

**Farm to School Testimony
Joint Committees on Agriculture
February 8, 2017**

- Three behaviors: tobacco use, no physical activity and poor nutrition
- lead to four diseases: cancer, heart disease, lung disease and diabetes,
- which account for over 50% of deaths in Vermont.

These are preventable diseases. At the Health Department we are working with partners to help Vermonters quit tobacco, be more physically active and eat a healthier diet, including more fruits and vegetables. This is a winnable battle, and we are enlisting help from all sectors to achieve success.

While we often attribute these diseases to adults, prevention starts early. Our children are struggling with healthy eating and lack of adequate physical activity, but we are making inroads. The latest Youth Risk Behavior survey (2015) for high school shows a slight decrease in overweight rates (from 16% to 14%) and obesity rates (from 13% to 12%). We have also seen an increase in fruit and vegetable consumption (from 23% to 24%). This is where Farm to School comes in.

We support Farm to School activities because they help to build healthy habits in children like eating more fruits and vegetables. This not only leads to better health, but we know that healthy, well-fed children are more successful learners.

We also know that children who are hungry have trouble concentrating in school. One in seven Vermont children face hunger, but Farm to School and school nutrition programs are making a difference: between 2010 and 2015, childhood hunger decreased by 37% as school meal programs improved and expanded.

We know that it takes time to learn to like certain foods, with some people needing at least seven tastes over time to develop a liking for a food. Farm to School provides taste tests of local vegetables and fruits in school lunches and in classrooms, increasing student exposure to sometimes unfamiliar foods.

Farm to School also provides important nutrition and agricultural literacy education. Children in Farm to School programs learn where food comes from and how food is grown, making them better consumers as adults. They also learn gardening skills and the nutrition information that helps them make better decisions as food consumers now. This will carry over into adulthood.

Healthy habits start before elementary school and because of that, we support extending Farm to School to early childhood programs in Vermont. Farm to Preschool brings gardening activities to young children and provides opportunities to taste vegetables and fruits that may be new to them.



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

These programs do more than simply help children learn to eat healthy, local food. They also support local farms and distributors of local foods. Every dollar spent on local foods contributes an additional 60 cents to the local economy.

The Vermont Department of Health supports the expansion of Farm to School programming to more schools and to early childhood programs. We will continue our support of Farm to School programs through our staff and programs.