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Grow Food Northampton lands \$97K federal grant for farm to school programs



Ellena Baum leading a school field trip at Crimson & Clover Farm in Florence. SUBMITTED PHOTO

Students working during a field trip to the Grow Food I



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NORTHAMPTON — Education about farming and local food will receive a boost in Northampton Public Schools.

Grow Food Northampton recently received a \$97,667 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for “farm to school” programs, a term that, according to Grow Food Northampton’s director of programs Michael Skillicorn, encompasses “anything that is happening in schools that connects kids to healthy food and farms.” The money will help support the nonprofit’s ongoing work in the school district.

Only four groups (<https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/FY2019FarmtoSchoolAwardees.pdf>) in the state received grants, including Springfield Public Schools. Last year (<https://www.gazettenet.com/amherst-schools-receive-farm-to-school-grant-from-USDA-18416415>). Amherst-Pelham Regional Schools was a recipient.

Already, Grow Food Northampton does programming in the city's elementary schools. The nonprofit organizes field trips for students in the fall and spring to area farms, such as Crimson & Clover Farm in Florence.



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“We bring elementary students out and get their hands in the soil,” Skillicorn said.

In the winter, the organization puts on cooking workshops in elementary schools. Students have learned how to make a rainbow salad, butternut squash pudding and even homemade butter, “which was really fun and so easy,” he said.

“I would say the work is very much underway, and this grant will help perpetuate it and strengthen it over the next couple years,” Skillicorn said.

The nonprofit also hopes to expand programming into the district's middle and high schools. “That is certainly a priority,” Skillicorn said.

Mistelle Hannah, the district's food service director, said that funds will help buy new equipment, like a heavy-duty blender and a salad spinner, and professional development for staff on how to use it.

Hannah is also part of a group from the district going to the Massachusetts Farm to School Summit in October, which is not paid for by the recent grant but will help develop farm to school programs and make existing ones more cohesive, she said.

The USDA grant is for two years, and though Grow Food Northampton is the recipient, Skillicorn said a large portion of the money will go to the schools.

In a statement announcing the grant winners, the USDA said that farm to school programs bolster the local economy and expose young people to agriculture.

“Our nation's food supply depends on more young people entering the field of agriculture as farmers retire,” U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue said in a statement. “Farm to school inspires young people to consider careers in agriculture and food systems.”

Skillicorn sees benefits as well.

“I just believe that connecting kids and people in general ... to healthy food and to farms and where their food comes from can have really positive consequences in the short and long term.”

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