

My name is Kathy Alexander. I am the School Nutrition Director for the Mt. Abraham Unified School District and the Addison Northwest School District. I work with 2 school districts, 9 schools and 30 staff who make sure that our students are well fed and nourished so they can learn each and every day. I have been working in school nutrition for over 23 years.

I am asking that you level fund both the Local Purchasing Incentive and the Farm to School & Early Childhood Grants Programs at \$500,000 each.

Both of these programs have enormous positive impacts on our school nutrition programs and schools. They also directly impact students and their families and our communities.

About 10 years ago I met a dairy farmer with 4 children who all attended our schools. Spending time with him and hearing his story made me realize that when our food is sourced locally it does a lot more than put healthy, fresh food on school lunch trays. When we buy local, we support families and students nutritionally, economically and possibly for their future. This simple encounter resulted in our district School Nutrition programs committing to serve only **Cabot** Macaroni and Cheese on our school menus. We do this because we understand that family farmers depend on us to be partners in supporting students and our communities.

Farm to School initiatives are the epitome of getting a bang for your buck and the programs we have in Vermont are something to be very proud of.

The Farm to School and Early Childhood Grants give schools and Early Childhood centers the opportunity to take steps to initiate Farm to School programs that extend beyond just purchasing local food to opportunities for food education, agricultural exploration, efficient food processing and connections to farms and farmers. These factors are sustainability in action.

I once brought a young man to testify before a committee to share a student perspective on what Farm to School Grants contribute to his education. When asked point blank by a committee member to tell the committee what difference the Farm to School program made to him, he paused for a long time and then said. "It makes me think twice – I think about what I am eating, where it was grown and who grew it". After 23 years I cannot say it any better. A student tells you that your program makes them think... that's a win every day!

Mt. Abraham School District earned the 15% Local Purchasing Incentive this year. Actual purchases added up to 18% which means our program will be highly motivated to reach 20% in 2024 and ANWSD will not be far behind. Reaching this level of purchasing is not easy. It takes planning, coordination, and thoughtfulness and a huge commitment on many levels, but it is so worth it. Especially with Universal School Meals and the huge impact that our school meals programs have on so many students, we want to know that every mouthful of Shepherd's Pie, Butternut Cranberry Bread, Carrot Souffle, Kale Salad and Cheesy Quesadilla is changing lives in more than one way and making our students think twice.

Please level fund the Farm to School & Early Childhood Grant program at \$500,000 base appropriation and the Farm Purchasing Incentive at \$500,000 base appropriation. These programs are vital, impactful, and far reaching. As Vermonter we can be so proud to have these opportunities and thank our lawmakers for their creativity and thoughtfulness.