



House Agriculture & Forestry Committee  
January 27, 2021

My name is Betsy Rosenbluth and I am the Project Director of Vermont FEED at Shelburne Farms. I also coordinate the Vermont Farm to School Network.

I want to touch briefly on what we have learned during the pandemic and a request to the legislature that we believe will make a substantial impact on both COVID recovery and the long term health of Vermont kids and farmers.

First I want to acknowledge both the VT Agency of Education and the Agency of Agriculture staff for mobilizing so quickly to direct COVID funding to school nutrition. The \$100,000 of CRF funding that was directed to the FTS grants program this fall was all granted, covering the added costs of equipment and supplies in FTS programs to provide adequate outdoor learning spaces and healthy meals and snacks. Vermont FEED was able to leverage this funding to secure an additional \$25,000 from the Vermont Community Foundation to support feeding kids in smaller farm to school programs like in Albany, Troy, Bradford, Springfield and Lowell.

School nutrition programs have pivoted quickly to feed all kids in a variety of settings. Many programs have been able to continue their local purchasing, especially when they had *systems in place*. Others required more packaged grabngo products of which we have a limited supply, made with Vermont food. Schools and Early Childhood programs were also disappointed when Thomas Dairy could no longer supply their milk. But what we see school nutrition programs do have in common is the *desire* to buy Vermont products and support the local food system, when possible.

We see similar adaptations in farm to school educational programming, with a shift in focus to food security. Schools have sent home seed packets and grow kits, and distributed their school garden produce and other local foods to families. But perhaps the biggest impact of farm to school has been the ability to quickly engage community partners that schools and early childhood providers have built relationships with through their programs. And students are engaged, seeing in real time the intersection of food security/climate change/COVID/BLM and making those connections back to civic participation.

This year we are asking you to fully fund the FTS and Early Childhood grant program at \$500,000 to meet our goal of farm to school in all districts. Now we know more than ever how important farm to school and school nutrition is to supporting our local food system and feeding our kids. It is a critical year to support schools in their effort to

support families and improve the health of our kids, while benefiting our farmers. We also know that 90% of our brains are developed by age 5 so it is so critical that young children have proper nutrition and are exposed to new healthy foods, especially in a time with food insecurity so high (1 in 3 Vermonters). The technical assistance provided through the grants program will support programs working towards universal school meals, improved nutrition, and increased local purchasing. As we saw this fall, the program is efficient at distributing funding quickly to early childhood programs and schools. This week the grants program issued an RFP for subsidized CSA shares to early childhood programs, in response to an identified need.

Schools have been spending \$15.5 million on food every year and we want to keep more of those dollars in the Vermont economy and with VT farmers. If 20% of all school food purchases were local, that would be over \$3 million annually going to VT producers, and almost \$5 million contributed to VT's economy.

Thank you!