

Food Literacy for all Massachusetts Children

Knowing where food comes from, how it affects our bodies, and the role it plays in our culture, our communities, and our environment is essential. To help Massachusetts children lead healthy, independent, thoughtful lives, all students in grades K – 12 should have access to food system education in school, learning about agriculture, nutrition, food justice, and culinary skills. These lessons will teach critical life skills and allow students to make informed decisions about food.

Food system education connects with a range of critical issues:

- **Physical health:** Understanding how nutrition and cooking impacts physical growth and health can have a long term impact on students' wellness and that of their families.
- **Mental health:** Activities like growing plants, raising animals, and cooking allow students to participate in social-emotional learning and practice skills such as teamwork, planning, and empathy.
- **Jobs:** Massachusetts' food sector employs hundreds of thousands of workers with a range of skill levels. By learning about these potential careers and developing the necessary skills, more students will be prepared to enter professions such as farming, fishing, health and wellness, engineering, processing, and transportation.
- **Environment:** Learning about the food system is an important lens through which to understand the impacts of climate change as well as how individual decisions can have an impact.
- **Community:** Food system lessons incorporate discussions about inequitable access to food, providing students with the opportunity to become civically involved in their community.

Many students throughout the state are already learning about the food system in science, social studies, wellness, culinary arts, horticulture, and other classes, as well as in cafeterias and school gardens, and in their broader communities. These lessons have had a profound impact on many of their lives and their families. But not every student in Massachusetts has consistent access to high-quality education about the food system.



Successful models of classroom food literacy work abound in Massachusetts. Building on those successes can have a transformative impact not just on the students themselves, but on their families, their communities, and the Commonwealth as a whole.

Food Literacy for all Massachusetts Children

Food literacy is not included in most state frameworks or tested on the MCAS, making it challenging to include these concepts in the curriculum. Many teachers feel unprepared to teach about the food system and struggle to find high-quality, culturally appropriate, curriculum-aligned lessons. The state should set food literacy standards and provide resources to support educators in integrating these subjects into their curricula.

To ensure that all students have access to food system education, state investments are needed in:

- professional development and materials;
- staffing food system education coordinator positions;
- a central repository for high quality, culturally appropriate, standards-aligned lessons; and
- better coordination among state agencies and nonprofits.

Funding for these efforts will leverage significant impact, as it will facilitate collaboration among decision makers, school administrators, teachers, parents, and students who recognize the importance of teaching food literacy in schools and want to collectively work to implement solutions.

Curricula, lessons, field trips, materials, and professional development must include concepts of racial equity in the food system including historical context of how inequities in the food system came to be. Grants and other opportunities should give preference to under-resourced schools, especially those in food marginalized areas.

Successful models of classroom food literacy work abound in Massachusetts. Building on those successes to ensure that all students graduate with an understanding of where their food comes from, how to feed themselves healthfully, and the role they can play in ensuring a sustainable and equitable food system can have a transformative impact not just on the students themselves, but on their families, their communities, and the Commonwealth as a whole.



Invest in Food System Education for Massachusetts Children

A level \$1 million investment in food system education will have a lasting impact on hundreds of thousands of Massachusetts children's health, the environment, and local economic development.

Continue support for coaching and grant programs through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

To ensure that teachers are supported in offering food system education, the state should allocate funding to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to continue the expansion of the Massachusetts School Wellness Coaching Program, and fund professional development opportunities and experiential learning through the Farming Reinforces Education & Student Health (FRESH) grant.

Continuing the expansion of the **Massachusetts School Wellness Coaching Program** will ensure that more school districts go beyond the requirements of wellness policies to integrate best practices around nutrition education and make plans to implement those goals.

A third round of FRESH grants will provide opportunities for professional development about food system education, spaces for teachers to learn how to integrate food literacy lessons into their curriculum and make connections with community partners, earn continuing education credits, receive ongoing support, and identify funding sources to purchase materials to implement new lessons.

These grants also support expanding educational programming around food literacy, and support expanding staff time to meet food literacy objectives. The first two rounds of the grant were popular, and only a certain percentage of districts have been awarded funded through this competitive program.

Proposed DESE Funding

- Massachusetts School Wellness Coaching Program expansion: \$250,000
- MA FRESH grant: \$750,000

Total: \$1,000,000

Support Policy to Provide Quality Food Education to Massachusetts Children

S.2588, a bill under consideration this legislative session would begin to provide resources and guidance to districts, schools, and educators related to food literacy.

This legislation adds food literacy to the list of topics that the board of elementary and secondary education may set educational standards for, specifically stating that such standards “shall promote an understanding of food systems including, but not limited to: (i) nutrition and the impact of diet on personal health; (ii) culinary skills; (iii) food production, including farming, fishing, and processing; (iv) the connections between the food system and the environment; (v) hunger, its causes and efforts to alleviate it; (vi) racial and other inequities in access to food and jobs in the food system; (vii) food justice; (viii) cultural connections to food; and (ix) careers in the food system including in the fields of farming, fishing, processing, engineering, transportation, public health, and hunger alleviation.”

To help teachers add food literacy to curricula, this law directs the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to identify appropriate materials and curriculum and provide professional development opportunities for educators, helping to improve teachers’ preparedness for these new lessons.

This legislation would also enable DESE to fund a Food Literacy Trust Fund that could be used by schools to support this programming and convene a working group of educators and others with expertise in the food system to review and report on the implementation of food literacy efforts in the Commonwealth.

