanted to be involved because students attend their after school and summer programs for a good part of the year and need healthy food choices during those activities also."
- Teachers benefit from professional development opportunities and assistance accessing community resources to facilitate integration of food, farming, nutrition, and sustainability issues into the regular curriculum. "You need supportive principals and interested teachers to be successful," observes Superintendent Collins. "Once teachers see they don't have to twist themselves into pretzels to integrate FFN into the curriculum and that they have help and resources, it's an easy sell. Getting teachers out of the classroom and onto the farms and into the community also sparks their creativity and introduces them to a new educational partners."

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For more information about the National Farm-to-School Program, see www.farmtoschool.org

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