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Testimony for Senate and House Agriculture Committees on the Role Farm to School Plays 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 over the past decade 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:

- Between 2010 and 2015, 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

At the same time, between 2010 and 2015 in Vermont, here is how much we did to expand children's access to good nutrition in schools:

- Farm to school programs expanded to reach into every region of the state.
- Participation in school breakfast and lunch programs increased significantly. 870,000 *more* school meals were served to 7,700 *fewer* students in the 2015-16 school year than were served in the 2009-2010 school year.
- Meal quality and nutritional content have improved significantly, due to changes in the federal nutrition requirements for school meals, the purchasing of more fresh and local foods by schools, and the efforts of school nutrition professionals to train themselves to meet these new guidelines, cook more, and reheat less.
- We know that the participation increase is linked to improved meal quality and the "cool factor" of eating local foods and supporting local farmers because the greatest participation increase is among students whose families must pay for their meals.
- 65 Vermont schools are now providing universal breakfast and lunch to over 13,500 students. Five additional schools are preparing to make this move, thanks to the expansion in funding for the Farm to School Grants Program in the last legislative session. These schools are piloting a program to provide technical assistance to help schools improve the sustainability of their meal programs and increase their purchasing of local foods.

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.

- 37 Vermont schools are accepting New England Dairy & Food Council and Hunger Free Vermont's challenge to move breakfast into the school day, and have seen breakfast participation increases as high as 642%.
- 83% more summer meals were eaten by children at nearly twice as many sites throughout Vermont in 2015, as compared to 2010. Summer is the worst season for child hunger, when families have to provide 10 extra meals a week to each of their school-age children.
- Afterschool meal programs are providing nutrition after school to 7,000 students engaged in afterschool activities—an eight-fold increase as compared to 2010. As students stay later and later at schools, and as school schedules often have students eating lunch as early as 10:30am, these nutritionally-balanced meals, usually served right after the end of the school day, are important for all students—even those who have healthy dinners with their families to go home to. For those students whose families may have no food at home, they are critical.

It is no coincidence that over the past 6 years, as access to more nutritious food has expanded for Vermont's children, child food insecurity and hunger has declined.

In addition to producing a dramatic decline in child food insecurity and hunger, we are beginning to be able to measure more subtle—but no less critical—ways in which Vermont children are better off as a result of expanding farm to school and school meal programs. In schools that have either implemented universal meals, or moved breakfast into the school day (“after the bell”), or both, principals and school nurses are reporting:

- Improved academic performance and improved focus in class
- Declines in school nurse visits—as high as 72%
- Declines in behavioral referrals—of at least 10%
- Declines in absenteeism

We can't stop now. 17,000 children in Vermont still live in food insecure homes, and are at risk of going hungry every day. And, our fights against chronic diseases and the economic-based achievement gap have only just begun.

Thank you for taking the time to review this information, and for supporting the continued expansion of Vermont's farm to school and school meal programs.