

5 Questions: Erika Rincon



By **Brian PJ Cronin**, Reporter | November 21, 2020

Erika Rincon is the farm-to-school coordinator for Common Ground Farm in Wappingers Falls.

What is your job?

I was hired in January to help the Beacon school district with the 30% Initiative, which was started in 2019 by Gov. [Andrew] Cuomo as an incentive to get schools to purchase more New York state products for their lunch programs. As long as 30 percent of a district's purchases come from New York, it gets reimbursement from the state. For a small district like Beacon, which has about 2,000 students, that could equal about \$50,000. Since schools closed in the spring because of COVID, a lot of my focus has gone toward helping with the emergency food pivot to remote meals. I help make sure students are able to access that food, regardless of whether they're in school or learning remotely.

How do you do that?

The Beacon district set up five distribution points where parents can pick up food for remote learners. It's also doing deliveries using school buses. It's trying to use as much local produce as possible, but there's less produce now because of the time of year. However, just this month, when carrots were the "vegetable of the month," the district purchased more than 400 pounds. Farm-to-school programs don't just help kids eat healthier, they support regional farmers during the economic recovery.

It is unusual for a school district to partner with a farm?

It's pretty unusual. We're lucky to have Common Ground so close. Beacon kids have been coming to the farm on school trips for years.

Will Beacon reach the 30% Initiative this year?

A lot will depend on if we have in-class learning or suddenly go remote again and have to reshuffle. It's important that families sign up for meals at [beaconk12.org](https://schools.mealviewer.com/) (<https://schools.mealviewer.com/>); the district has a lot of set costs but gets reimbursed based on how many students receive meals. There are wonderful things being done in the cafeterias. The U.S. Department of Agriculture [which oversees school nutrition programs] signed a waiver at the beginning of the year that breakfast and lunch are available free during this school year to everyone, regardless of income.

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You were a farmer at Common Ground. Do you miss the fields?



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Rincon preparing to distribute food to Beacon students (Photo provided)

I do! I love Common Ground Farm; it's such a beautiful farm to work at. But I enjoy this aspect of the work as well.

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