

# Sea to School How-to Guide for K-12 Schools in New England

The following insights were learned over the course of a USDA Farm to School Grant focused on increasing local seafood consumption at eight K-12 schools across New England. Our partner schools represented a diverse range of districts across the region.



Gulf of Maine  
Research Institute

## Project wins:

**11,000** pounds of local seafood was offered to nearly **40,000** students across New England resulting in **\$55,000** in value to the local seafood economy.

**80%** increase in local seafood served at participating schools.

**76%** of students who tried local fish, said they loved it.



## Participating schools

State	School district	Student population	Average meal participation	% free / reduced lunch	% non-white students
Maine	Auburn School Department	3,382	1,700	53%	18%
	RSU 12 – Sheepscot Valley	950	750	53%	5%
	Portland Public Schools	6,795	3,398	54%	46%
Massachusetts	Chicopee Public Schools	6,850	5,500	100%	49%
	New Bedford Public Schools	14,000	8,500	100%	63%
New Hampshire	Portsmouth Public Schools	2,585	900	17%	20%
Vermont	Lamoille North Modified Unified Union	1,361	720	60%	4%
	Windham Northeast Unified School District	1,055	600	55%	10%

## Why Serve Local Seafood?

Serving local seafood is a win-win-win. It's a win for health, it's a win for community and economy, and it's a win for the environment.

### Health

Local seafood is a wonderful lean protein and is rich in vitamins, minerals, and omega-3 fatty acids, all of which are important for the growth and development of kids.

### Community & Economy

Choosing local seafood supports fishermen, coastal communities, and our regional seafood economy.

### Environment

Local seafood is responsibly harvested and a climate-friendly protein option.

By serving local seafood you are making a big difference in the lives of your students, community, and local economy.



*Anneliese Johnson at Lamoille North SU in Vermont carves fish melons on local fish day. Students ate more seafood at Johnson Elementary than at other schools in the district in part because of the enthusiasm and buy-in from staff.*

# Follow these key steps to develop a successful sea-to-school program



## Make Commitment and Get Buy-in

### Make a public commitment

Set a goal around how much local seafood you want to serve in the coming school year (e.g., once a month, once a week.) Publicizing local seafood goals has been demonstrated to motivate various institutions to follow through and do more with their local seafood goals.

### Get buy-in from staff

Staff attitudes towards seafood have a big influence on students' perceptions and meal preferences in the cafeteria. Students are much more likely to choose local fish when offered if staff are passionate and encouraging about serving this highly nutritious local protein. Student choice can be impacted if staff serves fish with a wrinkled nose.

### Be a local seafood champion

The unfortunate truth is that not everyone loves seafood. Sometimes, seafood needs a cheerleader. We've seen more success in districts where nutrition directors are enthusiastic and excited about local seafood. So go ahead, shout it from the rooftops: Rah! Rah! Rah! Seafood!

### Share the WHY

Serving local seafood makes a huge difference to students' health and the health of our local economy, community, and environment.

Why  
Local  
Seafood?

### Health

- Seafood is a superfood, rich in vitamins A and D and omega-3 fatty acids.
- Only 1 in 10 Americans are eating the recommended serving of seafood.
- Eating seafood twice a week leads to improved brain and eye development, reduces the risk of heart disease, lowers the risk of depression and anxiety, and helps build strong bones.

### Community & Economy

- Local fishermen compete with a global seafood market where the US imports about 90% of the seafood that we eat.
- Buying local fish supports coastal communities, working waterfronts, and the local seafood economy.

### Environment

- Local fish are abundant and responsibly harvested.
- Local seafood is a climate-friendly protein.



## Decide on Your Favorite Fish Format

### Filets or Ready-to-Bake

Both fish filets (fresh or frozen) and/or ready-to-bake items have benefits and drawbacks. What you choose will be influenced by your kitchen and staff capacity. You can always ask for samples before committing to a whole order.

#### Pros

- Less expensive
- More adaptable

#### Cons

- Requires scratch cooking
- Learning curve for those who haven't worked with fish before



Filets

#### Pros

- Heat-and-serve
- No learning curve
- Less staff time needed

#### Cons

- Costlier
- Less control over the final product
- Only a handful of companies in New England offer these products



Ready-to-Bake

### Favoring Fish Filets

We worked with several schools that said they could not ever work with filets of fish for various reasons including kitchen staff and capacity, the unfamiliarity of working with filets, and extra time need to prep meals using filets. These schools were then presented with an opportunity to source free filets of local fish through the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association's Fishermen Feeding Mainers Program (FFM). FFM donates local fish to schools and provided schools with a risk-free way to experiment with using filets of fish. These schools quickly discovered that working with filets of fish is no different from working with other raw proteins and adapted readily to using filets. A few of them no longer sought out a local ready-to-bake product, preferring to use fish filets.



*Mike Flynn and Vicki Dill of RSU 12 in Maine can portion and prep 100 pounds of local fish filets in 30 minutes.*

## ✓ Sourcing Local Fish

### Ask your primary vendor

The first step is to ask your primary vendor if they source local seafood. You will need to be specific about what you mean by local fish (see box on next page). It can help to mention a few common local species that have been historically served in K-12 meal programs in New England. For example, haddock, pollock, or Acadian redfish (also called ocean perch).

### Ask your other vendors

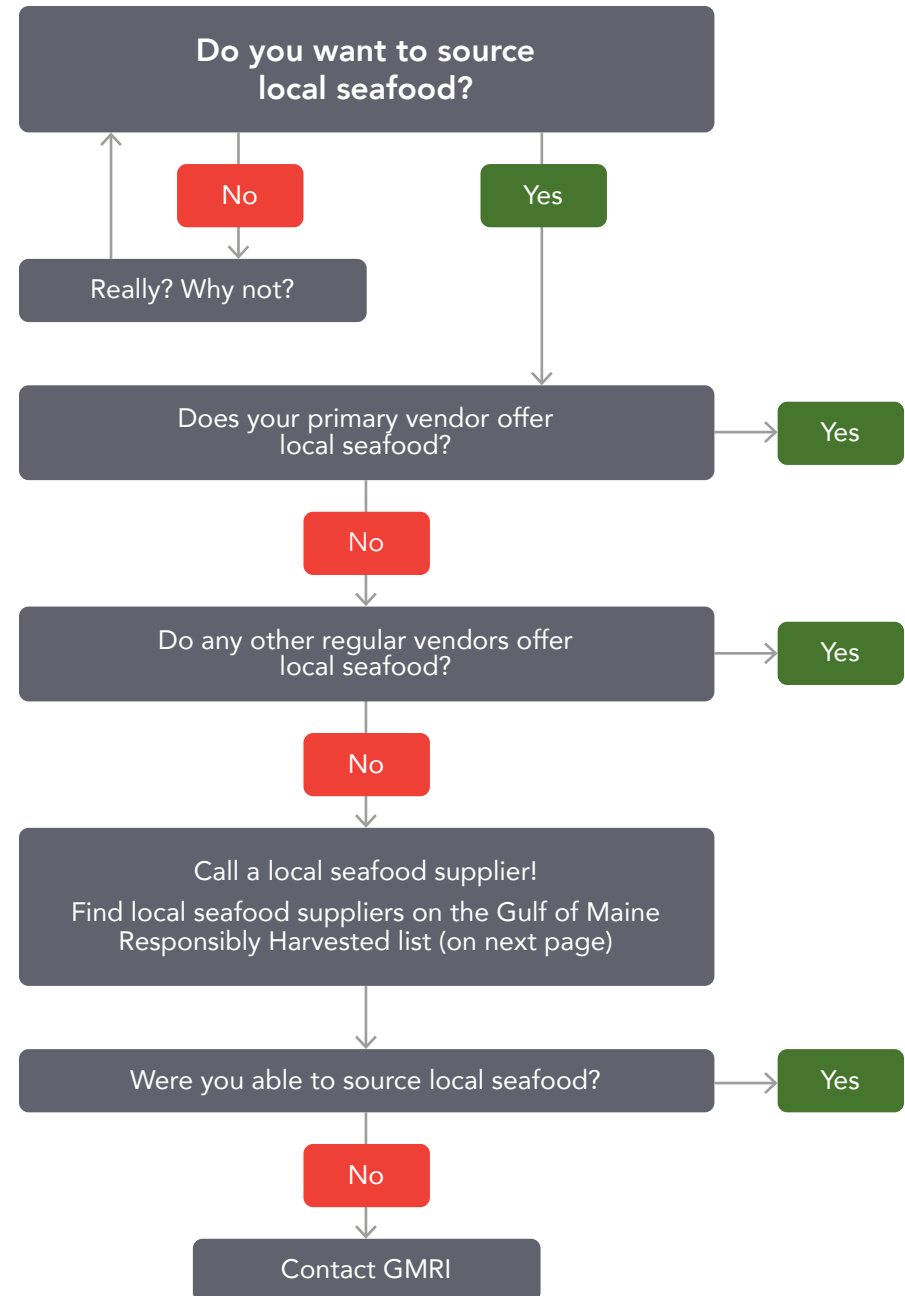
Who else is supplying your school? Are they able to source local seafood? Sometimes it is easier for smaller vendors to bring on new products. Again, being specific helps. For example, instead of asking if they can source local fish, tell them you're looking for a fish sandwich made with local fish (such as haddock or pollock). If you know a seafood company that sources what items you're looking for, ask specifically if they're able to purchase from that company.

### Reach out to local seafood suppliers

Local seafood suppliers (see list on next page) may know of alternative methods of getting their products to your door. Reach out to a local seafood supplier and see if they can help you with the delivery/distribution.

### Still having trouble?

Contact GMRI for extra help. Sophie Scott can be reached at [sscott@gmri.org](mailto:sscott@gmri.org) or (207) 228-1866.



## Local seafood suppliers

GMRI works with a [number of seafood companies](#) that buy and sell local seafood.

- Filet
- Ready-to-Bake

Company	Location	Type
<a href="#">Atlantic Sea Farms</a> Specializes in kelp and kelp products	Saco, ME	•
<a href="#">Channel Fish Processing</a>	Quincy, MA	• •
<a href="#">Foley Fish</a>	New Bedford, MA	•
<a href="#">Great Eastern</a>	Boston, MA	•
<a href="#">Ipswich Shellfish Group</a>	Ipswich, MA	•
<a href="#">Maine Shellfish</a>	Kennebunk, ME Ellsworth, ME	•
<a href="#">North Coast</a>	Boston, ME	• •
<a href="#">PJ Merrill</a>	Portland, ME	•
<a href="#">Red's Best</a>	Boston, MA	• •
<a href="#">Seatrade</a>	New Bedford, MA	•
<a href="#">True Fin</a>	Portland, ME	•

If you're in Maine, the [Maine Coast Fisherman's Association](#) is running a program called [Fishermen Feeding Mainers](#) that donates local fish to schools across the state.

The [Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen's Alliance](#) compiled a [list of local seafood suppliers](#) on Cape Cod.

Fish don't follow state lines. Local seafood is a very regional product. The Gulf of Maine stretches from Halifax, Nova Scotia to Cape Cod and encompasses much of New England's waters. Southern New England waters range from south of Cape Cod to the New York border. If your school is in New England, any seafood that is harvested and processed in New England can be considered local.

What Is  
Local  
Seafood?

Local fish species that work well in K-12 schools include many mild flakey white fish such as:

- Acadian redfish aka ocean perch
- Atlantic pollock
- Dogfish aka cape shark
- Haddock
- Hake

Local  
Fish  
Species



## ✓ Get Student Buy-in

### Taste tests work!

It's one thing to get seafood on the menu, it's another getting students to choose the local fish cake over pepperoni pizza. The success of taste tests and more specifically, *repeated* taste tests in getting students to accept a new food cannot be overstated. Give students multiple opportunities to try local fish and participation will come. Use this as an opportunity to try out different recipes and get feedback from students.

### Choose familiar preparations

Start with something that students are already familiar with. Maybe it's as simple as serving a fish stick made with local fish. Or maybe it's substituting fish in a familiar favorite – students love pigs-in-a-blanket, so what about fish-in-a-blanket? Turn Taco Tuesday into Fish Taco Tuesday. Alternatively, pair local fish with a favorite side – roasted potato wedges or mac and cheese.

### Choose flavorful preparations

Kids will not be excited about a bland baked fish. Especially in older grades, students are looking for spice and flavor. Even in the elementary grades, you can experiment with flavors by offering different dips or sauces that can be served on the side.

### Make it a celebration

Seize opportunities to celebrate local seafood to drum up excitement about this superfood. Here on right are a few options to consider.



October is National Seafood Month (it is also [National Farm to School Month](#), so serving local fish in October is a two-for)

Local Fish Fridays or Fish Taco Tuesdays or Wild Fish Wednesdays

Harvest of the Month

- [Maine](#): March is protein month
- [Massachusetts](#): May is seafood month
- [New Hampshire Farm-to-School](#): Indigenous Harvest Calendar features local fish and shellfish on their summer calendar

**Celebrate  
seafood!**



## ✓ Make Connections Outside the Cafeteria

### Identify interested and motivated teachers

Connecting the dots between what students are learning in the classroom to what they are eating in the classroom can improve meal participation rates. Identify teachers who are excited about local seafood in the cafeteria – they are your allies. Seafood can be incorporated into so many curricula: science, social studies, history, and health. GMRI's Sea-to-School Resource Hub (on right) has materials for teachers.

### Connect with outside organizations passionate about local seafood

Are there other organizations in your community that could help you in your mission to get more of this nutritious local protein on your menus? Ask a fishermen's group to come into the school for a day. Go on a field trip to a local aquarium or visit a science center. Do any of your students come from fishing families? Ask parents who are fishermen to visit the school and talk to students about local fisheries.

### Share your successes!

Are you serving local seafood? You get bragging rights. You should be shouting this from the rooftops. Share with staff, share in a parent newsletter, share on your school's social media, contact your local newspaper – let people know what you're doing!

## ✓ Sea-to-School Resource Hub

GMRI developed a [resource hub](#) to help schools in their sea-to-school mission. It contains tools to help you in your work including:

- **Over 50 K-12 recipes.** From Coconut Thai Curry Pollock to Baked Crunchy Fish to Hake Fish Cakes.
- **Local seafood posters and digital menu boards.** Hanging posters in your cafeteria and around your school are an easy way share that you're serving local seafood and why it's important.
- **Taste test guides.** It's no secret that taste tests take extra time and capacity. These guides can help you plan for success.
- **Social media kit.** Images and sample text for sharing your local seafood story.
- **Information for teachers, staff, and parents.** Including videos on fish preparation in schools, sample lessons focusing on seafood, and recipes for the home.



## ✓ Join GMRI's Gulf of Maine Responsibly Harvested Program

Participants of GMRI's Gulf of Maine Responsibly Harvested Program join a network of like-minded institutions and businesses that are committed to serving local seafood. Program partners have access to benefits including communication materials, educational events and opportunities, and an annual awards series. Contact Sophie Scott for more information: [sscott@gmri.org](mailto:sscott@gmri.org) or (207) 228-1688.

