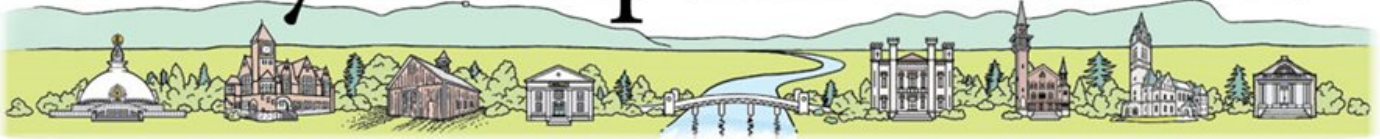


Daily Hampshire Gazette



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Column by Margaret Christie: Partnerships fuel farm-to-school



In this 2017 photo, volunteer Maria Darrow of Northampton works in Grow Food Northampton's Giving Garden at the Florence Organic Community Garden. GAZETTE FILE PHOTO » [Buy this image](#)

By [Margaret Christie](#) (/byline?byline=By Margaret Christie)

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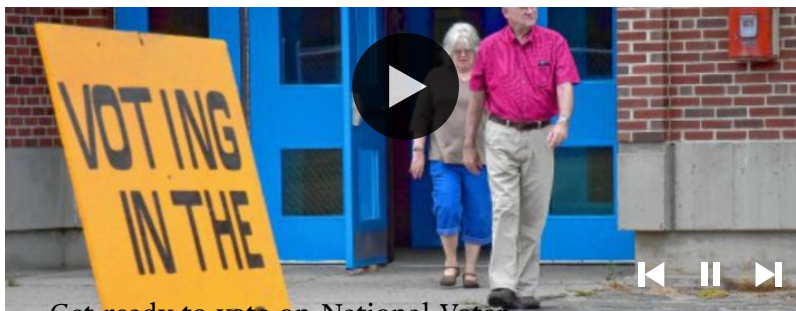
This year's back-to-school season has come with lots of good news about the farm-to-school efforts underway in local K-12 and college dining services.

Our schools are serving more local food in the cafeteria, growing food and teaching lessons in school gardens and connecting food and farms to learning goals in the classroom. These activities make our schools more vibrant and nourishing, and their benefits reach farms, businesses and surrounding communities.

Not surprisingly, farm-to-school efforts rest on a web of partnerships within each school — dining service staff, teachers, administrators, custodians and groundspeople — and in the larger community. Parents, students, farmers and community groups play critical roles in overcoming the challenges inherent in making big change.

Adding hands-on, garden-based activities may engage and delight kids, but teachers need support in creating lessons that connect to their curricular goals in order to prioritize garden visits.





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Incorporating more healthy or local products in a school menu serves no one if kids won't eat the food.

Schools and colleges can leverage their spending on food to support the businesses that make our local food economy work — farms, distributors and processors, for example — but their success requires enthusiastic staff and strong business relationships, in which each party is willing to try something new and untested.

At the K-12 level, Amherst, Northampton and Springfield all have had recent headline-worthy successes. Northampton and Springfield have new U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm-to-School grants. Northampton's nonprofit grant recipient, Grow Food Northampton, will coordinate activities including local sourcing, visits to farms, school gardens and cooking and nutrition classes.

This project builds on the nonprofit's ongoing efforts to make healthy, local food available to more Northampton residents and to ensure that kids who grow up in the city know where food comes from and how it is grown.

Springfield Public Schools, working with its dining service management company, Sodexo, will use their USDA grant funds to build five to seven new teaching gardens at schools. When completed, more than half of Springfield's 60-plus public schools will have school gardens! They'll also expand parental involvement in partnership with the Springfield Food Policy Council and UMass Extension Nutrition Education Program.

This will be the first full school year that Springfield schools will be served by the system's new Culinary and Nutrition Center, allowing them to do more from-scratch cooking and to use more local ingredients. The Springfield Food Policy Council has played a central role in catalyzing Springfield's farm-to-school activities and ensuring strong input from the community.

Both Springfield and Northampton will send teams to Massachusetts Farm to School's annual Institute in October. In both communities, the teams are notable because of their broad representation, including high-level administrators (such as Northampton's superintendent), a school committee member, and staff from classrooms, dining services and garden programs.

In Amherst, elementary science and garden coordinator Jennifer Reese was recently honored with a teacher champion award by nonprofit Project Bread. Amherst's school gardens, farm field trips, and food-and-farm-related teaching activities are the result of a partner network that includes local farms and foundations, UMass Amherst and school staff members.

Local college dining services also include farm-to-school innovators. With support from the Kendall Foundation, Smith College is spearheading a project with Westfield State University, Mt. Holyoke College, Amherst College and 17 farms to expand the colleges' use of locally and regionally grown meat.

By committing to use all parts of the pastured animal and scheduling processing during the slow season for local slaughterhouses, the project aims to expand local meat production, preserve pastureland and support critical infrastructure businesses, at a price that works for both farmers and the colleges.


UMass Amherst has a long, strong track record of expanding local sourcing in its dining program — not to mention building a vibrant student farm, educating students from across the Five Colleges about agriculture and food justice, and supporting commercial farmers through research and extension activities.

One recent project demonstrates UMass Dining's ability to take action that benefits Massachusetts residents who may never set foot on the Amherst campus. Working with Red's Best, a seafood distributor that aggregates product from small coastal fishing boats, and Boston's food business incubator Commonwealth Kitchen, UMass Dining developed a product using underfished species with low consumer recognition. The result is a versatile and spicy breaded fish that pleases students while taking pressure off more heavily fished species.


It's no surprise that well-fed kids learn better than hungry ones, and that hands-on, real-world lessons can help kids fully understand academic concepts. Grassroots organizing and a national farm-to-school movement have resulted in increased foundation and government support for these activities. Our local schools are showing us that the positive results accrue to all of us.

The writer is a special projects director at CISA.


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