



MASSACHUSETTS
FARM TO SCHOOL

INSTITUTE

Institute Report

2023 - 24



Introduction

The Massachusetts Farm to School Institute is a year-long professional learning opportunity for a select number of school or school district teams from across Massachusetts. The Institute kicks off with a 2-day retreat where teams have the opportunity to work with an experienced farm to school coach to develop a mission & vision as well as a comprehensive school-wide farm to school action plan that includes curriculum development, local procurement, utilizing outdoor learning spaces, and cultivating family and community connections.

The School Year 2023-2024 Massachusetts Farm to School Institute Teams each developed a vision statement and action plan for their farm to school program. They worked throughout the year with the support of a coach to accomplish the goals set forth in their action plans. In the following report, we outline some of the highlights and challenges that the seven participating school districts shared at the close of the school year. As these teams wrap up their participation in the Institute, they join a cohort of Institute alumni from 28 schools and districts across Massachusetts.

Institute Teams

Amherst-Pelham Regional School District

Assabet Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School

Greater Lowell Technical High School

Learning First Charter Public School (Worcester)

Truro Central School District

Webster School District

Alfred G. Zanetti Montessori School (Springfield)



2023-24 Institute Highlights

7 Institute Teams

8,648 students impacted

85% of teams improved or built school gardens

57% of teams successfully integrated farm to school into the curriculum

71% provided their cafeterias with school garden grown produce



Amherst-Pelham Regional School District

Amherst-Pelham Regional Public School's Institute year concluded with three key insights: (1) while small changes are achievable, addressing systemic issues within a district in transition proves challenging; (2) both students and teachers exhibit enthusiasm for ongoing initiatives; (3) the district benefits from numerous successful models, ample inspiration, and robust support networks.

In an effort to expand local procurement, the cafeteria sourced items such as carrot coins, butternut squash, and kale from Joe Czajkowski (MA), cream cheese from Franklin Foods (VT), and yogurt from Upstate Niagara (NY). Menu offerings expanded to include dishes like a three sisters stew with local butternut squash and a kale and apple salad with local kale.

School gardens provided year-round learning opportunities for all 53 elementary classrooms, involving 960 students. Field trips to local farms and kitchens were supplemented by a new partnership with Cultivating for Community Farm, the educational farm of the Food Bank of Western MA. Efforts to integrate farm-based learning into middle school curriculum were explored, using Island Grown Initiative's world language lessons. High school students collaborated with elementary schools to provide garden maintenance and planting activities. Regular Farm to School updates were provided to the school community in the superintendent's newsletter.

One highlight of the year was the middle school climate justice event, featuring 20 workshops from local and regional organizations about climate solutions.

Future objectives include integrating nutrition education into wellness classes, revising curriculum to emphasize gardening, and fostering community involvement in advisory roles.



Assabet Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School

The Assabet Valley farm to school team focused their work on building a program around a formerly unused greenhouse. Their journey started in January 2023 when they identified a school-wide issue: no one ever used or was seen in the large on campus greenhouse. In February, the team visited Fat Daddy's Greenhouse to gain inspiration and to imagine the pivotal role that the structure could play in their farm to school program.

Recognizing that establishing a greenhouse was a large endeavor, the school hired a greenhouse consultant to get a program started, and the team applied to the MFTS Institute to get support in creating an action plan and vision. Creating this vision statement and plan at the Institute Retreat allowed the greenhouse program to get underway, and throughout the fall and winter the space was used to grow various lettuces, tomatoes, mushrooms, strawberry plants, peppers and herbs for use in the cafeteria as well for the students in the Culinary Arts program.

There were many hard lessons learned throughout the year, including major mechanical failures in the winter that destroyed the plants, followed by a serious aphid infestation. The spring season was spent getting the greenhouse back on track. This year, the Biotech students used the greenhouse for experiences, and the Design and Visual Program created logo options. The team hopes to continue reaching out to the school-wide community to increase student and staff involvement across the curriculum.



Greater Lowell Technical High School

The Greater Lowell Technical High School farm to school team surpassed their action plan goals this year with a flurry of activities. They incorporated student-grown nasturtiums and squash into cafeteria meals, provided food systems lessons, developed a curriculum on seasonal gardening for school gardens and the greenhouse, and ran an active greenhouse program along with a student-run plant sale.

A major focus was creating curriculum for the Transitional Occupations Program (TOPS), tailored to gardening seasonally and processing garden and greenhouse harvests. This program caters to students with significant cognitive & intellectual disabilities, aiming to equip them with employability skills for independent adult life.

The TOPS gardening and greenhouse program kicked off with seed and plant science, progressing to harvesting, seed collection, and recipe utilization. They planned future plantings, constructed new garden areas, created budgets, shopped for materials, and organized a plant sale with over 1,000 seedlings, generating funds for the program.

To benefit the wider school community, they devised plans to supply the cafeteria and Culinary Arts program with lettuce, kale, tomatoes, peppers, and herbs. Additionally, they prepared a plan for summer utilization of the garden and greenhouse during the Summer Enrichment Program.

Future goals include implementing a small aquaponics system in the classroom, growing lettuce year-round in the greenhouse for the cafeteria and Culinary Arts program, and growing herbs year-round in the aquaponics system and greenhouse.



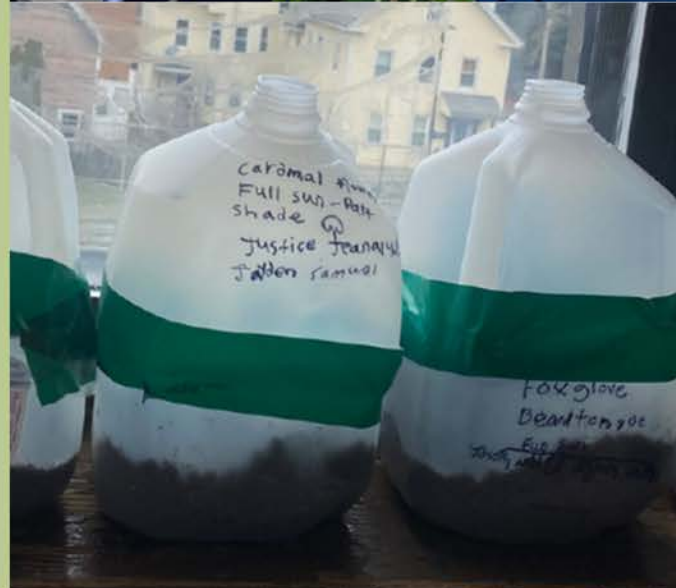
Learning First Charter Public School (Worcester, MA)

Learning First Charter Public School is located in Worcester, MA and serves students within the city of Worcester. It is a K-8 school with about 700 students. This was their first year developing a Farm to School program. While the team struggled with some challenges such as a lack of indoor growing space and staffing shortages, there were clear successes throughout the year.

The team held a school-wide Winter Sow event where students learned about seeds and plants and planted seeds. In a school-wide, "Raised Bed Build," students built new garden beds for their garden site. The cafeteria purchased and served local food through the Northeast Food for Schools program. In the early spring, the students planted a pollinator garden. Students also got to enjoy a farm field trip to learn about where their food comes from.

Goals planned for next year include:

- Continue to build and grow the community garden
- Look at opportunities to have plants within classrooms
- Continue to provide hands on activities for students relating to their community garden and farm to school program



Truro Central School District

Truro Central School's Farm to School program reinforces the important themes of community, environmental health, and sustainability while teaching about agriculture, health and wellness, science, art, literature, nature, and stewardship. At TCS, they reinforce intuitive eating and the story of local food through their Farmer in the School lessons and experiential lunchtime nutrition education led by a registered dietitian. Their goal is to source fresh, local food for their students and integrate the TCS cafeteria into the local food network.

Truro Central School has vegetable and fruit gardens that provide fresh produce for school meals. The gardens allow students to learn about agriculture and healthy eating while getting hands-on experience growing their own food. The team's vision is to create vibrant sustainable garden spaces that allow for student engagement at all levels, and connect the garden to classroom learning opportunities. They hope the gardens provide students with lifetime learning opportunities including teamwork, responsibility, problem solving, and environmental awareness.

Students at Truro Central School participate in food-based learning activities integrated throughout the school day to gain knowledge and skills around nutrition and gardening. These activities provide hands-on learning and connect students to fresh, local foods. Their Snack Cart Initiative provides students with easy access to balanced snacks throughout the school day, helping to reduce food disparity and support consistent nutritional intake.

To fund their program and goals, the team held Truro Central School Farm to Table fundraisers throughout the year to celebrate local cuisine, support the educational garden, and promote sustainable education and agricultural awareness. Renowned local chefs created dishes from locally sourced ingredients, and brought the community together to support hands-on learning experiences and environmental stewardship.



Webster School District

This year, Webster re-established their Farm to School committee by holding routine meetings and setting concrete action items on their Institute action plan. In order to solidify the team and connect with the greater school-wide community, the team established main contributors at all schools, and created a Farm to School newsletter that was distributed district-wide.

On the school site, the team worked to expand the number of garden beds, and created new growing plans to accommodate increased participation from staff and students. In order to reach their goal of getting more students actively participating in Farm to School activities, they increased the frequency of Harvest of the Month taste tests both in the classroom and cafeteria.

In the cafeteria, the taste tests even included offering recipes featuring harvests from the school gardens. The cafeteria also partnered with local farms and food hubs, as well as community partners to bring more local produce into school meals.

The team worked through obstacles such as how to increase student participation, unpredictable weather, space and ground conditions, and is hoping to increase the interest in summer involvement. They look forward to planning for upcoming meetings, activities, and the next planting/harvesting season, as well as spending their MA FRESH grant funds to expand their program to incorporate indoor hydroponics systems.



Alfred G. Zanetti Montessori School (Springfield Public Schools)

This year, the school garden at Alfred G. Zanetti Montessori School was intentionally planned and utilized, the garden beds were updated and the unused playground items were removed from the area. The Zanetti farm to school team established an afterschool garden club and used the school's e-newsletter to regularly promote the afterschool club activities and opportunities for classroom teachers and students to get involved during the school day. The team designed engaging hallway bulletin boards to promote the Harvest of the Month crop and garden club activities. Harvest of the Month teaser videos were shown frequently on the morning broadcast news. To promote school-wide involvement, school garden lessons and resources were made easily available. Students grew microgreens in several classrooms and the main office, and at the family Math Night, students shared the outcome of a school-wide taste test of cabbage salad made by students.

Future goals of the Zanetti team include:

- securing funds and supplies for the school garden club
- working with the Springfield Public Schools Garden Coordinator for support in reaching educators
- aligning the science standards to the garden
- writing a cooking & gardening club curriculum, and how-to manual
- inviting the vocational school to create additional infrastructure for the garden
- hosting a Family Cultural Heritage Night that highlights family recipes.

