

**REPORT OF THE  
SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY  
AND THE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION**

**Farm-to-School Task Force  
Report (SJR 347)**

**TO THE GOVERNOR AND  
THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA**



**SENATE DOCUMENT NO. 18**

**COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA  
RICHMOND  
2007**





# COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

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21 December 2007

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The Honorable Bill Bolling  
President of the Senate of Virginia  
Oliver Hill Building  
102 Governor Street  
Richmond, Virginia 23219

The Honorable William J. Howell  
Speaker of the House of Delegates  
General Assembly Building, Room 635  
910 Capitol Square  
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Gentlemen:

In coordination with Secretary of Education Tom Morris, I am pleased to submit the Farm-to-School Task Force Report pursuant to the requests of Senate Joint Resolution 347 (2007). This concept bears great potential for benefiting our school children and farmers in the Commonwealth.

If you have any questions or require additional information relevant to this transmittal, please do not hesitate to contact me at (804) 692-2511.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert S. Bloxom".

Robert S. Bloxom  
Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry

RSB:cpb

Cc: The Honorable Thomas R. Morris, Secretary of Education

## PREFACE

At the Request of the General Assembly in Senate Joint Resolution 347 (2007), the Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry and the Secretary of Education jointly convened a task force to study Farm-to-School concepts and develop a plan for implementation in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

**The Honorable Robert S. Bloxom, Co-Chairman**  
Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry

**The Honorable Thomas R. Morris, Co-Chairman**  
Secretary of Education

### **REPRESENTED PARTIES**

Secretariat of Agriculture and Forestry  
Bill Dickinson, Deputy Secretary

Secretariat of Education  
Douglas Garcia, Assistant Secretary of Education

Nutritionist  
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Department of General Services/Division of Purchases and Supply  
Eugene Anderson, Director, Policy, Consulting and Review

Fruit and Vegetable Growers/Agricultural Interests  
Melvin Atkinson, Rural Community Coordinator, City of Virginia Beach  
Cynthia Chiles, Crown Orchard Company  
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# Report of the Farm-to-School Task Force

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Recognizing the problems associated with childhood obesity and the search to open additional markets for fresh farm products in Virginia, the General Assembly passed Senate Joint Resolution 347 (2007), which requested that the Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry and the Secretary of Education establish a Farm-to-School Task Force to develop a plan for implementing a Farm-to-School Program in the Commonwealth. SJR 347 also asked this panel to determine the best method of providing information to educational institutions.

To meet the requests of SJR 347, the Secretaries formed and convened a Task Force three times to study the issue and identify solutions to the challenges inherent in establishing a Farm-to-School program. Regarding methods for best communicating information on the availability of Virginia produce to schools, the panel recommended a dual approach. Senate Bill 797 required the Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) to establish a website to promote Virginia products to educational institutions. The Task Force believes improving this website will best serve as a means for communication on Virginia's Farm-to-School Program. In addition to the VDACS website, the communication infrastructure currently present in the Department of Education will prove vital in linking all K-12 school districts with resources as this program develops.

Farm-to-School is about creating connections between growers, distributors and educational institutions. Through these connections, children and their parents can also be reached. To meet the educational needs for implementing a Farm-to-School Program, the Task Force submits the following recommendations:

### **:: Recommendation One –Strategic Partnership between VDACS and Department of Education**

The Task Force recommends creating a continuing strategic partnership between VDACS and the Department of Education to ensure that this program receives the necessary attention to take root in the Commonwealth without needing significant new resources. This partnership will ensure that officials at both agencies understand the needs of the groups they serve. A formalized partnership will require a small funding source and should be formed with staff from each agency dedicated to this effort.

### **:: Recommendation Two – Redesign of VDACS Farm-to-School Website**

A redesign of the current Farm-to-School website will make existing resources more accessible and user friendly to all parties. This site could also be the medium through which success stories and other resources are presented. It will also provide information to link growers with distributors and distributors with educational institutions.

### **:: Recommendation Three –Funding Sources for Certification Assistance in Good Agricultural Practices/Good Handling Practices**

Certifying small growers in Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP) will enable more farmers to sell directly to schools or distributors who

provide to schools. These certifications (which standardize the way products are grown and handled) eliminate the barriers to markets caused by concerns over food safety. The Task Force recommends that the long-term strategic partnership seek to identify funding sources to assist growers with this process.

**:: Recommendation Four – Pilot Farm-to-School Program**

To guarantee the success of a Farm-to-School Program in the Commonwealth, the strategic partnership should plan and execute a pilot study to assess the feasibility and sustainability of the program. This partnership should identify tasks to be undertaken in the pilot study and also methods for evaluating the success of this program. Funding for this could be sought from existing state monies or applicable grants

## **INTRODUCTION**

Childhood obesity remains a growing concern in the Commonwealth of Virginia and across the United States. Accordingly, our educational institutions have assumed an important role in promoting healthy lifestyles by monitoring what food is available during schooldays and providing nutritional instruction. A promising movement has also taken root across the country and holds potential to give greater access to fresher, healthy food items while also benefiting Virginia's agricultural economy by opening new markets for growers. Farm-to-School Programs create sustainable agricultural communities by linking schools with local growers. Farmers gain access to new markets and provide schools with fresher, healthy products. These programs also aid educational institutions as they continue efforts to promote healthy lifestyles among students by creatively incorporating educational curricula designed to improve understanding of agriculture and nutrition.

Farm-to-School Programs have existed for nearly a decade in the United States<sup>1</sup>, but their prominence has emerged primarily in the last few years. In essence this idea connects our schools with local farmers and creatively addresses two growing concerns: childhood obesity and the effort to keep smaller scale farming a viable enterprise. By strengthening local food systems, a child's access to fresher, healthier food choices increases, and farmers gain access to new markets. Integrated curricula provide a catalyst for increasing healthier eating habits while also teaching an appreciation for Virginia's rich agricultural tradition.

Creation of a Farm-to-School Program in the Commonwealth faces many challenges, and successful implementation will require all parties to work together and rethink how school lunches are traditionally produced. Virginia is not alone, however, in facing challenges involved in implementing Farm-to-School programs, and with the guidance of other states' successes in finding solutions, the Commonwealth can establish a program with strategic, but minimal, dedication of resources.

## **CHALLENGES**

The Task Force's study defined major challenges that would need to be addressed before implementing a Farm-to-School Program. While this remains a complex issue, the task force has identified ways to begin addressing the challenges.

### **Product Availability**

Virginia's prime harvesting occurs within the summer months when schools are not in session. While some potential exists for capturing products at harvest and putting them into processing, growing seasons limit which items are available during the school calendar. The success of a Farm-to-School Program depends on educating both school officials and distributors about Virginia's growing seasons to ensure that when products are available, schools know about and find ways to access them.

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<sup>1</sup> Anupa Joshi, Marion Kalb and Moira Beery, "Going Local: Paths to Success for Farm-to-School Programs," National Farm-to-School Program (01 February 2007), 2.



### **Distribution**

The process of distribution represents the greatest challenge identified. There is no uniform system of purchasing used across the Commonwealth. School districts in the Commonwealth of Virginia typically contract their food supply services to vendors in a yearly bidding process. Some schools may take out a separate contract for produce. Vendors may not offer Virginia products as part of their service package. Larger produce distributors hesitate to sell to schools because smaller order sizes disrupt the efficiency of scale in regular operations.

### **Product Costs**

School lunch systems have limited funds to spend on meals. Many operations depend on being self-sustainable in order to provide meals and compensate employees. As such, there can be an overwhelming disincentive to tinker with a system that balances for the financial needs of a school lunch program. Introducing more fresh vegetables at a greater cost of purchase could harm the existing balance in financial operations if children discontinue buying lunch as a result. Farm-to-School Programs must be cost effective in order for schools to be able to take the risks associated with providing more fresh vegetables on the lunch lines.

### **Food Safety**

Although small farmers can often provide the scale of supply needed by individual schools, nutritionists and lunch directors consider food safety their number one concern over buying local. Most contracts even require distributors and vendors to only buy from growers who are certified in Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP). Certification for smaller farms and growers often proves time-consuming and cost prohibitive.

### **Labor**

Most school kitchens no longer have the facilities, the staff or the time to handle the labor needs posed when preparing fresh produce for consumption. Time demands and lack of training have led lunch directors to use mostly processed and ready-to-serve items. Introduction of fresh produce will require lunch directors to adjust labor and training needs – both of which may involve increased cost.

### **Expressing a Geographic Preference in Purchasing**

Opinions differed on the legality of school districts expressing a geographic preference for Virginia products when bidding out contracts. This represents a major challenge and must be further clarified before progress can be made on implementing a program.

## **COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

The Task Force found that many of the existing challenges arising from a lack of communication and awareness about the initiative. Education of all relevant parties provides an important piece of a successful program. Understanding the needs of communities involved will better equip the program administrators to adapt and better serve the different regions across the Commonwealth.

### **Growers**

Many growers are actively interested in providing fresh produce to schools but have been unable to connect with distributors interested in sourcing local products.

Increasing awareness through existing communication routes (VDACS Farm-to-School website and other appropriate channels) will help develop these connections by showing which schools are interested in buying local products and which local products schools want. Greater understanding of the demands and preferences of the market will allow growers to plan better what they are able to offer each year.

### **Distributors**

The Farm-to-School web site should link distributors with growers interested in selling to educational institutions. The strategic partnership should conduct a survey to gauge the level of interest among distributors in sourcing local products and selling to schools.

By identifying both distributors and growers interested in selling to educational institutions, this group can build the framework for the Farm-to-School programs.

### **School Administrators, Nutritionists and Purchasers**

Professional conferences provide a great medium for promoting the Farm-to-School concept and responding to questions and concerns at the grassroots level. The Task Force's work has already been promoted to the School Nutrition Association during their fall conference.

The strategic partnership should continue outreach to professional organizations (School Nutrition Association, Virginia Association of School Business Officers, etc.) by presenting at annual conferences. The Department of Education can help promote Farm-to-School programs at the school district level through their communication infrastructure.

### **Students (and their Parents)**

The VDACS-Department of Education partnership should determine those existing standards that could best be met through a Farm-to-School Integrated Curriculum by studying whether standards of nutritional education and agricultural education can be incorporated into material produced for use with the sciences and health education.

In addition to researching how Farm-to-School can help achieve existing goals, the VDACS-Department of Education partnership should work with existing organizations to compile agriculture and nutrition curricula to be offered and promoted for use in the classroom. Several models currently exist and can be used to build an appropriate option for Virginia schools.

The partnership may want to consider reviving Virginia Agriculture Week, which was an annual week-long promotion and celebration of Virginia agriculture in our schools. This partnership can accomplish shared goals by involving organizations who have already expressed a strong interest in the ideals behind Farm-to-School Programs. Such organizations would include the Virginia Foundation for Agriculture in the Classroom.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Task Force concludes that the success of a Farm-to-School program depends on it being cost effective and efficient for all parties involved. Additional collaboration will be necessary to develop promotional materials and build momentum by meeting the educational needs mentioned above. The Task Force identified the following strategies to help achieve this goal:

### **:: Recommendation One – Strengthen the Strategic Partnership between VDACS and Department of Education**

Achieving success in the implementation of a Farm-to-School Program in Virginia will require a strategic partnership between state entities and organizations with the relevant expertise. Conversations on Farm-to-School should continue between VDACS and the Department of Education. A modest funding source will be necessary to sustain operations of this strategic partnership.

A continuing task force from these two departments should work to determine ways to encourage and implement the Commonwealth's program through low-cost or no-cost options. Two strategies identified included promotion of distributors who sell Virginia produce to local schools and encouraging school administrators to ask their distributors what products can be sourced locally. This partnership should seek ways in which to expand/improve Virginia's Farm-to-School Program, possibly through the Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program.

### **:: Recommendation Two – Redesign the VDACS Farm-to-School Website**

The Task Force recommends redesigning the current website to include sections for farmers, distributors and educational institutions. Fostering relationships between these three groups achieves a critical first step. Making the website a comprehensive resource on how to increase usage of local agricultural products will greatly advance the Commonwealth's Farm-to-School Program.

### **:: Recommendation Three – Identify Funding Sources for Certification Assistance in Good Agricultural Practices/Good Handling Practices**

Certifying small growers will enable more farmers to sell directly to schools or distributors providing to schools. Initially, grant funds should be identified to subsidize the certification of growers. The Task Force recommends that the long-term strategic partnership seek to identify funding sources to assist growers with this process. Appendix D provides a list of possible funding sources.

### **:: Recommendation Four – Conduct a Pilot Study**

Before implementing plans for a statewide Farm-to-School Program, the Task Force recommends launching a pilot study to assess the feasibility and sustainability of any long-term institutional program. The VDACS-Department of Education partnership should work to recruit two school districts (one rural, one urban) interested in participating in the pilot study.

The long-term partnership should identify possible funding sources from the Commonwealth or applicable grants. This partnership would be charged with planning the nature of the pilot study. This group should consider beginning with a focus on certain products that are easily supplied.

## APPENDIX A: Legislative Mandate – 2007 General Assembly

### SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 347

*Requesting the Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry and the Secretary of Education to establish a Farm-to-School Task Force to develop a plan for implementing a Farm-to-School Program in Virginia. Report.*

Agreed to by the Senate, February 6, 2007

Agreed to by the House of Delegates, February 20, 2007

WHEREAS, the General Assembly has determined that childhood obesity has become a significant health concern; and

WHEREAS, the need exists to promote healthy lifestyles within our public schools and across the Commonwealth; and

WHEREAS, a number of states, including New York, have established, by statute, farm-to-school programs "to facilitate and promote the purchase" of homegrown farm products by the educational institutions within the state; and

WHEREAS, the Commonwealth's fruit and vegetable growers have the ability to provide quality farm-fresh food products to schools, universities, and other educational institutions under the jurisdiction of the Virginia Department of Education; and

WHEREAS, the health benefits for our children are paramount, and promoting the purchase of Virginia farm products is vital to our economy; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That the Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry and the Secretary of Education be requested to establish a Farm-to-School Task Force to develop a plan for implementing a Farm-to-School Program in Virginia. In developing its plan, the Task Force shall study the best method of providing information to the Virginia Department of Education, interested school divisions, and institutions of higher education regarding the availability of Virginia farm products, including the names and contact information of farmers, farm organizations, and businesses that market Virginia farm products.

The Task Force shall be appointed jointly by the Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry and the Secretary of Education and shall consist of one nutrition specialist; one procurement specialist; representatives of Virginian's fruit and vegetable growers and other agricultural interests; and representatives of rural and urban school divisions.

Technical assistance shall be provided to the Task Force by the Department of Agriculture and Forestry, the Virginia Department of Education, and the Department of General Services. All agencies of the Commonwealth shall provide assistance to the Task Force for this study, upon request.

The Task Force appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry and the Secretary of Education shall complete its meetings by November 30, 2007, and the Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry and the Secretary of Education shall submit jointly to the Governor and the General Assembly an executive summary and a report of the Task Force findings and recommendations for publication as a House or Senate document. The executive summary and report shall be submitted as provided in the procedures of the Division of Legislative Automated Systems for the processing of legislative documents and reports no later than the first day of the 2008 Regular Session of the General Assembly and shall be posted on the General Assembly's website.

## **APPENDIX B: Related Legislation – 2007 General Assembly**

### **CHAPTER 352**

An Act to amend the Code of Virginia by adding a section numbered 3.1-14.4, relating to establishing a farm-to-school website.

[S 797]

Approved March 13, 2007

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:

1. That the Code of Virginia is amended by adding a section numbered 3.1-14.4 as follows:

§ 3.1-14.4. Commissioner to establish farm-to-school website.

The Commissioner shall establish and maintain a farm-to-school website. The purpose of the website shall be to facilitate and promote the purchase of Virginia farm products by schools, universities, and other educational institutions under the jurisdiction of the State Department of Education. The website shall present such current information as the availability of Virginia farm products, including but not limited to the types and amount of products, and the names of and contact information for farmers, farm organizations, and businesses marketing such products.

## APPENDIX C: Virginia Produce Availability Chart

Table courtesy of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

VIRGINIA FRUIT AND VEGETABLE AVAILABILITY CALENDAR												
	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC
APPLES												
ASPARAGUS												
BLACKBERRIES												
BLUEBERRIES												
BROCCOLI												
CANTALOUPE												
CUCUMBERS												
GRAPES												
GREEN BEANS												
GREEN PEPPERS												
GREENS/SPINACH												
NECTARINES												
PEACHES												
PUMPKINS												
RASPBERRIES												
SQUASH												
STRAWBERRIES												
SWEET CORN												
TOMATOES												
WATERMELONS												

## **APPENDIX D: Possible Funding Sources for Certification Programs**

Potential funding sources which could be used to help fund a certification program for smaller growers are given below. Brief descriptions outline eligibility and amounts of grants. All information below is extracted from USDA or other appropriate online resources. Links have been given to full text versions of these program descriptions.

### **:: Federal-State Marketing Improvement Program (FSMIP)**

The Federal-State Marketing Improvement Program (FSMIP) provides matching funds to State Departments of Agriculture and other appropriate State agencies to assist in exploring new market opportunities for U.S. food and agricultural products, and to encourage research and innovation aimed at improving the efficiency and performance of the U.S. marketing system.

FSMIP funds a wide range of applied research projects that address barriers, challenges, and opportunities in marketing, transportation, and distribution of U.S. food and agricultural products domestically and internationally.

Proposals may deal with barriers, challenges or opportunities manifesting at any stage of the marketing chain including direct, wholesale, and retail. Proposals may involve small, medium or large scale agricultural entities but should potentially benefit multiple producers or agribusinesses. Proprietary proposals that benefit one business or individual will not be considered.

Proposals that address issues of importance at the State, regional or national level are appropriate for FSMIP. FSMIP also seeks unique proposals on a smaller scale that may serve as pilot projects or case studies useful as a model for others. Of particular interest are proposals that reflect a collaborative approach between the States, academia, the farm sector and other appropriate entities and stakeholders.

FSMIP is funded by annual appropriations to the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), USDA. AMS anticipates that approximately \$1.3 million will be available for support for this program in fiscal year (FY) 2007. Approximately 25 to 30 projects are funded each year. The average grant award is \$50,000.

For complete information, access the USDA Program Description at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/tmd/fsmip.htm#BriefDescription>

### **:: USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant**

Each State (all 50 are eligible) that submits an application that is reviewed and approved by the USDA is to receive \$100,000. In addition, each State would receive an amount that represents the proportion of the value of specialty crop production in the state in relation to the national value of specialty crop production using the latest



available complete specialty crop production data set in all states whose applications are accepted. Specialty crop block grant funds can be requested to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops. Specialty crops are defined as fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, and nursery crops (including floriculture).

Examples of “enhancing the competitiveness” of specialty crops includes, but are not limited to: research, promotion, marketing, nutrition, trade enhancement, food safety, food security, plant health programs, education, “buy local” programs, increased consumption, increased innovation, improved efficiency and reduced costs of distribution systems, environmental concerns and conservation, product development, and developing cooperatives. Specialty crop block grant funds will be awarded for projects of up to 3 years duration.

For complete information, access the USDA Program Description at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/fv/scbgp.html>

### **:: SARE Sustainable Community Innovation Grant**

Any person or organization with an idea that will link sustainable agriculture activities to healthy rural community development can apply.

Eligible activities include those that will increase knowledge, build capacity and make connections between farms and rural communities to the benefit of people who live in those communities. This could include, but is not limited to, developing farmers markets, establishing nutrition classes about the benefits of local foods and facilitating local processing of pastured livestock.

Project maximums are \$10,000 for up to two years of activities.

#### **Successful proposals include:**

- **Partnerships.** All relevant stakeholders in the community should be represented, including producers, civic organizations, local government and entrepreneurs. To that mix should be added researchers, community development professionals, environmentalists and other specialists as needed.
- **Multiple disciplines.** Even though scientists are trained within disciplines, real-world agricultural problems seldom occur within such neat boundaries. The research team should consist of cooperators from a variety of disciplines who design a plan to integrate their efforts.
- **Linkages.** Link sound farm and non-farm economic development with agricultural and natural resource management.

For complete information, access the Southern Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education site at [http://www.southernsare.uga.edu/scig\\_page.htm](http://www.southernsare.uga.edu/scig_page.htm)

### **:: Community Food Projects Competitive Grants**

The Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program (CFPCGP) is designed to increase food security in communities by bringing the whole food system together to assess strengths, establish linkages, and create systems that improve the self-reliance of community members over their food needs.

The program is designed to:

- Meet the needs of low-income people by increasing their access to fresher, more nutritious food supplies.
- Increase the self-reliance of communities in providing for their own food needs.
- Promote comprehensive responses to local food, farm, and nutrition issues.
- Meet specific state, local, or neighborhood food and agricultural needs for infrastructure improvement and development.
- Plan for long-term solutions.
- Create innovative marketing activities that mutually benefit agricultural producers and low-income consumers.

These grants are intended to help eligible private nonprofit entities that need a one-time infusion of federal assistance to establish and carry out multipurpose community food projects. Projects are funded from \$10,000-\$300,000 and from 1 to 3 years. They are one-time grants that require a dollar-for-dollar match in resources.

For complete information, access the USDA Program Description at [http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/food/in\\_focus/hunger\\_if\\_competitive.html](http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/food/in_focus/hunger_if_competitive.html)



