

**Taken from Food Connects' response to the Vermont Agency of Education's Request for Information (Jan 2023):**

Years providing services: 14 years. (Food Connects 10 years. Food Connects programs were incubated for 4 prior years under Post Oil Solutions.)

Provide a brief description of the services your organization provides (no more than four sentences)

- Food Hub Enterprise: Sales efforts for locally produced foods
- Farm to School Program: Professional Development and support for Food Service Directors
- Farm to School Program: Coaching schools towards their Farm to School goals, including broadly supporting increased purchasing by advocating to administrators, teachers, staff and the wider community.

See an overview of Food Connects sales to VT public schools for SY 21-22 below.

Food Connects delivered nearly \$213,000 in regionally sourced foods from 61 farms and producers to 16 School Food Authorities throughout VT during SY 21-22. This equates to 489 deliveries. 25 of the 61 farms and producers are located in VT, resulting in \$147,900 or 69% of the total school sales noted below. As you can see, we have increased delivery routes specifically to serve more schools in new areas.

VT School District	SY 21-22 Sales
Addison Central School District	\$1,952.50
BRSU	\$4,294.72
Essex Westford	\$2,949.32
Hartford School District	\$450.00
Orange Southwest Supervisory Union	\$8,040.51
Rutland City Public Schools	\$1,344.33
Springfield School District 56	\$450.00
SVSU	\$5,872.05
TRSU	\$4,019.42
Twin Valley School District	\$742.57
WCSU	\$18,023.34
Windham Central	\$1,786.86
Windsor Southeast SU	\$17,582.57
WNESU	\$96,726.25
WRVSU	\$2,156.75
WSESU	\$46,515.64
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$212,906.83</b>

Food Connects partners with VT FEED to support and promote the VT Local Purchasing Incentive. Green Mountain Farm Direct (GMFD) is another close partner. Together, Food Connects and GMFD offer best practices to increase local sourcing in schools. Both organizations also make all products in our respective catalogs available to the other increasing the selection of products schools can order. Additionally we work closely with CAE Farm Connex and the Intervale Food Hub in sourcing Vermont products from Northern Vermont that we then sell to our school customers.

Finally, we have been informally partnering with ACORN Food Hub and the Vermont Farmers Food Center and the Bennington Food Hub to do a better job of serving schools in their region.

Hurdles for schools to start or increase local purchasing:

- School budgetary constraints
- Food service staff shortages and lack of time
- Schools understanding the required documentation for local sourcing (micro purchases, 3 bids and a buy, etc.)
- Cumbersome procurement regulations which small, rural programs are not adequately staffed to manage.
- Promoting locally processed or prepared foods to schools often require producer technical assistance with product development, pricing, product formulation statements, etc.
- Ease of ordering locally sourced products either via a direct relationship with a farm or via a food hub or distributor.
- Seasonal constraints of product availability

In January 2021, Food Connects hired a full time Institutional Sales Associate to oversee all school accounts and to make ordering via the Food Connects Food Hub as easy as possible. This role is approaching its capacity to continue to onboard new schools while offering the customer service required to serve existing accounts.

Farms and producers need to seriously consider their audience when selling to public schools. This often can take significant time and resources. When dealing with any type of processed or prepared foods, sometimes the recipes need to be altered altogether to accommodate school nutrition guidelines and product formulation statements are highly encouraged. Other variables that farms and producers need to take into account when selling to schools include the product configuration, price, and marketing. Once farms and producers understand the level of work involved to sell to schools with often less financial returns compared to selling to other outlets, their attention is directed to other priorities.

The Institutional Sales Associate at Food Connects has been able to offer some technical support for producers who have expressed interest in serving more schools. However, as more opportunities arise, this role will exceed its capacity to help develop comprehensive go-to-market strategies to sell to schools.