

# THE CONNECTICUT FARM-TO-SCHOOL COOPERATIVE

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## A GAME PLAN FOR WHOLESOME PUBLIC SCHOOL FOOD PROCUREMENT IN CONNECTICUT

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current condition of farm-to-school movements across the nation varies dramatically on a state-by-state basis. Ambitious states like Vermont (1), New Mexico (2), and New York (3) allocate funding through state legislation and spearhead creative incentives for schools to source food locally. These efforts majorly advanced local procurement in each state. However, many other states lag behind in farm-to-school efforts, and as of today schools spend less than 6% (4) of the National School Lunch Program funding on local foods. While major policy advancements at the federal level would be ideal, an evenly divided and highly partisan senate makes this highly unlikely. Therefore, this game plan operates under the assumption that the best way to advance ambitious farm-to-school legislation is by guiding states with relatively underdeveloped farm-to-school movements to create their own state-level incentive programs inspired by successful models found in other states.

Connecticut has recently built momentum and support for real action around the farm-to-school movement but still needs concrete policies to help advance procurement. The current movement is young and taking shape but recent developments like the creation of the Farm to School Collaborative (5) and initial advancement of the CT Grown for CT Kids Bill (6) through the appropriation committee signal Connecticut is ready for more ambitious action.

This four-phase Game Plan would first refine and organize the farm-to-school movement in Connecticut before securing a permanent source of funding from the state. Once secured, funding would be paired with an approved suppliers program and corresponding farm-to-school cooperative comprised of public school districts. The multi-step Plan is modeled after the highly successful New Mexico Farm to School Cooperative and Approved Suppliers Program, and includes recommendations for modifying these programs to better fit the Connecticut procurement landscape. Taken together, the Game Plan will consolidate the buying power of public school districts, allow small farmers into new markets, and promote a healthier, more ethical approach to feeding school children. Additionally, the Plan will help to move the conversation around farm-to-school from hyper-focusing on locality to including a broader and more integrative spectrum of values across social and environmental systems.

# INTRODUCTION

According to the National Farm to School Network, Connecticut is ranked a 3 out of 6 in terms of progress made toward farm-to-school programming (4). The state has earned its average ranking by passing some farm-to-school legislation, like H.B. 76, which specifies that when choosing among equal bids for food contracts, CT school districts must choose bids from local farms. It is also ahead of most states in establishing "high political support and advocacy" through the creation of the CT Farm to School Collaborative. However, Connecticut still has a long way to go because it has yet to secure funding for its farm-to-school program. As mentioned in the Executive Summary, there is a bill called CT Grown for CT Kids that is currently moving to the appropriations committee (7). If passed, this bill would establish a grant program to support school districts as they prepare to transition toward farm-to-school (F2S) food procurement.



## F2S Barriers

- **Pricing:** school districts need low-cost food, similar to that of national distributors (i.e. Sodexo); farmers need to sell at higher prices
- **Distribution:** CT lacks aggregators that could more easily connect farmers with schools
- **Labor and Equipment:** schools need more cafeteria workers and updated equipment to process fresh local produce

## F2S Opportunities

- **CT Farm to School Collaborative:** representatives from the Dep. of Ag., Dep. of Ed., Food Corps, farmers, school district food directors, and more
- **CT Grown for CT Kids Bill:** if passed, would help schools prepare for farm-to-school initiatives
- **CT Farming:** has grown over the past two decades (8), so opportunity exists for small farmers to get involved

# GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Connecticut Cooperative Game Plan addresses three prongs of school food procurement deficiencies, each framed by the precept that no single justice area may be advanced at the expense of another.

## Child Nutrition

One in six kids in CT struggles with hunger and many rely on school food for multiple meals per day (9). School food providers like Sodexo offer highly processed food that is high in carbohydrates, fat and chemicals (10). When children don't eat well, their physical and mental health suffers, including their ability to learn (11). Therefore, one of the guiding principles of the Game Plan is to improve school food nutrition.

## Small Farm Stability

The average school district in CT only spends 5% of its procurement budget on local food (12). Districts favor the low costs and convenience of companies like Sodexo, which support big agriculture. This is detrimental to farmers' wellbeing as well as to local economies. Farmers of color are often disproportionately impacted. Thus, this intervention aims to bring schools and small, local farms closer together.

## Environmental Health

Like most food consumed in the US, school food typically comes from conventional, big agricultural companies that rely on monoculture crop plans, pesticide usage, concentrated animal feeding operations, and fossil fuel-heavy packaging and transportation, all of which are significantly detrimental to the environment. This proposal aims to minimize the environmental footprint of school food in CT.



The Game Plan, described in the following sections, addresses the health, social, economic, and environmental consequences of Connecticut's school food system. In targeting this wide array, the Game Plan is a comprehensive, long-term, farm-to-school strategy that builds upon existing efforts in Connecticut while incorporating lessons from other states.

The Game Plan's primary intervention is a Connecticut Farm to School Cooperative Pilot, where school districts consolidate their purchasing power to ease procurement from small farms. The intervention specifically draws from New Mexico's successful Pilot Cooperative.



# INTERVENTION: NEW MEXICO MODELS

## Farm to School Cooperative Pilot

The New Mexico Farm to School Cooperative Pilot's (13) **structure** consists of 10 school districts, coordinated through a single Anchor District, and sources from over 70 suppliers. The Pilot's **objective** is to "request[] proposals from reputable fresh fruit and vegetable producers . . . to provide distribution and delivery of regionally grown products for the school meal program."

The Pilot accomplishes this objective through several **methods** and qualifications within their RFP that boosts small farms' standing in the procurement process. The two most critical sections are the Pilot's Geographic Preference definition and its Evaluation Criteria scoring system. The Pilot sets its **Geographic Preference** for farms that are either within the state of New Mexico or within 100 miles of the conglomerate Pilot districts. The Preference minimizes the distance between school food and its source, flexibly connecting students to their community with its dual criteria.

The Pilot then weighs the Geographic Preference and other desirable supplier traits in the **Evaluation Criteria** on factors that contribute to its primary goal of sourcing regionally grown produce. For regionality, the Criteria values proximity to the Pilot districts under its Geographic Preference. The Criteria also boost several other positive externalities under its Values Alignment and Community Connection categories. Values Alignment awards points for New Mexico-grown produce, sustainable growing or organic practices, and practices that "show consideration for workers and the land." Community Connection then awards points for vendors that are interested in partnering with schools to collaborate on educational opportunities.

## Approved Supplier Program

Prior to the Co-op Pilot's debut, New Mexico Grown implemented its Approved Supplier Program (14). New Mexico Grown is primarily a grant that incentivizes local produce procurement for schools, childcare centers, and senior living facilities. The Approved Supplier Program furthers this mission by providing an alternative, approachable food safety certification for the state's smaller farms. The Program's **purpose** is to grow and diversify the base of New Mexico farms that provide for these target institutions.

New Mexico's Approved Supplier Program's **strategy** to bridge the gap between schools and other institutions and small farms is to help farmers complete the trainings and certifications to be eligible to sell to local institutions. To incentivize the farmers' participation, all institutions that benefit from the New Mexico Grown Grant must buy from the list of producers that complete the Approved Supplier Program. The Grant provides between \$600 and \$50,000 for individual buyers to participate and select from the list.

The Program allows suppliers to join if they are GAP or other third-party food safety certified. However, these certifications may be out of reach to smaller farms. In that case, the Program administers its own Alternate Approval Pathway to maximize the eligibility all New Mexico farms. Specifically, the Program's **methods** for the Pathway are to help farmers write Farm Risk Assessments and Food Safety Plans and pass a desk audit. These proxies fulfill the ordinarily unattainable certifications, so farms may then sell to the New Mexico Grown Grant's schools, childcare centers, and senior living facilities.

The Cooperative Pilot consolidates New Mexico school districts' purchasing power and administrative processes to ease food procurement, while the Approved Supplier Program alleviates barriers that prevent small farms from entering and competing within school procurement.

# ENHANCING CONNECTICUT'S F2S CO-OP PILOT

With the New Mexico F2S Cooperative Pilot as a model, several opportunities exist to implement a Connecticut Pilot in line with the guiding principles outlined on page 5.

## Contextualize Geographic Preference for Regionality

Incorporating New Mexico's dual Geographic Preference to the Connecticut Pilot will provide the same benefits. Because the state is small, incentivizing both suppliers within the state and regional/ reciprocal purchases within a set geographic radius (i.e. from New England food hubs) is necessary to expand supply. Enhancing Connecticut's Geographic Preference to award points for suppliers within New England practically achieves locality, reducing gaps between schools and school food sources, while meeting schools' demand.

A reciprocal purchase agreement for regional procurement will boost another positive externality. The reciprocal relationships will then motivate Connecticut farm growth by requiring participating food hubs to source from those farms.

## Establish a Stakeholder Advisory Board

To boost equity within the school food system, farmers should acquire a role in the Connecticut Co-Op Pilot. The project should enhance and democratize farmers' role in school food procurement by establishing a Stakeholder Advisory Board within the Pilot Project. Members would be present for debates and vote on management and governance measures to raise participation rates and stakeholder wellbeing, promoting the goal of a more wholesome procurement system.

The Advisory Board's participatory role would also allow faster two way communication between school districts and suppliers. Improved communication directly raises stakeholder knowledge to the Pilot, including feedback to improve the model, and builds relationships between the Pilot and its suppliers.

## Enhance "Evaluation Criteria" Scoring System with Positive Externality Criteria

The largest opportunity to improve Connecticut's school food procurement system in alignment with the Game Plan's three prongs is to adopt and enhance the New Mexico Pilot's Evaluation Criteria scoring system with more positive Externality Criteria. Taking cues from the Good Food Purchasing Standards, procurement programs can improve their purchasing across the categories of Local Economies, Environmental Sustainability, Valued Workforce, Animal Welfare, and Nutrition Goals. Developing these categories in a similar approach to the Approved Supplier Program Alternative Approval Pathway, as opposed to relying on third-party certifications, will further give smaller farms a fighting chance. An enhanced Connecticut Pilot's Externality Criteria set will prioritize purchases from suppliers and farms that improve the schools' and the state's overall food systems.

First, the Local Economies criteria can allocate points through an evaluation procedure to promote equity based on race, gender, and prior program involvement. Promoting farmers that are traditionally underserved and underrepresented broadens Connecticut farming diversity and works towards ensuring that every person and community in the state has equal access to nutritious food. Second, the Environmental Sustainability criteria can value farming practices that respect and maintain their land, including organic and sustainable practices while limiting pesticide use and runoff. Additionally, carbon footprint analyses are a cost-effective way to gauge food procurement's environmental impact from the direct farming practices to food transportation. Third, points for the Valued Workforce criteria will incentivize purchases from suppliers that promote their workers' wellbeing. Promoting farms that do not exploit their labor then incentivizes others to do the same, improving conditions for the valuable and vulnerable members of the food system. Finally, allocating points for Animal Welfare incentivizes humane animal treatment, and school nutrition professionals can set target points and standards to meet students' needs under Nutrition Goals.



# ADAPTING CONNECTICUT'S F2S CO-OP PILOT

The proposed Connecticut F2S Cooperative Pilot should be coupled with an Approved Supplier Program with the same purpose of growing and diversifying Connecticut small farms. Successfully implementing both programs requires additional support, however.

## Designate Anchor District

The Co-Op Pilot should designate an enthusiastic school district as the administrative hub Anchor District in order to achieve the same programmatic streamlining as in New Mexico. Interviews indicate that Norwich and Hartford are both experienced districts with active and committed farm to school programs. These districts then are preliminary fits for the Anchor District role.

Additionally, Connecticut food hubs like the Northwest Connecticut Regional Food Hub could possibly provide guidance and support for running a food cooperative with the state.

## Administrative Support

To support the Connecticut Pilot, the Anchor District should establish a full time procurement coordinator position as well as a grant writing position. Interviews and anecdotes also show that farm to school efforts are understaffed and underfunded, so exclusively hiring talent to support the comprehensive Pilot district will adequately prepare the Pilot for success.

Creating and hiring for these positions will also reflect the value Connecticut places on access to nutritious food for its students and the state's self-sufficiency through promoting its resident farms via the Pilot.

## Collaboration and Engagement

Finally, developing the Connecticut Co-Op Pilot and Approved Supplier Program in conjunction with the Connecticut Farm to School Collaborative will increase the Game Plan's chance of success.

Those working to develop Connecticut's up and coming farm to school landscape already convene at the Collaborative. Their cumulative and cross-industry and -agency knowledge of Connecticut's school and food systems is ideal to further refine the Game Plan for maximum impact and lasting success.



New Mexico's pioneering Farm to School Cooperative Pilot and Approved Supplier Program work in tandem to connect the state's public schools to their neighboring farms, promoting school meal nutrition and expanding equity across the food system. Connecticut can take cues and implement its own Cooperative Pilot and Approved Supplier Program to achieve the same benefits, while expanding its procurement evaluation criteria to maximize the potential social and environmental benefits.

Preliminarily, Connecticut must adequately amass the necessary support and funding in order to implement either intervention.





# ACTION STEPS

## Build Support

## Secure Funding

## Approved Supplier Program

## Pilot Cooperative

### Build Support

This first phase of the Game Plan focuses on organizing the relatively young farm to school movement in the state by connecting stakeholders, building out the existing Farm to School Collaborative to be more racially diverse, incorporating the values of local community members into the movement, and setting a shared vision and set of goals for what school procurement should look like moving forward.

### Secure Funding

Connecticut needs more permanent funding for school food procurement in order to implement any sort of ambitious programming. Different states have demonstrated numerous successful funding mechanisms including per meal incentive initiatives or lump sum grant programs. The second phase of the Game Plan focuses on bringing Connecticut leaders together to identify and implement the funding mechanism most appropriate for the state.

# POTENTIAL FUNDING MECHANISMS

## 30% NYS Initiative



### Per Meal Reimbursement

The 30% NYS Initiative (15) is a state bill that was passed in 2018 that triggers a per meal reimbursement jump from 6 cents to 25 cents when schools spend 30% of their National School Lunch Program funds on foods from New York. The program has already proven to be a success, and 72% (16) of schools believe they will be able to reach the 30% target within just five years. The program is estimated to inject \$150 million into the New York economy by 2024. Per meal incentive programs like New York's are gaining traction in different states now, and could become the dominant funding mechanisms for state farm to school initiatives in the future.

## New Mexico Grown Grant Program



### Lump Sum Grant Program

The NM Grown Grant Program is a state bill, passed in 2014, in which districts looking to expand their farm-to-school programs can apply for grants that provide lump sum reimbursements for products bought locally. The program has evolved to require school districts to purchase through the Approved Supplier Program in order to receive grants. For the 2019-2020 school year alone, the program incentivized school districts to spend over \$1 million (2) on produce grown in New Mexico. A similarly structured program in Connecticut could serve as an ideal follow-up to the CT Grown for CT Kids bill, which will hopefully pass soon.

These initiatives placed New York and New Mexico at the forefront of the farm-to-school movement by incentivizing schools to buy locally. The Plan recommends Connecticut leaders implement their own funding program modeled after one of these proven approaches to do the same.



# ACTION STEPS

Build  
Support

Secure  
Funding

**Approved  
Supplier  
Program**

**Pilot  
Cooperative**

## Approved Supplier Program

Once funding is secured at the state level, the Approved Supplier Program would launch in order to start the process of training and certifying farmers. The program would focus on providing access to new markets for small farmers—particularly women and BIPOC farmers in the state. The establishment of the Approved Suppliers Program would set the table for the final phase: launching the Farm to School Cooperative Pilot program.

## Pilot Cooperative

The final phase of the Game Plan focuses on piloting the CT Farm to School Cooperative. The Pilot would consolidate purchasing power of school districts, maximize the benefits of the new incentive program, and streamline the flow of produce from approved suppliers into school cafeterias. The Pilot would start with the most well-equipped and eager school districts and then expand out to eventually include all school districts in the state.



# REMAINING RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

## 1. **Build Out the Pilot Co-Op**

Solicit stakeholder input to adapt the Evaluation Criteria point system and establish appropriate auditing and reporting requirements will ensure that the Pilot efficiently and equitably achieves its purpose of improved procurement.


## 2. **Build Capacity in School Kitchens**

Secure adequate pay and training for kitchen workers, expanding kitchen space, and adding the necessary equipment to process and prepare farm-fresh meals is essential for transitioning Connecticut school's internal food system.

## 3. **Pair Educational Programs with Participating Farms and Suppliers**

Whether farms are located on school property or nearby, the endless opportunities to integrate farm-based learning into classes like math, science, culinary arts, and more will connect students to their food, land, and community.





# CONCLUSION

School food procurement does not currently serve the children it feeds, the farms that surround its districts, nor the environment that enables the food to grow. To meet schools' lowest-price bidding, food service companies that in turn favor large-scale and unsustainable yet cheaper agriculture extend negative externalities to child nutrition, the food system as a whole, and the environment. Connecticut schools rely heavily on this system to feed their students.

Connecting small, responsible farms within school districts' communities to the schools' kitchens is the essential step to providing children with the proper nutrition and food education to lead healthy, productive lives, all while caring for the land that sustains us all. As individual examples, the New Mexico Farm to School Cooperative Pilot and Approved Supplier Program, New Mexico or New York funding initiatives, and Good Food Purchasing Program all demonstrate effective advancements in better procurement. When combined, however, these models have the potential to bring Connecticut to the forefront of the farm-to-school movement.

This Game Plan's four steps outline how to realize Connecticut's potential. First, build support by connecting the full array of Connecticut farmers, food community members, schools, and parents will prime the farm-to-school system's stakeholders for change. Second, secure funding either through a New York-style reimbursement initiative or New Mexico-style block grant system will provide the economic incentive for schools to adopt farm-to-school practices with assistance from the next step. Third, implement a Connecticut Approved Suppliers Program will bridge the gaps and expand access between smaller farms and public institutions with steady budgets and demand for nutritious produce within the state. Finally, launch a Connecticut Farm to School Cooperative Pilot will consolidate and leverage multiple schools' purchasing power to streamline procurement from Connecticut and New England-regional small farms and food hubs, with the potential to extend positive externalities through a values-oriented scoring system and democratic stakeholder engagement.

Connecticut is primed for this revolutionary change, and this Game Plan could realize the state's resident farm-to-school system's potential. Drawing inspiration from proven models around the country while continually listening to and incorporating the needs and voices of Connecticut's communities will develop, set up, and sustain this intervention for long-term success across each of this Plan's three target categories.

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The CAFE Lab’s mission is to develop novel strategies to compel industrial food producers to pay the currently uncounted, externalized costs of industrial agriculture for people, animals, and the environment. For more information about the Program and the CAFE Lab and to access its publications, please visit: [law.yale.edu/animals](http://law.yale.edu/animals).



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