

## **Joe Bossen**

Vermont Bean Crafters

February 12, 2025

Farm to School Awareness Day

Hello. I saw some of you a few weeks back, for the record name is Joe Bossen of Vermont Bean Crafters, and I bought a farm down in Warren, and I'm here, similar, to tell the story, to advocate for this legislation, and I really appreciate everything Bob said about universal Meals Program. As someone with a kid going through the school systems and someone who has been working in the farm to school space for about 15 years with our company, and have heard all these anecdotes from food service personnel and directors about how important that program has been.

So to roll this picture out a little bit for you all... Vermont Bean Crafters started about 15 years ago, and one of the reasons we started it was to kind of get better, healthier foods into places that the local food movement kind of didn't necessarily, maybe leave behind, but was having trouble engaging with. Healthcare, K-12 education, early childhood education, incarcerated populations, basically all the people in our community that have the least agency over their food choices. These are the places that we wanted to get better food to. And so from the first schools that we worked with, which was like Burlington School Food Project and Doug Davis and Sarah Heissner and all these people that were really early advocates - to working with Abbey Willard (VAAF) and Vermont FEED. We learned along the way how to ask better questions and listen more and not just be like, "here's what we got. You should want it." It really should be, "What do you want? And how can we help you get that?" We've evolved our business model to the point where we now have our products getting picked up on a weekly basis by PFG (Performance Food Group). If you want to sell to schools in the state, it really helps to have it on a broadline distributor like PFG, or otherwise, you're chipping away at 5% of discretionary spending for a lot of school districts...

We started selling to Black River Produce, and then Reinhardt, then Reinhardt bought Black River, and then Performance (PFG) bought Reinhardt. All to say, to work in this space with broadline distributors is cumbersome, it's risky in its way. You know, it requires higher insurance, product liability insurance, and so to know that there's momentum going into having it be a worthwhile investment of our time and resources to work in Farm to School is really helpful.

When we're talking about these local food multipliers of, like, \$3 to \$1, it's not just like those dollars are a flash in the pan. Every local spend incentive that goes into this space kind of

helps act like a tugboat, rerouting this ocean liner of what school food service is in a direction that's more conducive with local. We're basically reformatting a generation's deep status quo into a future that I think we all resonate more with in this room.

At Vermont Bean Crafters, we do a number of things. However you want beans, we got them: like dry beans, pre cooked beans, black bean burger, cookies and muffins out of beans. The big idea is different schools have different equipment, have different staff, and their capacity to work with scratch cooking isn't always as much there as you would think from the outside looking in. All the people that I've met in the farm to school, the school administration, the people on the ground in the kitchens, I'm just really humbled and impressed by all the work that they're doing. To even think about the fact that they have like, a 20 minute churn on like seatings between students. As someone with a toddler, just transitioning people in and out of a meal time and mess like that while getting the food there hot, doing all the prep work that is going into it, it's a really impossible context. All this support that's coming from the state to help foster these programs, it's well beyond dollars and cents, although that matters too.

For us as an employer, as a small business owner, I'm really grateful. We're now at a point where each year, when I look at the sales reports, **we're selling to over 80 different K-12 schools in this state**, which is pretty cool. We're starting now to work with help from the agency of education and agency of agriculture to start selling to K-12 school programs in adjacent states. The work we're doing for small producers to help them serve in Vermont schools is also positioning them to get their feet under them, to serve the bigger, broader markets in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York State, Maine. And that helps us get from a business that can convert basically dozens of acres of beans, sunflower oil, herbs, carrots, onions, kale, turn them into value, add products, and go from dozens of acres to hundreds of acres of demand. And all of this is really helpful and catalytic in that.

Thank you very much.