



Farm to School Advocacy Toolkit

You are a talented and dedicated farm to school professional who believes in the benefits that farm to school can provide to students, farmers, and your community. Whether you have years of experience and a robust farm to school program in your community, or you are new to farm to school and want to help build a program in your community, you have an important voice that can help shape and pass farm to school policy. This toolkit offers ideas and tips to help you be an effective advocate for farm to school programs in New York and beyond!

Farm to School Advocacy 101

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

- **Engage on social media.** Do you have a Facebook page or online newsletter where you share farm to school updates? Add, tag, or invite policymakers so they can stay up to date with the great work you are doing.
- **Post to social media.** Share a picture, story, event, or fact about farm to school in action in your community to social media. Tag your elected officials and thank them for their support!
- **Introduce yourself to or meet with your elected officials.** This way they know you, your work, and how it relies on what they do if later you need to call on them for something!
- **Hosting an event? Invite your elected officials to attend.** Invite them to say a few words, participate in a school garden event, eat a local meal with students, or sit in on a farm to school lesson so they can see your farm to school work in action!

MAKE A SPECIFIC ASK OF YOUR LEGISLATORS

- **Join a New York Grown Food for New York Kids coalition call** ([or an advocacy group or association active in your area](#)) to share your ideas and experiences and learn about or organize for group advocacy opportunities. We go farther together!
- **Sign on to a letter** to show your support for a specific policy, budgetary, or programmatic idea or request. Find out today what the process is in your organization, business, or school to sign onto group advocacy letters so you are ready to take action when an opportunity arises.
- **Call your legislator.** Make sure to introduce yourself, be specific about your request and explain why it is important, and always remember to be polite!
- **Write an email or letter.** Ask your legislator to take a specific action and share an example, story, or statistics to illustrate the potential impact of this action on your community—and their constituents!
- **Meet with your elected officials.** Share your idea and story in a one-on-one meeting with your legislator or join with a group of other farm to school advocates to share your experiences and concerns and ask for your legislator's support. It is easier than ever to set up a virtual meeting—no travel to Albany required!



And finally, don't forget—one of the most important ways you can help be an advocate for farm to school is to vote for people who support this issue!

By sharing your story and experiences with policymakers, you can build your relationship with them and help more kids access fresh, healthy, nutritious foods from New York farms in your community.



THE 4 W'S (AND 1 H) OF FARM TO SCHOOL ADVOCACY

WHO

- You! You are the expert on your experiences and a constituent with a vote and an important story to tell.
- Your community. Work together with others in your farm to school program or network to explain what farm to school means to your community.
- Your elected officials. Click the links below or search online to find out who they are.



[US Senate](#)

[House of Representatives](#)



[State Senate](#)

[State Assembly](#)



[School Board](#)

WHERE

- Online: Participate in Virtual Lobby Days and spread the word about your work on social media.
- In Person: Meet with elected officials and their staff in your district and in Albany and invite them to join events.

WHY

- Policymakers want to understand what's happening in the communities they represent, how they can help constituents, and whether the needs of their constituents are being met.
- Visually celebrating your farm to school successes, sharing their impact on your students' health and the local economy, and communicating barriers you face that your elected officials can help with is key to building and sustaining support for successful farm to school programs.

WHEN

- Advocacy can be as quick as tweeting or calling your elected representative, or more involved like hosting an event. You can be a farm to school advocate even if you only have 5 minutes!
- Advocacy to the Governor about the budget and the State of the State address happens from August–December. The legislature then works on the budget from January–April 1 and on legislation until mid-June. You can contact your legislator's district office any time of the year.

HOW

- Build relationships with your elected officials by telling them who you are, what you do, and inviting them to learn about and experience your farm to school work firsthand! It is much easier to be heard when you make requests of your representatives if you have a relationship with them first.
- Share stories based on your own experiences or share data (like how many more students are eating more healthy local food) with policymakers to illustrate how state farm to school policies or programs they might support are positively impacting the communities they represent.

Read on for additional information, examples, and resources to help you be an effective farm to school advocate year-round!



How to Be a Farm to School Advocate: Identifying Opportunities

Relationships are the building block of successful advocacy—start thinking today about how you can build or strengthen your relationship with those elected to represent you in local government, in Albany, or in Washington, DC! It is much easier to be heard and receive the support you need when your elected official knows about your farm to school program and understands how it benefits your community (and their constituents!). When building a relationship, keep the following in mind:

- **Educate.** Share your story from the heart—explain what you do, how it benefits your community, why you care about this issue and why they should too!
- **Celebrate.** Invite them to share in your successes by thanking them for their support of the programs that make it possible. Everyone likes to feel like they are a part of the winning team!
- **Gratitude.** Elected officials, like you, are busy people that must navigate all sorts of requests. Be sure to thank them for their time and effort to help you with yours!
- **Timing.** Relationship building happens best when people have time and are relaxed. Take the opportunity to introduce yourself at an event you are both attending, invite them to your event, or meet with them in their district office (or virtually!) when the legislature isn't in session (Summer or Fall).

FARM TO SCHOOL 'RULES'!

In New York, there are two state-funded farm to school programs.

Farm to School Grants Program—Starting in 2015, this program provides grants (currently up to \$100,000) to help schools increase their capacity to procure and serve New York farm products.

New York Farm to School Incentive—Passed in 2018, this program increases the per-lunch meal reimbursement from 6 to 25 cents for schools that spend at least 30% of their lunch budget on New York Food Products from New York farmers, growers, producers, or processors.

Advocacy for farm to school programs is important year-round, but especially during the state budget process because that is when it is decided if and how much funding these farm to school programs will receive in the upcoming fiscal year.

Be sure to reach out to the Governor's office and your legislators between November and April to let them know that you support continued funding for farm to school programs! To learn more about the New York state budget timeline and process, [click here](#).

NEW YORK BUDGET PROCESS



FALL

The Governor gathers feedback as they prepare their policy agenda and budget priorities for the coming year.

The state legislature holds public hearings on how the previous year's budget was implemented.



WINTER

The Governor delivers their public State of the State address in **early January** and submits their budget proposal to the state legislature.

The state legislature debates the budget and holds budget hearings **between January and March**.



SPRING

State legislature must pass the state budget by **April 1st!**

The state legislature works on other legislation until the end of the session in June.



Hearings and Comments—The Senate and Assembly Agriculture and Education Committees hold public hearings on programs funded through the state budget every fall and spring. There are often additional public hearings around specific themes that may touch on farm to school. If you are invited to participate in a hearing, you will have a set number of minutes to share your verbal testimony and you can submit additional or more detailed thoughts as written comments. You can also submit only written comments if you don't want to speak publicly!

Upcoming hearings are posted on the [Senate](#) and [Assembly](#) websites, or you can learn about them through the New York Grown Food for New York Kids Coalition. Contact the appropriate Committee Chair's office or coalition leadership at AFT to express your interest in participating and they will help you sign up.

Rulemaking Processes—When the legislature passes a bill establishing or changing a program, there are often opportunities to engage in the rulemaking process by providing written comments or meeting with the appropriate legislative or state agency staff. You can provide feedback, data, and examples on how the proposed changes will impact your farm to school program. Join the New York Grown Food for New York Kids Coalition to receive alerts to opportunities to engage.

While this policy toolkit focuses on how to engage with state level law and policymaking, don't forget that laws and regulations impacting farm to school are decided at *all* levels of government throughout the year! Make your voice heard with federal, state and local agencies and at town halls, board of supervisor meetings, staff meetings, and other local forums to build support for farm to school in your community and advocate for changes that will help you serve more healthy, fresh, local foods to kids.

LOBBYING VS EDUCATING PUBLIC OFFICIALS*

Depending on where you work, there may be rules against lobbying public officials. This does not mean you can't be an advocate for farm to school or share your stories! Instead of mentioning specific policy asks to your legislators, share more general information and stories with them about farm to school in your community. *Everyone* is allowed to help educate decision makers.

If you do decide to lobby, note that if you spend more than \$5,000 annually on lobbying efforts (ex. salaried hours or other expenses like booking a room for an event in Albany), you must register with the [New York State Joint Commission on Public Ethics](#) and file periodic reports detailing who you met with and other information on your lobbying efforts. **If you stay BELOW the \$5,000 threshold, you DO NOT need to register or report any lobbying activities!**

FEDERAL POLICY

Many issues impacting school meals, particularly child nutrition standards and procurement laws and rules, are determined at the federal level. The USDA administers the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, the Farm to School Grants Program, and other child nutrition and local purchasing programs.

Contact your Congressional representative to share the impact of these programs and join the [National Farm to School Network](#) and other networks to stay up to date on federal advocacy opportunities. The Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act and the Farm Bill are both reauthorized every 5 years by Congress and represent critical opportunities to weigh in on the importance of farm to school!

* Guidance on 'Advocacy vs. Lobbying' provided by the [National Council of Nonprofits](#).



How To Be a Farm to School Advocate: Crafting Your Strategy

Do you want to advocate for your farm to school program, but are unsure how? Work through these 5 important steps and use the best practices below to help you be successful!

For additional tools, general Farm to School talking points, and sample social media posts, check out the New York Grown Food for New York Kids Coalition's [Communications Toolkit](#).

1 Identify your advocacy goal. Do you want to share the success of your farm to school program and invite elected officials to celebrate with you so they continue to support these programs? Do you need help accessing the resources and support you need to grow your farm to school program?

Start by defining your and your team's values and purpose for engaging in farm to school efforts, and from there, work to identify what changes you are seeking and what you need from your target audience. It may be helpful to draft a [values statement](#) and [farm to school action plan](#), if you don't already have one.

2 Identify your audience. Make sure you pay attention to the actual sphere of influence of the person you are speaking to (e.g. don't ask a state level official to do something that requires federal action—like changing federal procurement laws). If you don't know, workshop your ask with people who work in policy.

3 Identify your capacity. How much time do you have to put toward engaging with public officials? It's okay if you only have 5 minutes—you can still make a difference!

4 Identify opportunities. Do you have an annual garden planting or harvest celebration? Do you serve monthly or weekly meals featuring New York items, or do taste tests and farm to school lessons with students? Or do you want to travel to Albany or Washington, DC to meet with your elected official?

Look at your calendar for the upcoming year and consider whether you could engage in advocacy to highlight the impact of these events or meet policymakers where they work. You may wish to make a note in your calendar if the answer is yes!

5 Craft your message. What stories or examples can help communicate your goal or need? Do you have pictures or data you can use to support your arguments? Work to keep your message simple, clear, and succinct. Remember that your audience, whether members of your community or legislators, do not know a lot about this topic and you are helping to educate them.

Research your target audience and learn what motivates them so you know how to best frame what you are sharing or asking for in a way that will resonate with them. For example, if your elected official really cares about public health, emphasize how this is improving access to healthy local food for kids in their district!

6 Pick your tool. Use your answers to the above questions to pick which advocacy tool or strategy will best serve your needs. You may wish to quickly share and highlight an event you hosted on social media, or to meet directly with your officials and create a short one-page document outlining your main points to share with them.

October is National Farm to School Month.

National School Lunch Week is the 2nd week of October.

National School Breakfast Week is the 1st full week of March.

For more food-related days, [click here](#).



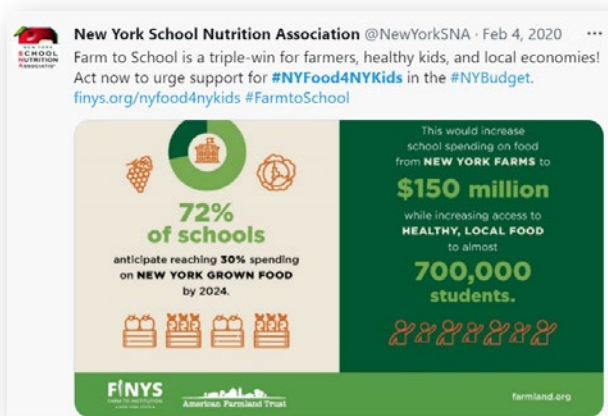
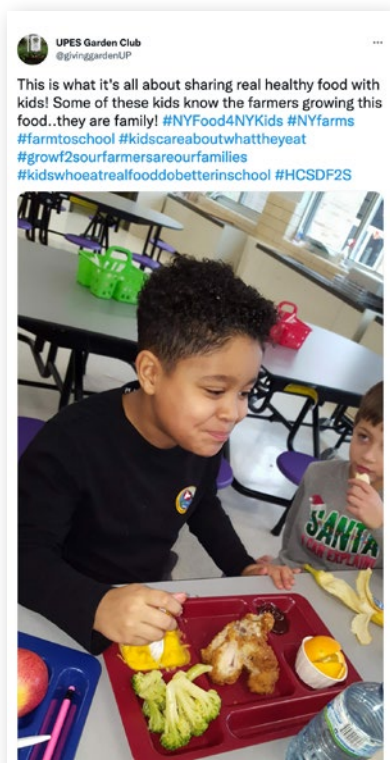
Recipes for Success: Advocacy Tips and Best Practices

Use the following pages to find tips, examples, and best practices to guide you as you advocate for farm to school in your community!

ENGAGING YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

- Use a high quality, colorful photograph or image. Explain what is happening and why it is significant in the caption. You can use a free online platform like Canva to edit photos and easily and quickly design simple graphics, like a photo quote, that you can save to use again later. Here are tips on taking good photographs of [school meals](#).
- Use hashtags like #NYFood4NYKids and #farmtoschool so that others can see and promote your posts too. Consider typing up the hashtags you use in social media posts in a word document and save it so you can quickly copy and paste them when you need them!
- Make sure to tag your Assemblymember, Senator, and other relevant policymakers like the Governor or Commissioner of the Department of Agriculture in Markets in your post! It's always a good idea to celebrate public officials' support publicly—tag and thank them for their hard work to make this happen wherever you can. If you are making a specific policy request, you may wish to also tag the Chairs of the Agriculture ([Assembly](#) | [Senate](#)) and Education Committees ([Assembly](#) | [Senate](#)).
- Join in a Virtual Day of Action event hosted by the New York Grown Food for New York Kids Coalition, National Farm to School Network, or other group and post to social media in concert with many other voices.

Check out [Rock on Café](#) and [Long Island East End Food Institute](#) on social media for more great examples!



WRITING YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

Click here for a sample email you can edit, copy, and paste.

- Contact your legislator directly through the contact form on their webpage or by sending an email to their listed office email, which can often be found on their webpage or by calling their office.
- You can also write a short letter on your organization's letterhead and attach it as a PDF file and/or mail it!
- State your purpose for writing close to the top of the email. Your email will most likely be read by one of the legislator's staff and directed to the person best able to respond.
- Be sure to keep your message succinct and polite and make your ask clear. Follow up if needed!

CALLING YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

Note: calling without a scheduled meeting time should be used for a specific ask during legislative session, or only after you've established a good relationship.

- Your elected official will have a phone number listed for an Albany office and one or more district offices. It is suggested that you call the district office closest to your location as you will probably be directed to speak with their constituent services staff, unless you are calling with a specific ask during the legislative session in which case—call the Albany office.
- Be sure to be polite and clearly share why you are calling with the staff person who picks up. They may take down your message or connect with you a different staffer who will be able to respond.
- Prepare a few notes or a short script to help guide you while on the phone so you don't forget what you want to say.
- Staff have the ear of the person you are trying to influence! Share your passion, treat them with respect, and meet them where they are (e.g. make sure they fully understand what you are talking about) so they can become your advocate within the office!

SAMPLE SCRIPT

My name is Helen and I am a constituent in your district calling to ask [Senator/Assemblymember ____] to support \$10 million for the Farm to School Reimbursement Incentive and \$1.5 million for the Farm to School Grants program in the state fiscal year 2022 enacted budget. Do you have a moment for me to share why, or is there someone I can connect with to speak about this further?

(Assuming they say yes) I have a farm to school program in my district where we do monthly meals featuring New York farm items that the kids always love, like apples and yogurt, and I would like to do weekly meals. I have been working to increase my purchases of New York farm products in [Senator/Assemblymember ____]'s district and these grants could help me do that. In my experience, farm to school helps grow our farm economy and strengthens this community while improving the health of the kids I serve. That is why I'm asking that [Senator/Assemblymember ____] support continued funding for New York's farm to school programs in this year's budget. Any questions for me? Thank you for your time and for passing along the message!

For anything longer or more detailed than the above script, it is best to set up a short meeting to share your message. If you do choose to call, keep it conversational and don't be afraid to ask the person you're speaking to whether they have any experience with the topic so you can react to their level of understanding, and have a short, memorable 2-way conversation.



MEETING WITH YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

SCHEDULE

- Email or call your elected officials' office to request a meeting. State the purpose of the meeting and the time frame you would like to have it. It is best to reach out to schedule 1-2 weeks in advance or more if there are holidays.
- Videoconferencing meetings have become much more common since the pandemic and are often easier to do (no travel!). Be clear about whether you want to meet in person or virtually. If you don't have a Zoom account, the member will likely be able to supply a link for the meeting.

PREPARE

- You may meet with a member of the legislator's staff and not the legislator themselves if you are reaching out during a busy time of year. Remember—they can become fantastic advocates on your behalf if you can educate them on your issue and convince them of your position! Ask questions, get to know them, and work to convince whomever you are sitting with why it's in the member's best interest to take the action you are seeking.
- Prepare notes and an agenda for what you want to say or cover. Most meetings are either 15 or 30 minutes in length, so plan accordingly. Start with introductions. Do some research ahead of time so you better understand what issues your legislator cares about and try to frame your argument and stories to connect to or highlight those issues.
- Consider preparing a short 1–2 page document outlining your key points and your requests with legislators that you can share with them before, during, or after the meeting. This will help them ask better questions and remember what you are asking for!

FOLLOW UP

- Thank the legislator and/or their staff for their time both in the meeting and in a follow up email. Before you leave, ask for their business card (in-person) or ask them to share their email in the chat (virtual) and share yours too so you know how to keep in touch.
- Keep the relationship going! Invite them to events or to tour your school's kitchen, share relevant articles, and send handwritten Thank You's if they take the action you are looking for. Maintaining these relationships will go a long way when the next time you need something rolls around!



INVITING YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS TO EVENTS

- Contact your legislator's office to give advance notice and share details of the event. Be sure to tell them when and where the event will take place, the purpose of the event, who will be attending, and if you would like the legislator to participate in any specific way (for example, giving short remarks or participating in a fun hands-on activity in the cafeteria).
- If appropriate, consider inviting a member of your local press to cover the event. Notify the legislator's office if there will be press there—elected officials love press exposure!
- Be prepared to have someone on hand to take photographs. A picture is worth a thousand words! Share these visibly in press releases, on social media or otherwise.
- Thank your legislator for coming both over social media and through email. If any of the legislator's staff attended, be sure to thank them as well!

CASE STUDY

GRAND OPENING OF THE NEWBURGH GRAND STREET GARDEN

In April 2021, Our Core Inc. held a grand opening event to celebrate the work students did installing their redesigned community garden and creating a new reading garden and seed library. The event was attended by students, their families, members of the community, city, county, and state officials and written about in their [local newspaper](#)! Our Core Inc. used the following strategies to help make the event a success:



- 1. Worked with partners.** Our Core Inc. partnered with organizations like the Newburgh Food and Farm Initiative, Land to Learn, and the Newburgh Public Library to share the responsibilities of contacting the press and elected officials, reaching out to community members about the event through mailing lists and social media and offering multiple activities to make the event interesting and fun for a wide audience.
- 2. Built community interest and buy-in.** Our Core Inc. engaged their members in the weeks leading up to the event by inviting people on their mailing list to help build the garden and updating them on the garden's progress. This helped make people aware of the garden project and feel more invested in turning out to see the result.
- 3. Framed the event in a way that resonated.** Our Core Inc. built upon existing relationships with local public officials who were invested in youth agricultural education, lived or worked close to the garden, or were interested in speaking (and being captured on camera!) at a celebratory community event. Our Core Inc. also pitched the story to press as a human-interest story centered in Newburgh, which they knew would capture attention due to interest in the city.



CONNECTING WITH THE PRESS

The media is often called our fourth branch of government, and with good reason. The press serves a key function in our democracy by helping us know about and understand what is happening at all levels of government. Advocates can strategically engage with the press to get visibility for an issue, program, accomplishment, report release—anything worth announcing! The media can also be a great way to connect with your elected members because press attention—both positive and negative—can influence voters. This is an important, yet unpredictable, tool in an advocate’s toolbox!

- Identifying your intended audience will help you pick the right news outlet to contact. If you are trying to reach community members, consider contacting your local paper. If you want to reach legislators in Albany, try one of the papers with statewide or Albany-focused distribution. You can find a list of New York local, regional, and statewide newspapers [here](#).
- One of the simplest ways to engage with the press is to write a [Letter to the Editor](#) reacting to a specific published article or an [Opinion Editorial](#), which can be more general but should still be current to what’s in the news. There are many guides available online, and your newspaper will also likely have [instructions](#) on how to submit a piece.
- You can engage the press more deeply by pitching a story idea to gain attention to an issue, story, or event. Reach out to a reporter and share the who, what, when, where, why, and how of your story. Explain why it matters. To find the best person to contact with your idea, look on the newspaper staff page for the reporters that write about agriculture, education, state policy and government, or whichever topic most closely aligns with your idea.
- You can also host a press conference or put out a press release to make an announcement. Engage partners and elected officials in the process to help create news-worthy buzz and, if appropriate, consider adding your event to your newspaper’s community event calendar!



CONNECT WITH US

When in doubt or if you need help with anything in this toolkit, reach out to AFT or FINYS staff, and we will happily provide support or answer your questions!

- Learn more at finys.org/nyfood4nykids
- Like [American Farmland Trust | New York and Farm to Institution New York State](#) on Facebook
- Follow [@FarmlandNY](#) and [@GrowFINYS](#) on Twitter
- Follow [@newyorkfarmland](#) on Instagram
- Use and follow the [#NYFood4NYKids](#) hashtag
- Need help? Contact us at: newyork@farmland.org

ADDITIONAL ADVOCACY RESOURCES

[New York Grown Food for New York Kids Communications Toolkit](#)

[New York School Nutrition Association](#)

[National Farm to School Network](#)

- [Web | Facebook | Twitter](#)
- [City and School District Farm to School Opportunities](#)
- [Farm to School Month Celebration Toolkit](#)

[Massachusetts Farm to School Advocates Guides](#)

- [Tips for Visiting Your Legislator](#)
- [Tips for Hosting a Legislator at Your School or Organization](#)

[Chef Ann Foundation](#)

- [School Food Advocacy Toolkit](#)

[Vermont FEED](#)

- [Communications and Outreach Planning Worksheet](#)
- [Coaching Guide for Farm to School Action Planning](#)

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