

**RI Agricultural Partnership 5-Year Strategic Plan**  
**Outreach Interviews**  
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**7/14/10**

*What are the opportunities and challenges in expanding farm-to-school in Rhode Island?*

All 36 school districts in Rhode Island are participating in farm-to-school at some level, but want to increase their local purchases. Major challenges are:

--Food service: 34 of the 36 school districts and many other institutions are served by either Sodexo, Aramark, or Chartwells food service companies. These companies are reluctant to change the model and purchase food direct from farmers and prefer to work through a distributor in the middle as it is easier to deal with one account and to do so in larger volume. So farm-to-school programs must work with the middle distributor. Farm Fresh RI is working to be this middle man by creating a one-stop distribution network.

--Distribution/Infrastructure: some light processing—such as chopping, washing, and bagging—is needed, but the infrastructure is lacking. Some on-going discussions with a RI prison to see if facilities may be available for use.

--Transparency: issues around how to ensure RI grown is labeled as such and out-of-state products are not labeled as RI grown.

--It is important to reward, showcase, and motivate companies that do purchase and distribute locally. Also need to provide technical assistance and other support to distributors who want to purchase more local products.

--Farmers have and are willing to grow more products—such as carrots, broccoli, sugar snap peas, and cherry tomatoes—and schools are willing to purchase these local products, but issues with the middle: distribution and light processing.

In terms of colleges and universities—Brown is a leader in local purchasing. RI School of Design, which hired the former food service director at Brown, is also working to increase local purchases. There are opportunities for URI to be a leader in local purchasing, but as with other state run institutions, they are not buying a significant amount of local products.

Some private institutions, such as Blue Cross, Blue Shield, sell RI milk, eggs and other local products for employees to take home on their way out of work. There are opportunities to duplicate this model at state institutions, but have not yet been successful.

*Is there any momentum around creating a state procurement preference for RI grown products?*

There has been discussion around this topic and it could be an agenda item for an in-the-work statewide Food Council. There are many opportunities for state institutions—URI, etc—to buy more local products and a local procurement preference would certainly help.

*What are the challenges and opportunities around education?*

Need to work on more coordinated education opportunities to expose children to farming. Farm-to-school could be more involved in this. Perhaps focus on opportunities to re-invigorate agricultural components or programs at vo-tech schools and to help support agriculture in the classroom.

Perhaps create a food system curriculum in all schools—include nutrition. Approximately 6-8 years ago the schools had a health curriculum and testing around this topic, but no longer in existence.

*What about purchases of local milk?*

Rhody Fresh has 8oz containers of milk which would be perfect for schools, but schools are currently not purchasing them. Schools are willing to pay more for RI milk, but a main barrier is around providing and servicing refrigerators/coolers for the milk which are currently provided by Garelick. It seems that Newport is working through some of these issues and is poised to buy from Rhody Fresh. If successful, other schools will likely follow.

*Issues around food safety*

RI has a strong GAP program which was built with the input from schools and the school districts are very happy with the program. Farmers who have undergone GAP training get a reduction in the cost of liability insurance and requirements from institutions are reduced. The GAP program should continue to be supported and expanded, especially if current trainers are close to retirement.

*Other long-term issues for farm-to-school in RI?*

Kids First supports a team of people who work to link farmers to schools. This technical assistance is funded by grants and foundations. It is unclear how long funders will continue to fund these efforts and currently activities are only covered for the next year. These important support services need about \$100,000 per year.