

# **Evaluation Report**

## **Year Two**

### **USDA Community Food Projects Grant**

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**Grantee:** Seeds of Solidarity Education Center, Inc.

**Project Title:** The SOL (Seeds of Leadership) Patrol: Cultivating Healthy Communities

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Seeds of Solidarity and the participants of this project reside in the North Quabbin area, an economically depressed region in North-Central Massachusetts. This project plans to increase the accessibility and reliability of local, fresh food for low-income teens and their families in this region. In addition, relationships will be developed between local schools and local food producers to provide students with fresh food and to give them a better understanding of where their food comes from and its full-cost. This project plans to promote renewable energy alternatives to insecure fossil fuels that threaten true food security and public health.

The project goal that encompasses the following measurable outcomes:

*Expanding on several established initiatives, the project will teach low income teenagers to grow food, create school gardens at six schools, encourage schools to source 20 percent of their produce from local farms, and facilitate small farmers in becoming mentors to schools. The project will recognize “Local School Heroes” to celebrate schools that grow or buy local food, create “Local Food, Local Energy” curricula and demonstrate innovative ways to use renewable energy.*

**Ten major outcomes and outputs of the SOL Patrol: Cultivating Healthy Communities Grant are being evaluated over a three-year period.**

In the first phase of this evaluation (2004), three of the outcomes were tested qualitatively, measuring the success of the engagement of low-income teenagers and college interns in leadership and food system activism. These outcomes measured the impact of a growing knowledge base, shifting values and attitudes, and the translation of what was learned into locally-based behavioral activities and food-based activism. The results are available in the first report.

In this second phase of an on-going evaluation (2005), four new major goals were attended to and measured both quantitatively and qualitatively, as well as the continued oversight of the first three (covered in the first report). In this report, the following two goals are evaluated qualitatively:

1. Implement the SOL Patrol’s Local Food, Local Energy curriculum tool kit in schools. Involve at least 900 children, 48 teachers and staff, and 60 family and community

volunteers in food producing gardens at six schools. The construction of school greenhouses, the study of food with an experiential focus, and the involvement of children in the process of taking food directly from greenhouses and gardens to produce food.

Beginning in January 2005, several group interviews were performed to assess the reactions of elementary and middle school students to the Local Food, Local Energy curriculum as it was introduced in North Quabbin schools. 'Thank you letters' became another valuable emergent source of data. A parent survey was sent home with children to better understand the communication of food information to parents and families.

2. Create a regional network of "Local Hero Schools" to participate in farm to school buying and partner with existing Local Hero farmers who serve as mentors. Encouraging school districts to purchase 20 percent of cafeteria produce from local farms and the engagement of food service directors in the integration of food into school cafeteria offerings.

The Food Service director from the Orange, MA school district was interviewed in depth regarding the success of the growing regional network aiding the integration of local produce into school cafeteria offerings. This Food Service Director oversees cafeterias at three elementary schools and a summer feeding program at eight sites. The interview came on the cusp of a very well attended conference hosted by Seeds of Solidarity, and with Kelly Erwin from the MA Department of Agriculture Resources on the Cultivation of Fresh Wellness Policies.

**Methodologies** include:

Methodology 1: The Orange, MA School District Food Service Director Sherry Fiske, was interviewed to better understand the impact this project has had on the management of food choices within elementary schools.

Methodology 2: Two group interviews with school children who had experienced both the curriculum and the greenhouse activities.

One interview was held at Butterfield Elementary School in Orange, MA. Eight children joined the evaluator to discuss the programs and their experiences.

The other was held at Athol-Royalston Middle School with 12 eighth graders who had built a greenhouse, grown plants and experienced eating them.

Methodology 3: Serendipitously, 64 written thank-you notes were received from students at the Athol-Royalston Middle School. In reviewing these letters, it was clear that they were not structured around a form dictated by the teachers. The evaluator reviewed the letters and extracted relevant comments regarding the goals of the project.

Methodology 4: 50 surveys were sent out to parents of children who have experienced at least one element of the SOL project. Parents were asked to answer the following questions:

1. Are you more aware of local food sources, such as farms and farmers markets, as a result of your child's involvement in food education programs at school? (Y/N)
2. Has your family's consumption of fresh local food increased over the previous year? (Y/N)
3. Do you consider where food is grown before you buy it? (Y/N)
4. Do you and your child grow vegetables at home? (Y/N)
5. What has your child learned about food from the activities at school? What information has been most helpful to you? (Narrative response)

**Outcome: Create a regional network of 'Local Hero Schools' to participate in farm to school buying and partner with existing Local Hero farmers who serve as mentors.**

**Initiate and expand a Local Hero Schools campaign at six schools and involve six farmers over three years. Encourage school districts to purchase 20 percent of cafeteria produce from local farms.**

#### Methodology 1: Interview with Food Service Director

The Food Service Director for Orange Elementary Schools, Sherry Fiske, is deeply committed to integrating fresh and local foods into school lunch and breakfast programs. She represents three of the six target schools for the project. She has strengthened relationships with five different fresh food providers/farmers in the local area...all of whom organize produce for use in the cafeteria. Sherry is committed to the goal of 20% of the school meal being fresh and local...*it only makes sense to the diets and working minds we are responsible for.* The newly proposed element for the project includes cooking classes to encourage the use of fresh and local foods in recipes for school and home.

Sherry reiterated that food service directors work in isolation and desperately need the support of a vital school/community organization to sustain farm to school efforts. The work of Seeds of Solidarity in facilitating communication among local farmers and food producers, community members and schools was noted by a group of sixty in attendance at a "Cultivating Fresh Wellness Policies" event and reiterated by Sherry...her job is too site-intensive to allow visitation to farms, to manage the networking and communication, help in the transportation and facilitation among farmers without help. Sherry added, *Deb Habib is a hands-on organizer who never forgets you or what she promises to do. She reviews all the resources available to us, looks them over and makes them available. She never drops the ball. And that means a lot for those of us trying something new.*

The additional networking and support of Kelly Erwin, MA Dept. of Agricultural Resources, has helped make this farm to school project a reality for Orange schools.

Kelly has helped, with Deb Habib, to organize growers/farmers to transport and bill the foodstuffs according to the school district schedule. She stated that, *Billing is a big problem for most food directors and can be considered a deterrent. The successful agreement to bill on a 60 day cycle was a major breakthrough. The farmers who have gotten involved see this project through their hearts...they want kids to eat well. Farmers ultimately must have some incentive to do this for the long-term...When they have a choice to sell their land for a profit that is greater than what they will earn farming, most see a way out by selling their land to developers. The life of the small local farmer is fading. If schools were to become a consistent and viable market, they might see a more beneficial long term for their effort.*

Sherry stated that, *most food service directors (FSD) are daunted by fiscal shuffling and compensation of fresh food with subsidized commodities, when they attempt to introduce fresh food to the menu. With a fixed amount of money available for each lunch, one has to be creative balancing the higher cost of 'fresh' with the lower costs of some main course items. 'Not dabbling with fresh' has been made very easy, through discounted governmental food commodities and "wide-open descriptors of what accounts for a vegetable or fruit" (ketchup as a vegetable) for FSDs to lay low and only serve what is required by laws governing school lunches. Some creativity is necessary to imagine lunches and breakfasts differently. FSDs need to reorient their priorities, most are focused on success= turning a profit - that's not the issue - good food for kids is the issue!*

Sherry holds a strong belief in the *power of food to build healthy minds and bodies*. She also feels a powerful sense of responsibility on the part of the FSD to respond with healthy foods. It is clear to her that about 40% of the children in the schools only eat at school. *Healthy fresh foods are not a part of their lives, outside of the school environment. Some children must have fresh foods explained to them in the cafeteria as they will not have encountered foods that are not processed, frozen or canned in their homes. I look closely at what kids eat and what they throw away. Most of what is thrown away is canned or frozen. Kids rarely, if ever, throw away a piece of fresh fruit or a vegetable that is fresh.*

Sherry is a great proponent of involving students in the growing and harvesting of foods. In a small garden off the cafeteria, *students are invited to eat outside in the 'garden café' during warm weather in order to be with plants that produce foods. Students participate in an OASIS project during the summer in which they grow a pizza garden and eat the produce directly from the garden. Sherry believes that, the more children are involved in growing and harvesting and eating foods in their own gardens or in places that they know from the local area, the more they will learn to love the taste and know the health benefits of fresh foods.*

Results: Considering this interview, it is clear that

- Sherry is committed to the goals of this project for many reasons, including the need to provide children who may not eat well at home with good solid, fresh foods that will bolster their ability to be a success in school. She will find a way to increase the amount of fresh food to 20%.
- Sherry is a role model for other local FSDs. She works with other directors to guide them toward using more fresh and local foods. Her strategies for balancing cost and

management with local farmers and fresh food should be captured and shared in workshops and in writing.

- Sherry knows that a strong support network and communication system among schools, communities and local farmers will enable schools to identify, rearrange and work to change the services now available in school cafeterias.

## **Outcome: Implement the SOL Patrol's Local Food, Local Energy curriculum tool kit in schools.**

### Methodology 2: Group Interviews with Students

Children from classrooms at Butterfield Elementary and Athol-Royalston Middle School were interviewed to assess their opinions and their knowledge base. Both the 5<sup>th</sup> grade class and a team of 3 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes participated in the implementation of the Local Food, Local Energy curriculum tool kit. Both schools were actively involved in the construction of green houses on their respective campuses and planting and harvesting food over the year. The schools both sold their produce to the community in an open event to sell seedlings and some foodstuffs.

Butterfield Elementary School: group interview with 9 students from the fifth grade

### **Result – Children felt a sense of responsibility and self esteem by participating in the construction of the greenhouse, its maintenance and the planting and care of seedlings.**

*We worked with our teacher and a couple other adults to screw together all the metal rods and put the panels on. It was a group project which is not always easy...so many minds and thoughts about how to do it. We put plants in there and made seedlings. Then we transported them and sold them to the community.*

*We got a fence donated by a local lumber man...we put it around the greenhouse and planted flowers around it. It made it pretty and got a lot of people to come over to see it. There was some vandalism...but, we just started over after the disappointment.*

*I learned a lot about how to grow seedlings and transplant them into my own garden. The pots that we used were made from recycled materials that you could throw into the compost and let it break into soil. It was more than just raising plants.*

*My mom made a huge garden for me. I bought 15 plants from the greenhouse, and planted them. I have pumpkins, tomatoes, cucumbers that I take care of, I even rototilled the soil.*

*Me and my friends from the class would go out and turn on the hose to shower and water them.*

*We had a big community event to sell the plants. We dressed up in costumes and went around the gym telling people about the plants. We had some plants that people hadn't heard of like spaghetti squash, hot peppers, marigolds so we told them about how to grow and harvest them.*

### **Result – Children learned the benefits of consuming local food. They understood the full cost of food that is not local and the ramifications of eating food that travels great**

**distances. All of the children attested to the better taste and the willingness to try new foods after growing them.**

*Usually where your food comes from isn't as healthy as a local garden. They usually pick supermarket produce before it is ripe and may use pesticides...its something you just can't know when its from far away.*

*If you get a fruit from California in Masschusetts, it loses its flavor, local fruit and vegetables have much more taste and are juicy.*

*When food travels a long distance to get to you, it costs to pay for the travel. And when people farm on gigantic farms, they can't be as careful with things like pesticides...local farmers can watch their vegetables grow, they know the soil, they know when to water, they care for them more carefully.*

**Result – Children are encouraged to eat more fresh vegetables and fruits because it benefits their health. Children influence the eating habits of their families by suggesting that new and fresh foods be incorporated into meals. Children encourage their parents to garden so that more fresh food is in their house and on the table.**

*I will probably garden more as a result of this class. I will probably check over fruits and vegetables more carefully before I buy them in a store.*

*I'll check the labels so I can find out how far it traveled and whether the farmer used pesticides or a covering.*

*It is so much cooler to eat something after you've helped it grow, it makes me want to eat more of them. I've been trying a lot of new foods that I never had before. We had a health class that let us try out lots of different kids of veggies and stuff. We could taste the difference right away...you wonder why anyone would want an old tired apple when they could have a fresh one.*

*People now a days don't really seem to care. They aren't thinking about how fresh food is part of your health. I know now how important fresh and local is to my health.*

*Looks aren't everything with a fruit or vegetable, at the store they make everything look beautiful but it doesn't always taste good...a few blemishes may mean that it will taste better because they didn't use pesticides...or let it stay on the tree to ripen longer.*

**Result – Children see the potential of gardening in their future. Children begin to understand the value of gardening as a community event.**

*If I hadn't done this program, I probably wouldn't have a garden at my house and that would be sad.*

*I will probably have a big garden...really big, so everyone in town could come and garden and take away what they need...that would make fresh food part of everyone's life.*

*It made me appreciate and begin to help my mom garden...I never understood why she did it before, now I get it!*

*When I'm older, I'm going to take after my mom and Deb and garden with my kids too. I want more people to get involved not just a single class, but the whole school and people from town.*

*I'd like people to know that its more important to be healthy than wealthy.*

#### Athol-Royalston Middle School – Eighth grade

#### **Result – Students understand the specific knowledge, skills and tools necessary to grow food locally.**

*We were involved in building the greenhouse and we planted everything. We learned that different plants have different needs...water, temperature, soil, compost, light.*

*We learned to grow things in different environments, like strawberries, you need to water a lot and keep them inside at night because of frost. Tomatoes stay outside and then they grow better.*

*We mixed and moved compost and lay it out and raked it around. We used compost because it has nutrients to help things grow better. The cafeteria could provide compost materials...it would be another way to get engaged.*

*They told us about the truck that runs on vegetable oil...so you can grow your fuel...how cool would that be?*

*Before the planting they explained all the different seeds and everything. They talked about creating hybrids and what the difference is between that and a regular seed.*

#### **Results – Students learn to appreciate the taste and the health benefits of local, fresh foods. Students learn to appreciate the work that goes into growing fresh food.**

*We learned the difference between organic vegetables and non organics. How could you eat something that was filled with chemicals that you couldn't even name?*

*You take more pride in what you eat if you've grown it, it's your work that has gone into it. I have a huge garden now, I used to have a small one but realized how much more I could grow and how to do it through this program. I don't like store-bought foods, I prefer pure organics. I don't like GMO and other modifications. I can't feel comfortable with the fact that we don't really know how all that will affect humans.*

*Last week we had a salad with lettuce from the greenhouse. It was amazing to know that we had grown some of that food.*

*I don't really care...if it looks like food I'll eat it.*

**Results – Students begin to understand where their food comes from and how that might affect its taste and vitality.**

*I had no idea where plants came from ... I thought lettuce was from a tree not the ground. Even beans...how they grow is so cool.*

*I do understand better where my food comes from a bit better. All the traveling, the giant farms, the ways of preserving food is a bit overwhelming. I do look at labels more and think about how to find local alternatives.*

*Meats are more difficult that veggies to think about. All the killing freaks me out. I don't like to think about the slaughterhouse and the animals that get killed to make things like hamburgers and hot dogs. Once it has a different form, it's easier to eat, even though you really know where it came from.*

**Results – Students learn that growing food demands working with other people in making decisions and supporting the work of others.**

*Patience comes with group work. We learned all of this in a large group...we had to come together to make the greenhouse. Patience is necessary because you don't see the results of food production right away, you have to wait.*

*If we hadn't done this in school, I never would have done this. I'm glad that I did.*

*We could have used more people helping us do this work. It would be great to see more people from the community help the school make this a success.*

*I'd love to go up to the elementary school and help those kids learn this...and get a garden started.*

### Methodology 3: Thank you Notes

65 Thank you notes from the eighth grade at Athol-Royalston Middle School contained interesting perspectives on the experience of setting up a greenhouse and planting seedlings for sale to the community.

**Results – 15 students felt as if they were starting a tradition that would benefit the school in the future by building something concrete, like the greenhouse.**

**Results – 45 students expressed gratitude and excitement for the opportunity to work with tools, build something useful, participate with adults from the community and learn a skill that could be used at home.**

**Results – 16 students claimed the health benefits of working OUTSIDE on a physical project (exercise) instead of sitting docile in school.**

**Results – 50 claimed an interest in growing food and setting up the greenhouse. Most were interested in being able to eat the food that would be grown.**

*Knowledge is Power!*

#### Methodology 4: Parent Surveys

A set of 20 surveys were sent home to the parent of the fifth graders who participated in the project at Butterfield Elementary School. 19 were returned.

Parents were asked a set of yes/no questions which are compiled below. The fifth question asked for a narrative answer.

**Results – Are you more aware of local food sources, such as farms and farmers markets, as a result of your child’s involvement in food education programs at school? 12 out of 19 said Yes.**

**Results – Has your family’s consumption of fresh local food increased over the previous year? 12 out of 19 said Yes.**

**Results – Do you consider where food is grown before you buy it? 10 out of 19 said Yes**

**Results – Do you and your child grow vegetables at home? 10 out of 19 said Yes**

**Results – What has your child learned about food from the activities at School? What information has been most helpful to you?**

*Nothing.*

*He has enjoyed learning to grow vegetables.*

*Plants need certain soils to grow.*

*He now likes more vegetables and fruits than before.*

*My child has learned that some food is grown locally and that food is better when it is fresh.*

*It has given him more of an appreciation of what goes into growing vegetables.*

*The importance of eating fresh fruits and vegetables and the excitement of growing food at home.*

*He has learned about growing fresh vegetables and their nutritional value.*

*She has learned the process of growing food from seedlings to plant and the importance of eating healthy. She loved it!*

*My child has a better awareness of local grown veggies.*

*My child has learned how food is grown and which foods are healthy and WHERE WE CAN BUY LOCALLY GROWN FOOD...and how much fun planting can be!*

**Conclusions drawn from a compilation and evaluation of the Interviews, Surveys and Thank you notes:**

- **The majority of students involved in this project increased their knowledge of local and fresh foods and the value of buying and eating those foods for health benefits.**

- **The majority of children enjoyed participating in the building of the greenhouse and in the planting and believed that they learned helpful skills for future use. These children have influenced the level of gardening at home and the purchase of fresh, local foods.**
- **More children desire and enjoy eating local and fresh foods and eat higher quantities at home and at school.**
- **Children would like to see more fresh food served in schools.**
- **Most children learned the ‘full cost’ of food that comes from outside the local area and its impact on freshness, taste and nutritional value.**
- **Parents could see the results of the program goals at home.**