



Farm Fresh New London County Schools 2015 Five-Year Plan

In December 2013, Ledge Light Health District (LLHD) received a two-year \$100,000 Farm to School Support Program Grant from the USDA. With this funding, LLHD created the Farm Fresh New London County Schools (FFNLCS) initiative, a partnership between the LLHD ACHIEVE New London County Coalition, the New London County Food Policy Council (NLCFPC), UConn Health Center and FRESH New London (FRESH). To best support and expand farm to school activities across New London County, the partners of FFNLCS established a strong network of local stakeholders and formed the New London County Farm to School Advisory Council. Stakeholders include parents, students, elected officials, teachers, farmers, food service staff, and interested residents from New London County. The Advisory Council aims to support sustainable farm to school programs that strengthen local agriculture, improve nutrition and build powerful connections to the local food system. During the two-year project, the Advisory Council collected data on farm to school activities, shared best practices, piloted new initiatives and began to address the barriers to a sustainable farm to school system. Input from stakeholders was invaluable to creating a comprehensive five-year plan for New London County farm to school work.

I. What is Farm to School?

“Farm to school empowers children and their families to make informed food choices while strengthening the local economy and contributing to vibrant communities.” (National Farm to School Network). Three core elements are the foundation of farm to school work:

1. School Gardens

Outdoor edible school gardens connect students of all ages to their food and provide experiential learning opportunities that impact student health outcomes. School gardens can also be used by classroom teachers to teach science, math, writing, nutrition and more. Produce from edible school gardens can be tasted in the garden classroom, served in the cafeteria, sent home to families and donated to local food pantries.

2. Local Food Procurement

Serving locally grown and produced foods in schools is a “win” for students, a “win” for local farmers and a “win” for communities. Local foods can be served in the cafeteria, as a healthy snack, as part a healthy school meal or used in produce tastings. Schools who purchase locally produced foods make a positive contribution to the local economy, often supporting small family owned farms and other businesses.

3. Nutrition Education

Through farm to school education, students learn about local agriculture, healthy eating, the environment and the food system. Knowledge, leadership and self-efficacy can lead students to make positive food choices for themselves and impact local food communities.

II. Background

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), obesity is the number one nutritional problem in America, particularly among vulnerable and low-income populations. The CDC, in partnership with the National Prevention Council, issued school-based recommendations which include: improvements in nutrition policies, increasing fruit and vegetable consumption, decreasing sugar sweetened beverages and establishing school garden programs (among others) as key strategies for preventing cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, and other nutrition related diseases. In New London County it is common for obesity rates to be as high as 58% in some schools. The NLCFPC suggests that lack of access to locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables is a contributing factor. The ACHIEVE Coalition asserts that coordinated child & parent health education activities and efforts to change nutrition related policies, systems and conditions in New London county will reduce cardiovascular disease related morbidity and mortality.

This Five-Year Plan builds on and further develops collaborations and partnerships in New London County to address health and food security issues through partnerships with schools including countywide gardening initiatives.

Our Mission: FFNLCS increases connections between schools and local agricultural, bringing local foods into school cafeterias to be served to students and working as a team to teach the next generation about healthful, whole and delicious foods.

Our Vision: All schools in New London County provide local food every day in their cafeterias which will inspire and benefit the community towards a healthier lifestyle. We believe our communities can work collaboratively to ensure these efforts continue and expand.

Our Values: FFNLCS operates by the following guiding values: dignity, empathy, perseverance, leadership, equity, loyalty, determination and optimism. Our values serve as the foundation of our organizational culture, key measures of our success, and the underlying principles that guide how we work.

III. Farm Fresh New London County Schools Goals

- To establish a sustainable, local farm to school system that improves nutrition, reduces obesity and reduces food insecurity among children in New London County.
- To support local agriculture and improve the capacity of small farms to respond to the needs of local schools in the area of fresh produce procurement, experiential learning for students, and increased opportunities to boost viability.
- To encourage and support school garden programs among county school systems, using an established clearinghouse of national resources and best-practice models.

IV. Progress

- Established the New London County Farm to School Advisory Council.
- Created a Farm to School Coordinator position for New London County.
- Surveyed farmers, food service directors and school gardeners to assess the status of current farm to school activities, understand the barriers to expanding farm to school programs, identify successful programs, and determine the level of interest by farmers and schools to participate in the Farm to School movement.

- Established a countywide School Garden Network to support the expansion of school garden programs.
- Allocated 10 - \$500 "Outdoor Edible" School Garden Mini-Grants to local schools to support their school garden programs.
- Supported the procurement of locally grown fruits and vegetables by 10 area schools, from 14 farms.
- Implemented a year-long nutrition education campaign called "Harvest for Schools" which increased awareness about local farms, eating fruits and vegetables as part of a healthy diet and increased the demand for locally grown, fresh food to be served as part of the schools food service program.
- Initiated a Farm to School Ambassador Program to connect students to the foods they eat and high school students to the local food movement.
- Launched a procurement pilot project among six farmers, who sold six crops to this school collaborative for processing and preserving. These foods will be served throughout the year in four New London County school districts.
- Supported local farmers markets by distributing 90 - \$10 coupons through summer feeding programs and local schools.

V. What's Next? - A Five-Year Plan

The Advisory Council has created this Five-Year Plan to advance the work initiated by the two-year USDA Farm to School Support Program Grant (2013-2015). The Plan includes recommendations from key stakeholders, data from surveys with school foodservice directors, local farmers, and school garden coordinators, interviews, pilot projects and networking.

Together we have learned so much about what is happening, what is needed and what is possible!

Goal 1: Farm to School activities will connect educators, parents, students and cafeteria staff around healthful, whole and local foods.

The Advisory Council members strongly recommend Farm to School strategies that connect multiple stakeholders, as a way to create efficient, effective and sustainable farm to school programs that reduce duplicative services, impact student health and ensure that consistent nutrition education messages are sent to students and families. Farm to School activities include making changes in the cafeteria, in the classroom and at the administrative level that promote consumption of locally grown, farm fresh fruits and vegetables. Students, families, educators, food service staff, administrators and school board members may all be involved and benefit from working as part of a sustainable Farm to School team but often, due to time constraints and school culture, work independently. In many schools, this leaves one or two staff members at the center of Farm to School projects that are implemented in isolation from larger, more established school programs. Advisory Council members believe that by connecting activities in the school garden, in the cafeteria and in the classroom, a culture of collaboration and shared workload across interested staff and volunteers, can reinforce learning throughout the school day.

Objective: By 2017/18, 50% of school districts in New London County will have a comprehensive Farm to School Plan in place, which includes strategies and activities based on the three core elements of Farm to School: procurement, school gardens and nutrition education.

Year 1 to 3 - Existing Farm to School programs in New London County will create a Farm to School Plan that connects the cafeteria, the garden and individual classrooms.

Year 3 to 5 – New Farm to School programs will convene stakeholders across schools and districts to create a work group or team for Farm to School activities.

Activities include:

- School district wellness committees will adopt Farm to School activities from among the USDA best-practices, which address the unique needs of individual schools.
- District-level policies will be adopted which support Farm to School core elements, activities and practices.
- Farm to School programs at the individual school level will include parent groups, students and key stakeholders.
- School food service managers will collaborate with teachers and school garden coordinators through quarterly meetings.
- The Advisory Council will receive training on the USDA Farm to School best practices.
- The Harvest for Schools Campaign will be implemented, as a way to connect farmers to school champions in each school district.

Goal 2: District administration and education boards will support Farm to School activities.

Many Farm to School projects start with a grassroots effort, an interested teacher or a passionate food service director, but Farm to School projects with school district level support have a foundation from which sustainability is built. Much like creating a team can have a lasting impact on a school's Farm to School program, administrative support can help set a consistent base of support for all Farm to School activities.

Objective: By 2020, 50% of school districts in New London County will adopt a Farm to School policy.

Year 1 to 2 - Promote Farm to School to boards of education, superintendents and PTO's, by sharing the benefits of farm to school, supporting data and the progress of FFNLCS.

Year 3 to 5 - School districts will draft and propose a Farm to School policy.

Goal 3: Farm to School stakeholders in New London County will share information, resources and best practices.

The Advisory Council will continue to engage a variety of important stakeholders to learn about Farm to School related activities, hear challenges and success stories and provide a venue for farmers, school food service managers and school garden coordinators to share their experiences. School foodservice directors will continue to learn from local producers about what goes into food production. Dieticians, health educators and other subject matter experts will create a nutrition education plan, which can be adopted or adapted by local schools. School food service workers will hear from students about what drives their food choices. School garden coordinators will utilize local farmers that wish to volunteer their time to discover ways that fruits and vegetables grown in the garden can be used in tasting and school menu recipes. Relationships, built from these conversations will forge understanding and collaboration. It is expected, that new partnerships formed through the Advisory

Council will increase the amount of local food served in cafeterias, help new school garden projects grow and connect community partners to schools for Farm to School education.

Activities:

- The FFNLCS Advisory Council will convene at least 25 key stakeholders at an annual gathering. Stakeholders will include representatives from schools, UConn Extension Service, UConn Health Center, NLCFPC, local farms, public health, students and their parents, elected officials, State Departments of Education, Agriculture and Administration Services, agriculture organizations and other community partners.
- Workgroups representing each of the USDA Farm to School core elements will meet twice annually. *These workgroups will include: 1) Procurement; 2) Nutrition Education; and 3) School Gardens (through the New London County School Garden Network).*

Goal 4: Young people in New London County will become connected to local agriculture.

Strategies to improve and expand the Farm to School core elements include connecting students to local agriculture. To that end, goals and objectives for making changes to school garden programs, local food procurement and nutrition education are outlined below.

Strategy A. School Gardens

School gardens as a form of nutrition education have become widespread. It is well known that many children fall short of the daily recommended intake of fruit and vegetables, that many children don't know where their food comes from and never have the opportunity to experience growing their own food. School garden based programs show promise as a method of hands-on learning that promotes and increases fruit and vegetable consumption among school-aged children. School gardens offer children learning experiences that begin in the garden and stay with them the rest of their lives — resulting in improved academics, better eating habits, greater environmental stewardship, and ultimately healthier, more secure and engaged communities. In fact, research supporting school gardens prompted the CDC to recommend school gardens as an important strategy for improving the diet of millions of children in the United States.

- Students who received garden-based nutrition education were more willing to try vegetables than students who received nutrition education without gardening activities. This behavior continued for at least six months after the nutrition education program. (Morris 2002)
- Participants in a school garden program experienced significant gains in overall GPA in math and science. (Murphy 2003)
- Students engaged in hands-on gardening lessons showed increased positive attitudes towards content material and learning in general. (Bell 2001; Waliczek 2003)
- Studies show that school gardening increases self-esteem, helps students develop a sense of ownership and responsibility, helps foster relationships with family members, and increases parental involvement. (Alexander, J. & D. Hendren, (1998)
- Students at schools that incorporate hands-on gardening into their curriculum demonstrate more concern for and willingness to care for living things. (Eames-Sheavly 1994; Murphy 2003)

FFNLCS recommends increasing the number of school gardens in New London County, increasing opportunities for teachers to satisfy learning objectives (by using the garden as an outdoor classroom) and making school garden coordination and maintenance more sustainable.

Goal 4.1: Students understand where their food comes from, seeing the complete cycle of produce from seed to plate in the school environment.

School garden programs will connect students to their food by growing plants from seed, weeding or harvesting the food. While providing a connection to the land, students do not often see the end result of their work: the produce prepared, served and enjoyed. By preparing or tasting the produce together with the school's community, students are able to make a greater connection to where their food comes from. Advisory Council members recommend that students experience the full cycle of the food they grow, from seed to plate.

Objective 1.1: By 2020, at least 50 public K-12 schools in New London County will have an outdoor edible school garden program.

Activities Include:

- Continue outreach to school administrators regarding the benefits of school garden programs, sharing models of successful and comprehensive school garden programs.
- Present School Garden Policy to school superintendents.
- Continue funding support with Edible School Garden Mini-Grant program.
 - At least half of all funds will be awarded to groups creating a new garden.
- New London County School Garden Network will provide support and resources for schools to start new gardens and sustain existing garden programs.
- Farm to School Youth Ambassadors will work with teachers and school administrators to build momentum for school gardens in their schools/districts.

Objective 1.2: By 2020, at least 50% of children participating in school food service programs will consume produce grown in their school garden in the school's classroom or cafeteria.

Year 1 to 2 - 10% of outdoor edible school garden programs will allow the consumption by students of school garden grown herbs, fruit or vegetables in the cafeteria or classroom.

Year 3 to 5 - Schools will have adopted guidelines that allow for and encourage school garden grown produce to be consumed by students in the garden, indoor classrooms or school cafeteria.

Activities Include:

- Educate school foodservice directors, letting them know that school garden grown fruits and vegetables are allowable additions to the foods served in school cafeterias.
- Ensure fruits and vegetables from school gardens are harvested and stored safely by providing schools with a school garden food safety plan.
- Use school garden produce to conduct tastings and samplings.

Goal 4.2: School gardens are sustainable, with year-round support from educators, administrators and community organizations.

Objective: By 2020, at least 60% of school garden programs will be maintained throughout the year by a school garden team, with representation by schools administrators at the school and district level and have a comprehensive plan that includes summer maintenance, tastings, and curriculum.

Year 1 to 2 - Four edible school garden projects in New London County will work together to create a comprehensive school garden planning guide and will pilot elements or activities from the plan in their school garden programs.

Year 1 to 5 - The N.L County School Garden Network will continue to meet quarterly to support school garden growth and sustainability.

Year 3 - The School Garden Planning Guide will be widely distributed to school districts in New London County.

Year 5 – At least 50%% of edible school garden programs will have a comprehensive coordination plan, including plans for long-term sustainability and multiple stakeholders.

Activities Include:

- Distribute a sample school garden plan through the New London County School Garden Network.
- Promote a plan through school wellness committees.
- Present the plan to superintendents, school principals and PTA's.
- Target additional edible school garden projects and provide direct support to create school garden teams.
- Share a model plan with schools as part of the Outdoor Edible Garden Mini-Grant program.
- Suggest school food service programs as the center point of a school garden team.
- New London County School Garden Network blog and Facebook page may include posting for volunteers needed in the school garden.

Goal 4.3: Community partners will enhance school garden projects.

Master Gardeners, local nonprofit organizations and community volunteers will contribute to the success of edible school garden programs and projects by attending School Garden Network meetings, providing trainings, resources and volunteer time to school gardens across the County.

Objective: By 2017, 80% of existing school garden teams will include community partners.

Activities include:

- Collaborate with University of Connecticut Agriculture Extension Service to recruit students of the Master Gardener Program to volunteer for school garden programs.
- Encourage civic organizations, senior centers, churches and residents to volunteer at their local school garden programs.
- Work with local colleges and universities to identify students interested in volunteering or work study at local school garden programs
- Continue to work through Ameri-Corps - Food Corps program to connect volunteers to local school garden programs.

Goal 4.4: School gardens across New London County provide experiential learning opportunities for all students, enhance required curriculum and connect students with agriculture.

Objective: At least 80% of school garden programs will be used to achieve learning objectives related to core curriculum

Year 1-2 - 50% of existing edible school gardens are used during school hours to advance core classroom curriculum. Farm to School - School Garden Instructional Units will provide resources for teachers and volunteers to connect Common Core and 21st Century Learning Objectives to lessons in the school garden.

Year 5 - Education activities in at least 80% of well established (in existence three years or greater) school gardens across New London County are linked to Common Core Standards for grades K-12

Activities include:

- Provide school garden curriculum to teachers and schools administrators, through the School Garden Network
- Support professional development opportunities, to provide hands-on learning for teachers.
- Work with teachers to assess and refine curriculum

Strategy B: Nutrition Education

Farm to School nutrition education is a key aspect of increasing demand for and consumption of locally produced fruits and vegetables in schools across New London County - reducing nutrition related illness and diseases, e.g., childhood obesity, malnutrition, and diabetes, while improving health outcomes for young people in our county.

Through Farm to School nutrition education activities, students learn how their food choices affect their bodies, their communities and their world. Farm to School nutrition education connects students to local agriculture through farm field trips, farmer visits to schools, and local produce tastings in the classroom and cafeteria. Students learn about nutrition through hands-on activities and fun, healthy social-marketing campaigns. And older students are empowered to make changes in their schools, families and communities through leadership development, project-based learning and experience working with the community. The goal is to build a healthy generation of empowered consumers, guided by knowledge to make healthy food choices.

To best support school-based Farm to School nutrition education activities over the next five years, FFNLCS Advisory Council members will coordinate services, policies and programs to ensure that schools have access to quality nutrition education and share information and best practices with principals, teachers, cafeteria staff, students and parents.

GOAL 1: Students are empowered to choose healthy options in the cafeteria.

Through the Harvest for Schools (produce of the month) Campaign, FFNLCS Advisory Council members will continue to connect students to locally grown fruits and vegetables and area farms, through tastings of locally grown produce, newsletters highlighting the produce item of the month, web content, and other activities that promote making healthy food choices.

Objective 1: By 2020, 80% of school districts in New London County will participate in at least six Harvest for Schools nutrition education activities per academic school year.

Year 1 - During the 2016/17 school year, at least seven school districts will conduct at least two Harvest for Schools produce tastings in the classroom or cafeteria.

Year 2 - 50% of participating schools will identify at least two school-based partners, outside of the cafeteria staff, to facilitate Harvest for Schools nutrition education activities.

Year 3 - Four schools districts will expand produce tastings to include at least two options per month. Through the tasting surveys, students input will help determine which of the options are served in the cafeteria.

Year 4 - A Harvest for Schools Nutrition Education Planning Guide, that provides the materials to implement a Harvest for School Program, will be widely distributed to school districts.

Year 5 - The Nutrition Education Work Group will evaluate change in knowledge, behavior and attitudes among children and their caretakers.

Year 1 to Year 5 - Participating schools receive training and materials to implement Harvest for Schools monthly produce tastings in the classroom, cafeteria or garden.

GOAL 2: Youth are empowered to make change in their community, transforming their local school food systems and contributing to the global movement for food system change.

Objective 2.1: By 2020, 75% of school districts in New London County will have at least one student who participates in the Youth Ambassador program.

Objective 2.2: By 2020, 75% of school districts participating in the Youth Ambassador Program will reporting an increase their Farm to School activities.

Year 1-5 - Twenty-five high school students, representing at least five school districts in New London County, will participate in 100 hours of food system literacy training with FRESH per year.

Year 2 - FRESH New London will host a Youth Summit for Farm to School Youth Ambassadors that will result in a youth driven action plan for increasing farm to school activities in represented districts.

Year 2 to 5 - School and community partners will support the Farm to School Ambassadors Program by assisting with recruitment, training and access to change agents. 75% of school districts in New London County will have at least one adult Farm to School Ambassador liaison.

Year 3 to 5 - Farm to School Ambassadors take action in their districts, resulting in an increase of Farm to School activities in 75% of school districts in New London County.

GOAL 3: Nutrition educators and dieticians will align efforts to promote Farm to School nutrition education materials that send consistent and impactful nutrition messages to children and their families.

Objective 3.1: By 2016, a Nutrition Education Workgroup - including community based nutrition educators, teachers and parents - will meet quarterly to share USDA best practices, review projects in New London County and share data.

Objective 3.2: By 2018, 75% of school district wellness committees will identify at least one active community nutrition educator to provide professional development on evidence-based nutrition education information and assist schools in adopting nutrition education practices.

Objective 3.3: By 2020, a website will be available with standardized nutrition education materials and consistent messages for schools and educators.

Year 1 to 2 - A complete guide of nutrition education materials will be created and reviewed by the nutrition education workgroup.

Year 3 to 5 - A nutrition education guide will be available online to all school districts in New London County. The guide will be reviewed and updated annually by Advisory Council members.

Strategy C: Procurement of Locally Grown Food

GOAL 1: Local schools will purchase CT Grown products to serve in the cafeteria, increasing the economic viability of local agriculture.

Objective 1.1: By 2020, 75% school districts in New London County have identified at least three farm partners for food purchases or education.

Year 1 - 60% of school districts in New London County will participate in the Harvest for Schools Campaign, sourcing at least six CT Grown products to serve in the cafeteria.

Year 2 to 5 - School districts will meet with local farmers before they plan annual school lunch menus, in order to menu locally grown products. This will result in an agreement between growers and buyers for the sale of crops at future point in time - for at least eight New London County food service departments with local producers.

Objective 1.2: By 2020, 75% of school districts in New London County will include local preference in their bids or request for proposals (RFPs) for annual produce providers.

Year 1 to 2 - 40% of food service directors will attend at least one training about procurement of locally produced foods. Training opportunities will be identified and provided or promoted to school food service staff.

Year 2 to 3 - At least six school districts will collaborate on a collective produce bid with an emphasis on including "local preference".

Year 1 to 5 - Farm to School technical assistance will result in a 10% increase in the amount of locally grown foods served in at least five of the 20 school districts in New London County. Technical assistance will include procurement support and training for school cafeteria staff regarding properly washing, storing and preparing whole produce.

Objective 1.3: By 2020, locally grown and processed produce will be available to serve year round in all New London County Schools.

Activities:

- Establish at least one additional local 'hub' for Farm to School trading and produce processing.
- Coordinate processing countywide. Each processing kitchen will work with unique CT Grown crops.
- Processed produce will be available to all schools in New London County.

GOAL 2: Barriers to local food distribution and sales will be addressed, while maintaining farm identity and produce traceability, through the creation of a regional food hub.

Objective: By 2020, a regional food hub will aggregate local farm products, provide sales coordination, whole-readiness training and transportation for food producers.

Year 1 to 2 - A NLCFPC Procurement Workgroup will meet monthly to create a workplan and raise the funds needed for a virtual food hub.

Year 2 - A sales coordinator will build relationships with local producers and wholesale purchasers to facilitate transportation, packaging and food safety requirements.

Year 2 to 3 - A web-portal will connect local producers with wholesale customers to provide of a virtual point of sale service to producers. Institutions may post bids or requests for proposals (RFPs) on the web-portal to engage local producers.

Year 2 to 3 - Farm products will have be identified by farm and be aggregated for storage and distribution throughout New London County.

Year 2 to 5 - Local producers will receive whole-readiness training, are prepared to respond to the wholesale buying needs of local schools.

Activities include:

- Host grower/buyers networking meetings
- Network with partner organizations to share resources -office and storage space, refrigerator trucks
- Engage growers and buyer in focus groups to launch the web-portal

GOAL 3: Students know about and support local foods served in school cafeterias.

Objective: By 2020, schools participating in Farm to School marketing will report a 10% increase in student participation in the school meal program.

Year 2 to 3 - A comprehensive local foods marketing campaign - that includes posters, point of sale signage and social media - will be available to all schools who procure CT Grown foods.

Year 4 to 5 - 50% of schools in New London County will participate in the local foods marketing campaign.

Activities include:

- Work with a professional designer to develop a bright, interesting and informative Farm to School marketing campaign that includes materials in the cafeteria, classroom and online. Materials will be directed toward children and their parents.
- Work with 3 school districts in New London County - run a focus group to assess materials and pilot materials in the cafeteria.
- Work with UCONN Extension, Start with Half a Cup and other statewide partners to align marketing efforts.