Farm to Food Hub to School

*Food Connects and the Windham Northeast Supervisory Union, Brattleboro and Bellows Falls, Vermont*

Food Connects is a nonprofit in Brattleboro, Vermont—the southeast corner of the state, just a stone’s throw from the New Hampshire and Massachusetts borders. It runs a vibrant farm to school program in line with a rapidly growing food hub that sources from about 120 farms and food businesses. These businesses are from a region roughly 50 miles from Brattleboro. Through an online marketplace, Food Connects lists products available from its roster of suppliers and delivers to its customers a couple of times a week. The tagline for the food hub is: “Hundreds of Local Products. Dozens of Producers. One Bill.” A buyer can save time by placing a single order, but still has access to hundreds of products.

**Meet the Players**

The following individuals have worked to create a successful farm to school program in southern Vermont.

- Harley Sterling, School Nutrition Director, Windham Northeast Supervisory Union
- Conor Floyd, Farm to School Program Manager, Food Connects
- Alex McCullough, Food Hub Manager, Food Connects
- McKenna Hayes, Food Hub Operations Manager, Food Connects

www.foodconnects.org
www.wnesu.org

The Windham Northeast Supervisory Union is the administrative body that oversees the Bellows Falls Union High School in Bellows Falls, Vermont, plus a middle school, four elementary schools, and an early education center. Although small in scale, the high school has a fully-functioning scratch kitchen—meaning that the kitchen can do more than just reheat premade food. They can turn raw food products into plated meals. Harley Sterling, the School Nutrition Director, came to the school district with a background in food activism, farming, and the restaurant scene.

**The Food Hub – School Connection**

Food Connects has a roster of roughly 120 farms and food businesses throughout southern Vermont and southwestern New Hampshire. It lists products on an online marketplace, based on farm availability.

“We feel like it’s our mission to make sure that everyone in the community has access to that [local] food through the work that we do.” — Harley Sterling
Schools, institutions, and even other farms with farm stands put in orders on the marketplace. Food Connects then communicates with the farms the exact amount of product that its buyers have ordered. Twice a week, Food Connects trucks visit the farms to pick up fresh product, which is then turned over as fast as possible to the buyers.

This process provides schools, groceries, and other institutional buyers with a single order form that gives them access to dozens of different farms in the region. It is similar to purchasing from a broadline distributor, but the money is passing through the nonprofit Food Connects and staying in the community. Plus, the buyers know exactly where their food is coming from and when it’s leaving the farm. These buyers can market local products to their students, customers, and diners.

The Dirty Details
In order to move products through Food Connects, a farmer or food business needs to meet the following criteria:

- Have product(s) that fit the needs of Food Connects’ buyers;
- Produce enough volume to fill larger orders, or be able to be communicative about current capacity and have interest in expanding; and
- Have a good story to sell along with the product.

In the meantime, there are no requirements for organic, or certified naturally grown. There are also no requirements to be GAP certified. The farmers’ values should align with Food Connects, i.e., they should be interested in moving toward more sustainable growing and they should be interested in supporting the local economy. These softer, values-based criteria are worked out between farmers and Food Connects at the beginning of the relationship.

If one of Food Connects’ institutional buyers were looking for products to be GAP certified, Food Connects would be able to move that product in parallel to their non-GAP-certified product. However, none of the schools that Food Connects works with is currently looking for GAP-certified products. The schools are all small enough, or are comfortable enough processing raw product, that such a certification isn’t on their list of concerns.

The Variety of Food Hubs
There are as many models for running food hubs as there are food hubs. Some are simply marketplace websites and the food hub doesn’t take control of the product the way Food Connects does. Others are aggregators, i.e., they bring together products from many different farms and lump them together to sell a greater volume. An aggregator, for example, would purchase carrots from Josie’s, Jane’s, and Jem’s farms in bulk crates, so that one buyer can have a single two-ton crate of carrots.

Food Connects uses two terms to describe its system:

- Source Identified – product it carries is always identified with the farm it comes from. This is important to a farm that cares about its brand and marketing image. When a school purchases from Food Connects, it will know that it’s getting product from Harlow’s Farm, for example, and can pass that information on to folks dining in the cafeteria.
- Just-In-Time Delivery – Food Connects doesn’t want to be in the business of storing food, so it conducts its logistics so that it’s holding onto product for as little time as possible. The upside of this is that buyers get their product as fresh as possible.
Advice for Farmers from Food Connects and the Windham Northeast Supervisory Union
Based on their work with more than a hundred farmers, Alex McCullough and McKenna Hayes of Food Connects offered the following advice to farmers looking to sell through food hubs and to schools:

- Work with a food hub or distributor. Unless the schools you could sell to have an unconventional program, it can be very difficult to establish a relationship. A food hub can be a great way to work within pre-existing markets.
- Start just with a couple products that you grow: things you specialize in and can grow at a large enough volume to earn profits while still selling at larger scales.
- Think creatively. Many schools want reasonably priced local product, but are going to be thinking about products that have been processed: cut apples, peeled and cut squash, diced potatoes, etc. Are there area partners you can work with? Don’t try and go it alone.
- Work your social skills. Network. Go to conferences and meetings and learn more about what kind of products are needed in schools and what could pay off for your farm.
- Be patient. No matter how well prepared you are, getting into school accounts can still take a long time. Larger schools and companies may have bidding processes that take months, if not years.
- Be open to production planning and forward contracting.
- Not every school has the same level of readiness when buying from local providers. Look for schools that have their values clearly stated or have an individual who is championing local food.
- Even a small win is still a win! Even if a school can only shift its yoghurt order, or only its lettuce order, that opens a door to future conversations. Small wins build on each other to make change.
- Some products just don’t work. They might be too esoteric or have too complicated a production process to be profitable on an institutional scale. Know when to stop following a lead and move on to a different product.

Harley Sterling, coming from the perspective of a nutrition director who buys both directly from local farmers and also from food hubs, offers the following advice:

- Understand the perspective of schools and the people buying food for their schools. Learn what their budget is, what regulations they need to abide by, and what their political obligations are. This way, you’ll be able to fit yourself into the appropriate niches in their systems.
- The secret is pizza. If you learn the language of school lunch credits through the USDA food buying guides, you’ll see that cheese is always something that schools can get cheaply and in bulk. Since pizza is predominantly cheese (and very few students don’t want pizza for lunch), a school that can create pizza in-house is saving money.
- Help schools understand that their money per meal can be flexed. That is, if they can save money by making one of their weekly meals cheaper (see note on pizza), they might be able to spend extra money another day of the week and put a more expensive local product on the plate.