

Jim Birmingham, Waterbury, VT

Director of Nutrition Services

Montpelier Roxbury Public Schools

Thank you to the Vermont Legislature and Governor Scott for supporting Universally Free School Meals for Vermont students this school year. The benefits of universal meals are numerous and have led to a marked increase in school meal participation in our district. This increase in participation has led to a corresponding increase in the amount of food that we are buying. This increase represents an opportunity for Vermont farmers and producers who could benefit from supplying Vermont school meal programs.

In this school year Montpelier Roxbury Public Schools have purchased roughly \$20,000 worth of fruits, vegetables, cheese, bread, maple syrup and some meat from Vermont farms and producers. Presently we are working on soliciting bids from Vermont farms and producers for the products we will need to procure for next school year. For example, we are evaluating bids to provide 80 gallons of Vermont Maple Syrup and 500 pounds of Vermont beef to the district for the 23/24 school year. My understanding and application of the procurement regulations and informal bid process is due in large part to training and support I have received from the Vermont Farm to School community. This training has been largely supported by grants funded by the Agency of Agriculture. This represents a clear example of the benefits of funding farm to school initiatives. MRPS will be spending more money with Vermont producers as a direct result of the training supported by these grant funds. For the benefit of Vermont's students and food producers please continue to support the Farm to School & Early Childhood program with a level funded base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2024.

The Local Foods Incentive Grant available to Vermont School Food Authorities has created a major shift in the ways School Food Directors think about spending and utilizing their USDA Commodity Foods Entitlements. I think it is important to note that School Food Directors have for many years focused their menu, production and purchasing plans on maximizing their USDA Commodity Foods Entitlement to reduce their food costs. The introduction of the Local Incentive Grant has rapidly changed that mindset. Now, Food Service Directors are prioritizing local purchases that count towards the Local Incentive Grant over USDA Commodity Foods. Whether a food is available locally has become a much greater factor for Food Service Directors when deciding how to allocate USDA Entitlement funds.

This shift has not been an easy one. Changing the purchasing paradigm takes time for School Food Authorities who make decisions on bids with local producers and USDA Foods allocation far in advance. Our district was unsuccessful in our first attempt at reaching the local purchasing threshold for the grant award. We are continuing our efforts to increase our local purchases with the goal of successfully reaching the 15% threshold for local purchases in the future.

In future iterations of the Local Incentive Grant it would be a benefit for partial awards to be allocated if there were still grant funds available after all of the successful grant awards had been distributed. A district that had tried to meet the threshold but had fallen short would benefit from being awarded a Local Incentive equal to the percentage of local purchases they were able to

achieve. For example, a district who managed 12% local purchases could be awarded \$0.12 per lunch if the grant funding allowed. I think that this would encourage districts who were reluctant to try to meet the threshold for fear of falling just short to make more purchases from Vermont producers and farmers.

While not within the purview of this committee I want to take this opportunity to say that one major shift that I think would create a major benefit for Vermont farmers and producers would be to move from the current system of USDA Commodity Foods Entitlements to providing Cash in Lieu of commodities. Providing SFA's with their USDA entitlement as cash would allow SFA's to spend those funds with Vermont producers. Vermont Food Service Directors are looking for ways to reduce our dependence on USDA foods and to maximize the Local Incentive. This is a major paradigm shift that has been readily accepted by a group that has historically been wary of change. Having the opportunity to receive Cash in Lieu of commodities would keep much of those funds in Vermont. Presently, nearly all of the USDA funds awarded to Vermont schools goes to out of state producers.

The Local Foods Incentive Grant has caused a major shift in how school food directors approach their menu planning. We are now looking for ways to increase our use of Vermont products as opposed to USDA Foods. The Local Foods Incentive grant has also changed the way we utilize USDA Foods, rejecting USDA foods that can alternatively be sourced in Vermont. Reallocating USDA entitlement dollars to items that do not meet the local definition allows us to maximize both our USDA entitlements and our efforts to meet the local purchasing thresholds in the grant.

The Local Foods Incentive Grant has had a deep and immediate impact on many Vermont School Food Authorities. Our efforts to reimagine school food purchasing to maximize local products are ongoing. What is clear is that the Local Foods Incentive Grant is working and that more and more school food dollars are being spent in Vermont as a direct result of it.

Thank you. For the benefit of Vermont's students and food producers please support the Local Purchasing Incentive program for schools at \$500,000 in base funding.