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Public health program named lead partner for New York State Farm-to-School Grant

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Over 600 students visit the Youth Farm Project in Danby, New York, each year to learn about farming, nutrient cycles and food justice.

Farm-to-school programs have rapidly been gaining popularity as public health nutrition interventions in the United States. These programs provide fresh, whole food choices for cafeterias, classroom snacks, before- and after-school programs, early childhood centers and summer meal sites. There are clear benefits to providing healthy, nutritious food options to students in schools, where many students eat between 35-50 percent of their daily calories. Childhood obesity and correlating chronic disease outcomes, representing the U.S. medical industry's most costly public health concerns, can be mitigated by improving food and nutrition security among our nation's youth and families.

In the fall of 2018, the [Cornell Master of Public Health \(M.P.H.\) Program](#), Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County, Headwater Food Hub and all nine School Food Authorities in Tompkins County, including 32 schools, joined forces to submit a proposal to the New York State Farm-to-School Grant program for \$92,829 over two years.

On Dec. 19, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced \$1.5 million in awards to support Farm-to-School programs across New York, including the Tompkins County Farm-to-School Project. The nine School Food Authorities supported by the grant in Tompkins are Ithaca, Groton, Newfield, Trumansburg, Lansing, New Roots, TST BOCES and George Junior Republic.

In Tompkins County, the funding will support coordination of a local buying strategy to connect over 100 New York farms with the 32 schools and 11,174 students in Tompkins County. In addition, with support from the Park Foundation, the grant will support training of food service workers in the preparation and effective use of local produce, as well as building upon existing efforts to raise student awareness of and consumption of local foods in schools through field trips, school gardens and classroom-based nutrition education.

Farm-to-School programs are a key component of the Cuomo's recent No Student Goes Hungry Initiative, which also provides funding to high poverty schools to support "Breakfast After the Bell" in an effort to address food insecurity in New York schools. "Breakfast After the Bell" improves access to and participation in school breakfast by alleviating barriers such as tight morning schedules and stigmas around poverty.

The poverty rate among households with children under 18 is 26.3 percent in Ithaca, 16.1 percent in Newfield and 15.7 percent in Groton, according to the U.S. Census 2012-2016. Feeding America reported 14,060 residents in Tompkins County were food insecure in 2016, 2,740 of whom were children under the age of 18. Nearly half of Groton students and 70 percent of Newfield students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, and have access to free breakfast and lunch every day.

Of the 11,175 students in Tompkins County, 4,951 are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Ithaca is the largest district in the county, with 5,216 students, of which 38 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Two Ithaca schools, BJM and Enfield elementary schools, have greater than 75 percent eligibility and, as of 2018-2019, offer universal school breakfasts. Three M.P.H. students have worked with Cornell Cooperative Extension this past year to help roll out Universal Free Breakfasts at BJM and Enfield, including development of an evaluation plan for monitoring and measuring successes.

The M.P.H. Program's main role in the Tompkins County Farm-to-School Project includes monitoring and evaluation. Faculty and students will work with partners to create and implement a framework for measuring Farm-to-School activities across Tompkins County, beginning with benchmarking existing procurement and student awareness indicators. Audrey Baker '08, M.P.H. '14, evaluation and assessment specialist with the M.P.H. Program and educator with the Food Systems and Health Concentration, has been working with Tompkins County school



Students make fresh salads during Wellness Night at Enfield Elementary school, where over 75 percent of students qualify for free or reduced meals.



First grade students at Belle Sherman Elementary School in Ithaca, New York, make lettuce veggie wraps with the Fresh Snack Program to learn about rainbow nutrition.

food and Farm-to-School projects in Tompkins County since 2009.

This project aims to benefit students in Tompkins County. According to the National Farm-to-School Network, exposure to local foods and nutrition education can increase children's willingness to try new fruits and vegetables, which can lead to improvements in diet quality, behavior and educational performance. Regional farmers will also experience notable benefits. This project is expected to move an additional 110,371 annual pounds of produce into school meals and upwards of \$100,720 more school food dollars spent on New York produce each year.

In the long term, the project aims to contribute to improved student health and learning outcomes, build lasting institutional markets in Tompkins County for New York farmers, support capacity growth for local food procurement, preparation and promotion with food service workers, increase school food budgets and ensure continuous quality improvement for Farm-to-School activities and school food in the region for years to come.

By Audrey Baker '08, M.P.H. '14

[A version of this story appeared with the One Health @ Cornell.](#)

[Read the press release by CCE Tompkins here.](#)