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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about Farm to School & Early Childhood and Child Nutrition Programs — and the crucial role these programs play in reducing child hunger and improving health and learning outcomes. Hunger Free Vermont is Vermont's statewide anti-hunger advocacy organization. We are a non-profit with the mission to end the injustice of hunger and malnutrition for all Vermonters. Over the last 25 years, Hunger Free Vermont has helped Vermont make the most of federal nutrition programs like 3SquaresVT and school breakfast and lunch, while also working to help more Vermonters reach economic security so that they do not need to rely on 3SquaresVT and the emergency food system to put food on their table.

While hunger in Vermont has improved in recent years, far too many Vermonters are food insecure and many more are just one missed paycheck or unexpected expense away from food insecurity.

- Currently, 1 in 10 Vermonters are food insecure, which means they struggle to access food, especially food that is nutritious and culturally appropriate, in a dignified way.
- Families with children are more likely to be food insecure. 1 in 7 children live in homes struggling to put food on the table.
- Many Vermonters who are working don't make enough to cover all their basic needs, like food, shelter, childcare, and medicine. For those who are eligible, 3SquaresVT and school meals help make up the difference. Many working families earn too much to qualify for these programs, yet still face shortfalls in meeting their basic needs.

We know that children have a basic need to be well-fed in order to learn well. When children are hungry, their health and learning outcomes, their brain development, and their workforce readiness are all affected gravely. The data show 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 regardless of their family's income — and are treated as a critical foundation for their education — is the approach that ensures the greatest participation and the best student outcomes.

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 connect with food and 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.

Thanks to investments by the Legislature in the Farm to School and Early Childhood Grant Program in recent years, we have been able to work directly with schools to improve participation in their child nutrition programs. We are just beginning to work with the third round of grantees, and our staff is equal parts proud of the accomplishments by the schools we've worked with so far, and excited by the potential within this newest

group of schools and early childhood providers. Schools who receive Farm to School Grants are starting brand new universal summer and afterschool meal programs; they are transitioning their school breakfast and lunch programs into universal programs, transforming their food and cafeteria's culture in the process; they are moving breakfast after the bell and seeing more and more students eat a nutritious breakfast together.

What's even more exciting is that the grant program is having a ripple effect beyond the individual grantee schools and beyond the length of the grants. Other schools are seeing the profound impact this work is having, and they want to be part of it, too. For example, Newbrook Elementary has found such positive results from launching their universal school meals program that they are exploring how to expand the program to other schools in their district. The grant program provides the support, and the little push, schools often need to take a big leap. As a grantee, Poultney Elementary launched a universal school breakfast program. They were expecting that the program could cost the school money, but the Farm to School grant gave them the financial ability to take that leap anyway. Participation in the breakfast program increased so dramatically after it became universal, that the program broke even and they never had to use that financial cushion. Now, they are considering doing the same thing for their lunch program.

None of this would have happened without the opportunity for relationship-building, support, and technical assistance that was available to schools because of the Farm to School and Early Childhood Grants Program.

I've mentioned "universal school meals" quite a few times, and I'd like to take a moment to share a bit more about these programs, as they are often a goal during our work with a Farm to School grantee. Since 2014, Hunger Free Vermont has helped nearly 25% of Vermont public schools, serving over 16,000 students, take the money out of school meals. We partnered with the University of Vermont to conduct a two-year study on the impact that providing universal school meals has had so far. The results are in — and they are powerful. Broadly, universal school meals has a positive effect on student learning, school culture, food quality, school meal program finances, student, family, and school administrators' stress, the relationship between principals and families, and more.

Specifically:

- 83% of staff at participating schools agree that universal school meals make students more ready to learn.
- 98% of staff at these schools agree that universal school meals have reduced financial stress on students and families.
- 81% of staff agree that with the universal school meals program, differences in family income are less visible, and as a result 72% agree that it has produced an improved social climate.
- And, 64% of staff agree that the school is able to purchase more locally grown or produced food.

The Farm to School Grants are an important tool to help schools explore and implement universal school meals, and because of the grant program, more Vermont students, families, and schools are experiencing these benefits.

We thank you for the new investments the Legislature has committed during the past three years to our state's Farm to School and Early Childhood Grants Program. We know that Farm to School and Early Childhood needs a total appropriation of \$500,000 to achieve our goals for getting Farm to School in 75% of our schools by 2025. Please do not reduce funding from FY19's appropriation of \$231,000, and please look to grow this funding so that this great work, and these great outcomes, can continue to grow.