

Food System Education - White Paper

Massachusetts Food System Collaborative

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Food System Education

Food system education - incorporating topics such as nutrition, agriculture, culinary arts, food justice, and other food-related fields - can have a lasting impact on students, their families, and their communities (Gortmaker, 1999; Wells, 2018; Silveira, 2011). Through these topics, students can gain the knowledge and skills to eat a healthier diet, learn to better understand and value the natural world, develop the skills to prepare food for themselves and others, and understand food access issues. Food system education has also been shown to have positive effects on academic and social outcomes (Williams, 2013).

Most children and young adults in the US are not eating a healthy diet, leading to increasing rates of obesity and obesity-related diseases in children and putting them on the path to face these challenges later in life (Moore, 2017; Kelder, 1994). Reaching students when they are young with effective instruction on healthy diets and helping them to develop an appreciation for fruits, vegetables and whole grains, will help reverse this negative trend (Howerton, 2007; Scherr, 2017; Evans, 2012).

By studying how fruits and vegetables grow, students learn important biology lessons while also developing an appreciation for the natural environment and the importance of environmental sustainability (Skelly, 2007; Wells, 2015). This learning is furthered by exposure to school gardens, local farmers, farm field trips, etc (Dyg, 2017).

High schools help to prepare students to be active members of their community and consider appropriate career paths. This is an important time to discuss issues of equity and race; unequal food access in their community can bring those issues to life and enable students to engage in projects to improve access. The food sector is large and growing rapidly, with employment opportunities for people with a range of educational backgrounds (Commonwealth Corporation, 2016). Teaching culinary arts will give students the skills to take jobs in restaurants, institutional kitchens, grocery stores, and food processing.



The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative (MFSC) was created following the completion of the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan in December 2015. The goals of the Collaborative are to promote, monitor, and facilitate implementation of the Plan. There are several recommendations in the Plan that support increasing food system education in K - 12 schools:

- [Food Access, Security and Health 4.1.1](#) Re-introduce contemporary home economics curricula to public middle and high schools. Contemporary home economics classes could involve an integrated curriculum including basic cooking techniques, MyPlate education, local agriculture education, food budget principles, food safety, nutrient information and labeling, and food-related health benefits and risks.
- [Food Access, Security and Health 4.1.2](#) Encourage and support nutrition education that is age-appropriate for students in elementary schools.
- [Workforce Development and Training 1.7.4](#) Support the development of curricular connections between school gardening programming, farm to institution food service relationships, and job and career information for students at elementary and secondary levels.

Expanding Food System Education in MA

There are many students throughout Massachusetts learning about nutrition, agriculture, food justice, culinary arts and other topics in classrooms, in school gardens, in the cafeteria, on field trips, and in afterschool programs. Some of these lessons are organized by teachers and staff at the schools while others are provided by UMass Extension, non profits, companies and others.

To ensure that all students have access to high quality food system education, the Collaborative is exploring what it would take to expand food system education in schools. A statewide mandate that this subject must be included in the curriculum may be one approach, however we would like to explore all avenues for increasing and improving food system education including, pilot programs, additional support for non profit based programming, better networking of existing efforts, additional research etc. Based on ideas generated by food system educators at the 2019 Massachusetts Food System Forum and on subsequent interviews with other stakeholders, the Collaborative has begun to understand some of the challenges and tensions inherent in this project.

1. Many of the existing programs are locally-based and driven by passionate teachers, other staff, parents, and organizational partners. How would mandating food system education at the state level build upon the successes of existing programs? Is it possible



to mandate and provide high quality state-wide programming without displacing or eliminating existing programs? How would that work?

2. Teachers are already asked to cover many topics with limited time and resources, and some of those concepts are included in standardized testing. How could food system education align with the existing curriculum and help teachers to illustrate some of the required concepts without creating undue burden?
3. We believe that expanded food system education will help students to eat more nutritious food, understand the natural world and the value of agriculture, enter the workforce with skills to succeed in the food sector, and understand food justice issues in their community. What other ways could the case be made to administrators and others about the value of food system education? Are specific metrics needed?
4. The school system is a complicated set of oversight and power structures. Which key decision-makers would need to be engaged in discussions about including food system education in school curricula -- superintendents, principals, school committees, PTOs, Wellness Committees, etc? What are the barriers to getting these people on board?
5. Many grant and technical assistance programs that help schools and teachers add new programming end up helping the schools that have sufficient resources to apply for, and implement, the programs. How can we ensure that any intervention we design will help the most under-resourced schools?
6. Massachusetts is home to 289 unique school districts, each with its own set of strengths, needs, and challenges. How would we respect and allow for these differences in implementing a state level food system curriculum?

For more information, see [our webpage](http://mafoodsystem.org/projects/food_literacy) (mafoodsystem.org/projects/food_literacy) or contact Brittany Peats at brittany@mafoodsystem.org.

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