

# Farm to School Programs Empower Connecticut Children to Thrive

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## CT children face challenges with food access and obesity, hindering their ability to grow and thrive.

In 2021-22, 1 in 5 CT children “**could always afford enough to eat but not always the kinds of food we should eat.**” Nearly 1 in 5 of CT children have obesity. Over 1 in 3 are not fully flourishing, meaning they struggle in either curiosity, finishing tasks, or resilience.<sup>1</sup>

## Farm to School empowers children for a healthy future while supporting the state’s economy.

Farm to School programs include school gardens, education, and exposure to locally grown food. Farm to School activities improve children’s knowledge, willingness to try fruits and vegetables, and consuming healthy food at school and home.<sup>2</sup> Key stakeholders from East Hartford report Farm to School benefits the whole child. Farm to School programs also boost local economies. Every dollar spent by schools on local food can generate \$0.86 more in the local economy.<sup>3</sup> **Connecticut Farm to School needs increased program access, district resources, and school meals access to benefit children, schools, families, and communities.**

## East Hartford models Farm to School Success (see: [VT FEED](#)<sup>4</sup>)

**Classroom:** The program provides hands-on education through three established gardens thriving under the care of a new Farm to School Coordinator and the Sodexo Food Service Team.

**Cafeteria:** Children frequently eat local food in school meals and taste tests.

**Community:** The program has grown with rich community partnerships, including the local Handel Family Farm, UConn SNAP-Ed, Intercommunity, American Eagle Financial Credit Union, and the East Hartford Hunger Action Team.



## East Hartford Stakeholders voice Farm to School successes and need for continued support

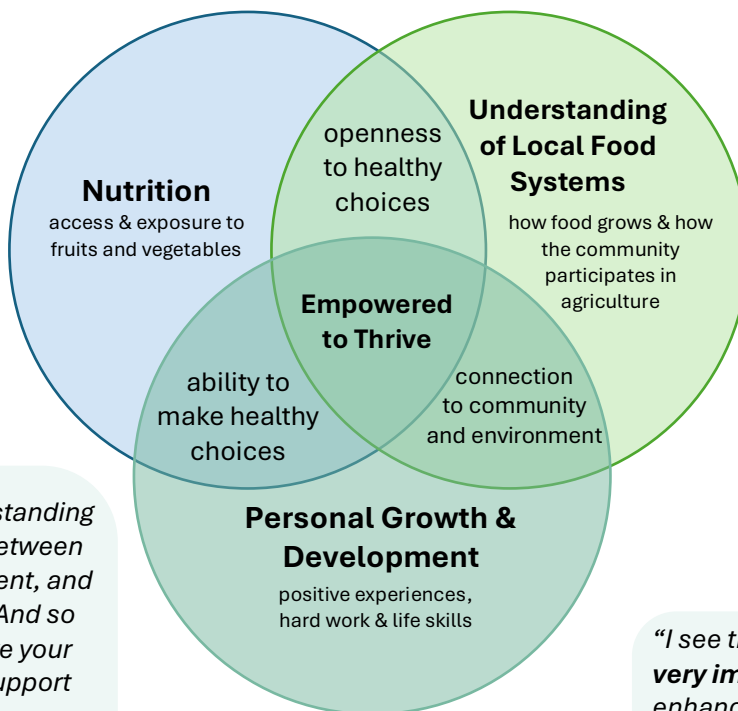
We interviewed 28 stakeholders—teachers, school food service, school administrators, Board of Education, parents, community members and organizations, local agriculture, and local and state government leaders.

### Farm to School Empowers Children to Thrive

*“If kids see it growing, then they feel they have a **relationship** with it and they feel more **ownership** and they’re more likely to maybe try something that might be unfamiliar, that they might not see at home... If you watch tomatoes grow and then get bigger and turn red, **it’s just not such a strange thing when it shows up in front of you.**”*

*“Because all of a sudden, this is not just a carrot. **This is MY carrot!**”*

*“But for kids from certain backgrounds or families, **they literally may not know how that food grows. So it gives them that opportunity.** Gives them more access to fresh food, which can be challenging.”*



*It’s important, especially when they’re young to get them involved in eating and seeing how things grow and that’s part of life. **That’s a life skill. That’s a life skill because they’re going to have to cook some type of vegetables for their family...**”*

*“The biggest thing is understanding that there’s a connection between your health, your environment, and what you put in your body. And so you can control how you live your life and what you want to support and how you want to develop as a human. And so **putting those options in front of the kids helps them understand from an early age that they have that autonomy.**”*

*“They feel that **they accomplished something.** They grew something, they learned something. They worked hard on something.”*

*“I see the **hands-on learning is very impactful...** That’s huge. It enhances the engagement, that academic piece of it, and **it’s that nutrition and food literacy, I think, is a piece that is really missing from our curriculum.**”*

# Farm to School is a powerful connector of nutrition, personal growth, and local foods to empower children to thrive.

Farm to School provides children with access to healthy produce. These positive, hands-on experiences help children try and eat healthy foods. Children learn valuable skills of gardening, cooking, and making healthy food choices. Farm to School connects children and families to the community.



## Programs need additional staff, funding, and school & community coordination for long lasting success!

Stakeholders talked about challenges maintaining the garden, finding regular volunteers, and making time for Farm to School education. Stakeholders said that staff members are needed to make sure the garden is maintained and used, organize educational activities, and strengthen community connections.

## Farm to School is Expanding in Connecticut with Opportunities for Growth

### Program Expansion & Successes<sup>5</sup>

**High participation:** 84% of school food authorities participate in Farm to School.

**Recent expansion:** 44% of programs are less than 3 years old.

**High local food access:** 79% of programs serve local foods.

**Advancing policy:** Established CT Grown Week, local food incentive program, and CT Grown for CT Kids Grant opportunities.

### Need for Quality Farm to School Programs<sup>5</sup>

**Consistent education:** Only 58% of programs provide food, nutrition, or agricultural education. Farm to School Programs need to grow partnerships for consistent education.

**Garden access for hands-on experiences:** Only 23% of programs have gardens. Successful gardens require funding, staff, and community support.

**Agricultural exposure:** Only 20% of programs have farm field trips. Only 16% bring farmers to visit. Staff are needed to coordinate and strengthen farm connections.

### CT Farm to School Policy Highlights

2006: CT Grown Week Established

2021: CT Grown for CT Kids Program & Grant Established

2023: Local Food Incentive Program Established

Proposed: Increased Program Access, Funding & District Resources, and School Meals Access

## Empower Connecticut children to thrive by supporting high-quality Farm to School program access, district resources, & school meals

This research supports policy that:

- **Expands access to Farm to School** programs and extend benefits to more children.
- **Increases district-level resources** for Farm to School programs through funding, incentive programs for local purchases, and designated staff to increase coordinated education, hands-on experiences, and access to local produce.
- **Increases participation in school meals programs, such as free meals for all students.** The more students that participate in school meals, the more funds that schools have available for to purchase high quality, locally grown food – which ultimately supports Connecticut's economy.

#### References:

1. Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. 2021-2022 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) data query. Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB). Retrieved 11/21/24 from [www.childhealthdata.org](https://www.childhealthdata.org). 2. Prescott MP, Cleary R, Bonanno A, Costanigro M, Jablonski BBR, Long AB. Farm to School Activities and Student Outcomes: A Systematic Review. Adv Nutr. 2020;11(2):357-374. doi: 10.1093/advances/nmz094. 3. Kane D, Kruse S, Markesteyn Ratcliffe M, Sobell S, Tessman NT. The Impact of Seven Cents. Ecotrust. 2011. 4. What is Farm to School & Early Childhood? <https://vtfeed.org/what-farm-school-early-childhood>. Accessed 11/21/24. 5. US Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (USDA FNS). Farm to School Census. Washington, DC: USDA Food and Nutrition Service; 2014. Available at: <https://farmtoschoolcensus.fns.usda.gov/census-results/states/ct>. Accessed 11/19/24. Policies: Conn. Gen. Stat. § 22-38d: Dedicated an annual week for the celebration of farm to school. Conn. Gen. Stat. § 10-215l: Created grant opportunities for schools, early child care centers, nonprofits, and farms for farm to school activities. Conn. Gen. Stat. 10-215m: Provides schools with reimbursement for locally grown and regional products.