

Testimony for House Agriculture & Forestry Committee (1/27/21)

My name is Maggie Rubick. I am an early childhood educator at Northshire Day School in Manchester. We currently serve 91 children and their families at NDS. Our families come from all over Bennington County, plus neighboring towns in Windham and Rutland counties. I am a pre-k teacher and child development specialist. I am also a long-time Farm to School advocate.

I am here because I love gardening with young children. I am passionate about providing garden-based learning experiences and I have been designing garden- and food-focused curricula for my pre-k students since 2014. I also support other educators in integrating garden-related opportunities. During the pandemic, being in the garden with preschool students has been my calm place in what often feels like a storm. When our world seemed to shut down last Spring, I got to be at work, preparing our garden for the growing season as we provided care to the children of essential workers. I also learned how to provide garden-based experiences remotely, using our garden as a way to connect with children and families who were staying home. When we reopened our regular program on June 1st and began to welcome back families, I got to share our growing garden again with my young friends. We observed butterflies and picked Japanese beetles from our green beans. Children harvested mint and chives on a daily basis and waited and waited for the carrots to grow. One of my students, who just turned 5, has been my garden helper through all of these transitions. He helped prepare the garden beds and sow seeds in the spring, taking a special interest in his patch of carrots, which he checked on each day for months. In the fall, when our new school year began, he introduced many new friends to our garden space and taught them about the slow-growing carrots and how to harvest the chives (his favorite). Now, we are looking forward to planting the garden together one more time. He insists that we grow carrots again and is hoping they will be ready to harvest before he goes to Kindergarten. But, just in case, he will come visit his younger sister next year and she can harvest the carrots.

At Northshire Day School, we are growing a program-wide Farm to Early Childhood initiative, which emerged from an intentional focus on Farm to School in our pre-k curriculum in conjunction with small-scale local food procurement. For several years, our Farm to School practices were limited in scope, constrained by a lack of resources and supports. Farm to School started small at NDS, but it is growing quickly and vigorously now. The Child Nutrition Grant we were awarded last year has had a profound impact on our program-wide Farm to Early Childhood initiative. The funding provided by this grant is enabling us to plan for professional development experiences for our educators, to increase local food procurement, and to expand outdoor learning opportunities through added garden spaces. We were awarded this grant just before the pandemic hit, and although every aspect of this work has become more difficult, we have continued to prioritize our Farm to School efforts because we see them as even more important than ever. During a time of economic struggle, it is essential to support our local producers. We have built new procurement relationships this spring and will continue to do so. We also saw a need for more equitable outdoor learning opportunities when our garden space became a limited-access area for preschool only. We will be expanding garden spaces this spring to include a sensory garden for infants and toddlers, plus several new

raised beds, so that *all* children at NDS have access to developmentally appropriate garden-based learning in their designated outdoor areas. We have also partnered with Oak Hill Children's Center, another licensed ECE program in our region, to participate in the Northeast Farm to School Institute. My program is serving as the mentor program in this partnership, supporting Oak Hill to grow their own Farm to Early Childhood initiative. Sharing resources, experience, and knowledge is a shared priority for NDS and for our collaborative team. Our collaboration envisions the creation of a regional procurement infrastructure and shared resources and supports that are inclusive of all early childhood programs in Bennington County.

All of these Farm to Early Childhood efforts stem from our understanding that Farm to School practices strengthen communities and contribute to resilience. Farm to Early Childhood programs also promote healthy child development. Although my version of Farm to School is focused on growing things in the garden, Farm to School is a wide-reaching lens that can be applied to nearly all aspects of the Early Childhood program, from policy-making and professional development to our school meal program, feeding children, supporting families, and strengthening our community. Many of our core values as Early Childhood Educators align with the goals and values of Farm to School. Programs like the Child Nutrition Grant and Northeast Farm to School Institute have had a significant impact on our Farm to Early Childhood practices and policies, and this impact continues to spread as we cultivate new relationships and share our resources, expertise, and passion with other providers in our area. Farm to School funding has a major educational, environmental, and economic impact. I am grateful for your support of Farm to School programming. I ask that you expand funding for Farm to School. \$500,000 annually would enable *all* children in Vermont and all communities to benefit from Farm to School practices and access equitable opportunities and resources.

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