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Testimony for Senate and House Agriculture Committees on the Effectiveness of the Child Nutrition Programs and Farm to School in Reducing Child Hunger and Improving Child Health and Learning Outcomes

Senators and Representatives, thank you for your time today, and for your Committees' work in the past few years to strengthen farm to school and school nutrition programs in Vermont.

I'm pleased to be able to tell you that the successful efforts to expand farm to school and school nutrition programs are paying off here in Vermont, in ways that we are finally beginning to be able to measure with both school-level and state-level indicators.

Children in Vermont are measurably better off because of the expansion of farm to school and school meal programs all over our state:

- In recent years, child food insecurity declined by 37% in Vermont, meaning that thousands fewer children are going hungry. We know that this decline in child food insecurity and hunger is a direct result of the expansion of food and meal programs serving kids in schools because during this same period, adult hunger declined by only 17%.¹
- In the past three years, over 5,000 Vermont children have gained access to at least one new daily meal at school, in afterschool programs, or during the summer. 1,700 of them thanks to the universal meals pilot included in the State Farm to School Grants Program last year.

We know that when children are hungry, their health and learning outcomes, their brain development, and their workforce readiness are all affected gravely. This data shows that full use of the federal child nutrition programs is key to ensuring that Vermont's children have access to nutritious food every day. We further know that a universal model, in which school breakfast, school lunch, afterschool, and summer meals, are provided to all students free of charge--and treated as a critical foundation for their education--is the approach that ensures the greatest participation and the best student outcomes.²

We also know that partnering school meals programs with farm to school programs is an effective way to improve meal quality, increase participation even more, and educate students to care about where their food comes from and the nourishment it provides for the rest of their lives. This virtuous cycle of linking the school meal programs with farm to school also creates new local markets for Vermont farmers, and improves community economic and food security--something we need more than ever in these uncertain times.

So first of all, I am here to thank you for the new investments you have committed during the past two years to our state's Farm to School Grants Program--now the Farm to School and Childcare Grants Program. I also thank you for enshrining the virtuous cycle of school meals and farm to school in law

¹ Food insecurity data is from the American Communities Survey conducted every year by the U.S. Census, using an 18-question survey developed by the USDA. The most recent measurement is for the period 2010-2015.

² Study being conducted by the University of Vermont Department of Education in collaboration with Hunger Free Vermont that surveys all Vermont schools currently providing universal breakfast and lunch about changes in student health, behavior, and learning.

by requiring grant recipients to work simultaneously on strengthening both their school meals and their farm to school programs.

The Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets used the increased funding to design a pilot to support five schools to develop and implement universal meal programs, while also increasing their local food purchasing. While two of the schools were able to implement sustainable universal meal programs for both breakfast and lunch, the other schools implemented one new universal meal--either breakfast or summer.

The schools in this pilot received both state funding and technical assistance from Hunger Free Vermont, and I'm so proud to be able to share the fantastic results with you today.

- Five schools received Universal Meals Farm to School Grants, but Craftsbury and Windsor brought in their high schools as well, so seven schools implemented at least one new universal meal program (for the price of five).
- \$65,000 in State funds have leveraged over \$90,000 in federal reimbursements so far, in addition to \$25,000 in additional grants from New England Dairy and Food Council and C&S Grocers.
- The five schools that implemented new universal breakfast after the bell programs saw an average increase in breakfast participation of 92% over the previous school year.
- The two schools that implemented new universal lunch programs saw an average increase in lunch participation of 32% over the previous school year.
- All of the children in the town of Windsor gained access to a new universal summer meals program.
- All seven schools increased their local food purchasing by more than 10%, and have implemented new systems to better track their use of local food in their meal programs.

We learned a lot from working intensively with the dedicated, thoughtful, hard-working leaders and food service managers at these schools. We learned that while schools certainly need funds to get new projects and nutrition programs off the ground, they also need technical assistance and backbone support to make the right choices given their unique situations, challenges, and visions. This learning was incorporated by the Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets into the redesign of the Farm to School and Childcare Grants Program this year, and I would like to take this opportunity to formally acknowledge the work of the Agency, and the collaborative and thoughtful approach they have taken. I am confident that we can look forward to continuing success for all of our state's future Farm to School and Childcare grantees.

Hunger Free Vermont is an advocacy organization, so you know I'm going to close with a request! The Vermont Farm to School Network had determined that \$500,000 is needed to fully fund the Farm to School and Childcare Grants Program--especially if we are going to truly serve our state's early care and education community. We respectfully request that you increase funding for this grants program, which is successfully reducing child hunger, improving child health and learning, and growing our local agricultural economy.

Finally, while we have just about exhausted the number of Vermont schools that are able to use the federal Community Eligibility Provision to provide free meals at school as an integral part of education, we are not done. The time is coming when as a state we will need to develop some creative ways to help all Vermont students access universal free school meals. Thank you for your commitment to Vermont's children and families--and we are going to ask you to do even more in the next few years!

Again, thank you. It has been an honor to offer this testimony.