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House Committee on Agriculture and Forestry
S.160 – an act relating to agricultural development

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about S.160, as it relates to school nutrition, hunger, and Farm to School. Along with our partners, like Vermont FEED and school nutrition leaders, Hunger Free Vermont greatly appreciates the attention given in S.160 to school nutrition and its deep connection with the local agriculture system. It is exciting to see so clearly that we are all working toward the same goals of ensuring Vermont's children have access to high quality, nutritious, and local meals in schools, and that our local producers are able to sell more products to schools - supporting their viability and our children's health and wellbeing.

I would like to address the specific language in the bill that calls for "an assessment of the potential to increase the amount of Vermont agricultural products that are purchased by school nutrition programs in the State, including an inventory of agricultural products, such as beef, eggs, or cheese, where demand from schools would create a viable market for Vermont farmers...".

As Vermont FEED and others are sharing today, such an assessment has already been completed, and that information is available. However, as Farm to School continues to grow, and if Farm to School is fully funded with an annual appropriation of \$500,000, and schools across the state are able to integrate strong Farm to School programming into their school - their classrooms, their cafeteria, and more - we also see the need to identify the next major step to bring more local food into school meal programs. We appreciate that legislators are eager to know what that next step is and to move forward on it - and that attention and energy is inspiring and pushing the Farm to School Network to really consider what that is.

Hunger Free Vermont supports the proposal from others in the Farm to School Network to explore how a state funded local food incentive program could support increased local food purchasing. Not only does this encourage more local food in schools, it also supports the financial success of school meal programs and supports our goal of creating the opportunity for all schools in Vermont to serve universal school meals.

As we know from the virtuous cycle, increasing local food in schools helps to increase student participation in school meal programs because the food quality improves and stigma around eating school meals decreases. Combining the virtuous cycle with a financial supplement from the state, has the potential to greatly improve the financial reality of many school meal programs across the state who are operating in a deficit. When school meal program finances improve, and when student participation in school meal programs grow, schools will be more able, and more likely, to transition their programs to a universal school meals model. This efforts goes hand-in-hand with the expansion of universal school meals, and the results of the proposed exploration and field testing of an incentive program would connect with and help inform our strategy for the best road toward a statewide universal school meals model.