



# Promoting Food Literacy: Why systemic food education for all students is imperative

## Background

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative was established to promote, monitor, and facilitate implementation of the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan, accepted by the state in 2015. The Collaborative leads collective action towards a sustainable, equitable, resilient, and connected local food system through advocacy campaigns and networks. We work with hundreds of food system partners across the Commonwealth who help us identify our legislative priorities, including food system education. The Collaborative published a report in 2022 titled "Food Literacy in Massachusetts: Local Success, Statewide Opportunities" before launching the Campaign for Food Literacy in 2023, which aims to ensure all K-12 students learn about the food system including agriculture, nutrition, culinary skills, and food justice.

## Statewide Food System Education Partners

The Collaborative seeks to promote food literacy through advocacy and awareness building, leading the Campaign for Food Literacy. Several statewide partners provide a variety of direct support, programming, and resources that promote food literacy.

- The **Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Office for Food and Nutrition Programs** has spearheaded several projects including convening a Local Food System Education Task Force, administering MA FRESH and MA FRESH CORP grants, partnering with The John C. Stalker Institute to provide professional development, and embedding food literacy into the School Wellness Initiative for Thriving Community Health (SWITCH) program.
- **Massachusetts Farm to School** "strengthens local farms and fisheries and promotes healthy communities by increasing local food purchasing and education at schools." Their professional development offerings support teachers, school nutrition staff and partners to advance food literacy throughout the classroom, cafeteria and community.
- **Massachusetts Agriculture in the Classroom** works to "promote agricultural literacy among educators and to provide them with the skills and support to integrate agriculture into their classroom."
- **Massachusetts Department of Agriculture Resources (MDAR)** works closely with the Commonwealth's four accredited agricultural high schools, has conducted a study to better understand the workforce needs of the agricultural industry and the educational opportunities available, and partners with organizations to advance youth agricultural and environmental programming and provide professional development opportunities for educators.

# Introduction

## The Need for Food Literacy

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### What is Food Literacy?

The Campaign for Food Literacy's working definition of food literacy is:

*Food literacy is having the knowledge and skills needed to navigate a complex food system - the web of actors and activities from food production to disposal - in ways that support individual and community health, the economy, and the environment.*

### Why is food literacy important?



#### **Students who are food literate are better equipped to make healthier choices.**

Diet-related chronic disease rates are high across Massachusetts<sup>1</sup> and the United States<sup>2</sup>, and food insecurity can lead to many chronic conditions<sup>3</sup> resulting in higher health care costs.<sup>4</sup> School garden participation and food-focused lessons lead to better individual health outcomes by encouraging more fruit and vegetable consumption and healthier food choices.<sup>5,6</sup>

- Kids in schools with FoodCorps - where they have access to hands-on food and nutrition education - eat up to 3x more fruits and vegetables.<sup>6</sup>
- 78 percent of The Food Project alumni report increased vegetable consumption as a direct result of learning about the food system.<sup>7</sup>



#### **Students who experience hands-on food education have improved educational outcomes.**

Food can be an effective lens for teaching other subjects, and experiential food-focused lessons can improve educational outcomes. One study of a food-based science curriculum found that “hands-on, food-based curricula” can improve food related science knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Another found that nature-based education improved the STEM capacity of low-income Black and Hispanic children.<sup>9</sup> In a survey of school principals in Mississippi about the perceived benefits of school gardens, nearly half of respondents reported improved attitudes of students towards school.<sup>10</sup>



#### **Students who are food literate are more civically engaged and prepared for civic life.**

Massachusetts is committed to ensuring all students are prepared for college, careers, and civic life. The Massachusetts Graduation Council says that preparedness for civic life includes “making informed choices, contributing to the common good, and strengthening equality, justice, and liberty in their communities, Massachusetts, and beyond.”<sup>11</sup>

Food insecurity is a pervasive issue, and food access is severely threatened in 2026 by massive cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. While we work to address immediate food needs and food system policy issues, it is imperative that we educate the next generation about the food system and food justice. Students who have access to food system education in their early years are more likely to become more civically engaged adults advocating for our food system.<sup>12</sup>

# Introduction

## The Need for Food Literacy

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**Students who are food literate are prepared for careers in the food system and beyond.**

The average age of a farmer in Massachusetts is 58.7 and many farms do not have succession plans.<sup>13</sup> Food education prepares and inspires more young people to pursue jobs in agriculture, nutrition, food service, and related fields. Land's Sake Farm in Weston, MA offers after-school programs, field trips, and more for kids of all ages. Their Education Manager said, "...many of the kids who come to our programs go on to farm-related jobs. We have hired staff into all departments who were first program participants, including several who have become farmers and food growers."



**Students who are food literate make better choices for their communities and environments.**

According to the World Wildlife Fund, in an evaluation of their Food Waste Warriors program, elementary schools who conducted food waste audits and completed a corresponding "math and science conservation curriculum guiding students to connect the dots between food, waste, natural resources, and wildlife" reduced their overall food waste by 14.5%.<sup>14</sup> Green Team is an educational program for K-12 schools in Massachusetts. In their 2023-2024 report<sup>15</sup>, a teacher was quoted saying "[O]ur students, not only got to see the benefits of reducing waste in our school, but took their practices to the community...to make a change for the better"

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### ***Food literacy is important because...***

*"My passion for food literacy and education grew from years of working as a sustainable fisheries and seafood systems researcher, where I've seen how knowledge gaps and inequities in access shape what people eat...I believe that when people understand where their food comes from and how it impacts the planet, they are better equipped to advocate for sustainable practices and equitable food systems."*

*-Campaign for Food Literacy Steering Committee Member*

*"When we teach students about how food is grown; different cultural aspects of food; how to cook food and then pair that with a high quality, scratch cooked school food program, we are able to provide students with the education and tools needed to develop life long healthy eating habits. Food is such a powerful educational tool that can tap into children's creativity, food identity, interest in sustainability and so much more."*

*-Campaign for Food Literacy Steering Committee Member*

*"I would like to see every child have the opportunity to grow their own food and understand where it comes from. That knowledge is powerful and can inform their future choices which in turn will influence them as individuals as well as their communities."*

*-Campaign for Food Literacy Steering Committee Member*

Food education provides enriching learning opportunities for students and builds essential skills for individual and community health. Ensuring all students are food literate is imperative.

# Opportunities & Strategy

## Key approaches to food literacy for all students

### How do we ensure all students are food literate upon graduation?

Currently, some students learn about food in school through classroom lessons, school gardens, cafeteria programming, field trips, and more. However, across Massachusetts, there is inequitable and limited access to food system education.

- Food literacy is not included in the Massachusetts state frameworks,
- Food education is often championed by one or a few passionate individuals making it difficult to sustain, and
- Access to resources varies by school, even within a district

To provide equitable, consistent access to food system education and foster food literacy, Massachusetts must make systemic changes that require and support meeting food literacy educational standards in every school district.

Incorporating food literacy into educational standards is an essential step towards ensuring equitable access to food education for all students.

### We envision Massachusetts leading the way in ensuring food literacy for all students statewide.

*To accomplish this, we must have:*

#### A Uniform Educational Standard

Food literacy is included as an educational standard for all students and there is a set of concepts defined that a student needs to learn to be food literate. Those concepts are woven into the curriculum for core subjects such as math, science, and social studies as well as taught through school gardens, field trips, cafeteria programs, and other hands-on activities.

#### Trained Educators

Teachers have access to professional development opportunities to expand skills for delivering standards-aligned food system lessons in the classroom and school garden. Schools also have the resources to establish dedicated staff positions trained to deliver food education.

#### Standards-Aligned Instructional Materials

Food system concepts are embedded into the curriculum frameworks and educators have a guide to where food literacy is included in the frameworks. There is an audit of and guide to high-quality, standards aligned food literacy curriculum spanning food justice, agriculture, nutrition, and more.

#### Equitably Distributed & Sufficient Resources

Resources are available year after year to support food education including training teachers, building school gardens, partnering with food education nonprofits, and more. Support is provided for districts to budget for or identify other funding for ongoing work. Resources are equitably distributed.

# Opportunities & Strategy

## Key approaches to food literacy for all students

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### State Learning Standards

Establishing food literacy as an educational standard for all students takes this essential skill from being something a subset of students in Massachusetts develop to something all students have an equitable opportunity to access. Massachusetts can be a trailblazer in making it a policy that all students acquire this essential skillset, and providing the support to deliver.

The Massachusetts Learning Standards, outlined in curriculum frameworks developed by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), provide important benchmarks for student learning. According to DESE:

*“The Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks provide teachers, students and families with clear and shared expectations for what all students should know and be able to do at the end of each year. They represent a promise of equitable education for all students. They formalize the expectation that all students in the Commonwealth have access to the same academic content, regardless of their zip code, background, or abilities.”<sup>16</sup>*

### An Act to Promote Food Literacy (H.735/S.392)



**Adds food literacy to topics DESE can set educational standards for in Chapter 69, Section 1D.**



**Outlines concepts that food literacy standards should promote an understanding of, including but not limited to:**

- nutrition and the impact of diet on personal health;
- culinary skills and menu planning;
- food production, including farming, fishing, and processing;
- the connections between the food system and the environment;
- hunger, its causes and efforts to alleviate it;
- racial and other inequities in access to food and jobs in the food system;
- food justice;
- cultural connections to food; (ix) local food producers; and,
- careers in the food system including in the fields of farming, fishing, processing, engineering, transportation, public health, and hunger alleviation.

*Also emphasizes that districts can incorporate into existing curriculum*



**Asks DESE to identify high quality lessons and provide professional development activities**



**Establishes a Food Literacy Trust Fund to help schools fund this programming.**

# Opportunities & Strategy

## Key approaches to food literacy for all students

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### Financial Literacy Case Study

Financial literacy provides a case study of how these changes can be implemented. In 2019, financial literacy was added to the topics DESE can set educational standards around.

Chapter 438 of the Acts of 2018, An Act Relative to Financial Literacy in Schools, signed into law in January 2019, required DESE “to assist schools in the selection of materials and curriculum on personal financial literacy, and resources for professional development activities.”<sup>17</sup>

DESE subsequently:

- Established the Financial Literacy Planning and Implementation grant program.<sup>18</sup>
- Developed a resource “Personal Financial Literacy in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks” highlighting standards where financial literacy concepts were already embedded in Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.<sup>19</sup>
- Developed a resource, “Curricular Materials at a Glance: K-12 Personal Financial Literacy,” that lists free, high quality curricular resources associated with the financial literacy topics.<sup>20</sup>

As a result of continued advocacy, the House passed An Act relative to personal financial literacy education (H.4670) in October 2025. If fully passed, these bills would require “school districts to provide instruction to middle- and high-school students on personal financial literacy, starting in the 2026 school year, consistent with standards set by DESE.”<sup>21</sup>

Financial literacy has also since been added to the draft high school graduation requirements released in December 2025.<sup>22</sup>

Incorporating food system concepts into educational standards will only be effective to promote equitable and widespread food literacy if accompanied by comprehensive support including funding, professional development, and high quality standards-aligned lessons and curriculum.

# Opportunities & Strategy

## Key approaches to food literacy for all students

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### New York City Case Study

#### Food Education Roadmap

In 2023, New York City published a [food education roadmap](#), which outlines a citywide strategy towards achieving three related health and wellness goals<sup>23</sup>

1. Students build knowledge and habits about healthy eating and wellness.
2. Students have access to and consume healthy food in schools that meets their needs.
3. The community (food service workers, educators, staff, and families) has the knowledge and resources to be advocates for healthy habits and wellness.

#### Wellness Policy

Following this roadmap, NYC Public Schools updated their [wellness policy](#) which now includes food education, stating, “[F]ood education that is interactive and happens in many subjects beyond health education. Food education teaches about the larger food system, from how food is grown (farming and agriculture) through what happens after it is consumed, and how these processes interact with the environment, economy, community, public health, and more.”<sup>24</sup>

#### Food Education Standards

The NYC public schools Food Education team is now working on a set of food education standards that institutionalizes food education by ensuring it is a core part of the curriculum.<sup>25</sup>

#### Implementation Support

Several programs support implementation:

- **Food Education Grant Program** - A funding opportunity administered by New York City Public Schools that connects schools with nonprofit organizations who specialize in food education. Students at participating schools engage in hands-on learning including cooking classes, gardening, hydroponics, and nutrition education. The grant program reached 60 schools and 25 nonprofit partners in its first year and 190 schools and 40 nonprofit partners in the second year.<sup>25</sup>
- **Nutrition Collaboratives** - A unique program that connects students with culinary staff. Participating schools engage in a series of meetings that involve nutrition education, feedback on the school food menus, and building relationships. In its first year, 200 schools received \$14,500 for this program.<sup>25</sup>

# Opportunities & Strategy

## Key approaches to food literacy for all students

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### Professional Development

An Act to Promote Food Literacy also states that: “The department shall identify and offer information on resources for professional development activities and instruction on food literacy”

DESE has already made great strides in facilitating access to free or low-cost professional development opportunities related to food literacy including through their [School Wellness Initiative for Thriving Community Health](#) and partnerships with [RootEd](#) and the [John Stalker Institute at Framingham State University](#). Passing An Act to Promote Food Literacy would ensure that this commitment continues even in the event of staff turnover.

### Access to Resources

The equitable distribution of sufficient and sustained resources would help support meeting food literacy educational standards in all school districts, for all students. The Campaign for Food Literacy advocates for several opportunities to distribute resources for food education.

**FRESH Grants** - Administered by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) with support from Mass Farm to School, [FRESH grants](#) have been an important tool for food system education programming. The grants have reached an impressive 63 schools & early education centers and supported promising efforts.

**Food Literacy Trust Fund** - An Act to Promote Food Literacy also establishes a Food Literacy Trust Fund to help schools fund programming. Monies may be expended by the DESE to encourage and facilitate food literacy programs in schools.

Continued funding for FRESH grants and the addition of the Food Literacy Trust Fund are both necessary to ensure funding is available to support implementation of food education. The goal of the Campaign for Food Literacy is to ensure K-12 students have equitable access to food education, which cannot be accomplished without systemic changes. One-time grants are not sufficient on their own. Some school districts have initiated high quality food system education programming but have faced difficulty sustaining it, especially if they haven't gotten a second grant.

Additionally, providing support for school districts to embed food literacy goals into other programs is an important strategy for systemic change. Schools have an opportunity to incorporate food education into several areas including:

- School Wellness Policies
- Food and Nutrition Services
- Farm to School Programs

More about systems change in schools can be found in our Action Guide.

# Conclusion

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Inequities persist throughout the food and educational systems. Communities that experience environmental injustice and racial inequities in health, education, and income likely have more limited resources for school gardens and food system education. Therefore, approaches to promote food literacy statewide must focus on both wide reaching policies and practices as well as equitable distribution of adequate and sustained resources.

The Campaign for Food Literacy continues to advocate for key policy changes & funding mechanisms that will help food system education reach all students across Massachusetts. In addition, the Campaign recognizes exceptional efforts taking place in classrooms, schools, and districts across the state. Each action taken to implement a piece of food system education not only provides valuable educational opportunities for students now, but also contributes to a growing movement to ensure *all* students are food literate. Supporting many multi-modal approaches to promoting food literacy in classrooms, schools, and districts across the state is an important strategy towards food literacy for all.

## Calls to Action



### Legislators

You can help make Massachusetts a leader in ensuring all students receive education to develop food literacy, an essential skillset for the health of students, their communities, and the environment.

- Pass ***An Act to Promote Food Literacy (H.735/S.392)***.
- Talk about the importance of food literacy.



### State Agencies

- Continue to provide funding, resources, and professional development to support existing food, agricultural, and climate education efforts across all grade levels.
- Seize opportunities to include food literacy as an expected educational outcome for Massachusetts students.
- Help ensure equitable distribution of resources, recognizing that some districts experience environmental and racial injustice and inequities in health, education, and income.



### Funders

- Provide multi-year funding that supports technical assistance, professional development, and regional collaboration and resource sharing. This helps programming become sustainable and embedded in school systems long-term as they experience turnover, shifting funding landscapes and evolving instructional guidelines.

**Members of the school community** including school nurses, school nutrition staff, school administrators, district administrators, school committee members, school wellness committees, parents/guardians, and students have a central role to play too. The Food Literacy [Action Guide](#) and Food Literacy [Resource List](#) that accompany this white paper can serve as resources to start or enhance your existing efforts to promote food literacy.

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