

**Harley Sterling, School Nutrition Director, Windham Northeast Supervisory Union**  
**Wednesday, January 27, 2021**

Thank you, my name is Harley Sterling, and I am the School Nutrition Director for Windham Northeast Supervisory Union. I am also on the board of directors for the school Nutrition Association of Vermont.

Thank you very much for taking the time to listen to my testimony today and I also want to extend a sincere thank you to this committee for the role you all played in helping to allocate the Covid Relief Funds to VT school nutrition programs through grants this summer and fall. I know I speak for all of us child nutrition professionals when I say that this has been a truly overwhelming, generational investment in our programs that has helped us weather the storm this year and will benefit the kids of Vermont for decades to come.

*I want to share with you my experiences as a VT FTS CN Grant recipient and why **I feel FULLY FUNDing the Farm to School and Early Childhood grants program at \$500,000** offers a remarkably efficient way to support our kids and farmers with each dollar spent creating value in so many different ways.*

My introduction to the VT FTS CN grant began 3 years ago, when our school nutrition program was just getting started. In order to facilitate our scratch-cooking farm to cafeteria model, we pretty desperately needed an investment in kitchen equipment at our middle school. When we heard about this grant opportunity we started looking to put a team together to make it happen. A bit to my surprise, a group came together in no time at all that included: me, our assistant superintendent, and our middle school life skills and art teachers, each of us excited in our own way about working together to bring our visions of farm to school to life. We ended up getting a new stove and oven to support our cafeteria, as well as rebuilding our garden boxes and investing in our life skills classroom. The impact of this grant was felt immediately, but what was just as important was bringing together a team of stakeholders from different positions in the district who may never have worked together under normal circumstances-- it brought us together, out of our individual silos, to start talking about what was possible. Three years later, those gardens are thriving, our kitchen equipment is doing great things, and that same team is still meeting once every month.

**Just the existence of these grants brought together a team of folks who were motivated and ready to grow their visions into reality. It is hard to explain the value of having this kind engagement and cooperation in our schools and how these working relationships have continued to benefit our students. It's created a real sense of partnership and community.**

The next year our district was fortunate enough to receive a second grant and we saw a remarkably similar thing happen with a new team coming together on their own at two of our elementary schools. This team consisted of both school principals, grade teachers, our school nutrition site manager, and their librarian. Like I said, this team came together on their own,

inspired by the success of our farm to school grant team at Bellows Falls Middle School, and with their own big dreams of an outdoor classroom space with sprawling gardens, chickens, and maybe even someday, a barn.

What they created was a space for school to come alive. Where seeds become food and sunflowers blossoming and bringing in birds and squirrels, and where the hidden treasure of potatoes they dug and turned into that same day's lunch. A space where children can experience finding their first chicken eggs hidden in a straw nest. To quote, our FTS Educational coordinator and school librarian, Mandy Walsh, "The garden is the great equalizer, In the garden there are no kids that are bad at math or kids that are bad at reading. When kids have their hands in the dirt the garden is a confessional space that fosters social emotional health and growth. Kids are connected to nature, learning about farming and self-sufficiency. In the garden everyone is equal" This is all happening at school.

What has this farm to school culture meant this past year?

To quote Mandy again, "The outdoor classroom has been the closest thing to normal we've had. The garden has been a healing space holding our stories, and it's been a confessional space holding our secrets. Really the garden has held us together."

### **How do you see FTS in your community benefitting VT agriculture or the VT economy**

These great success stories of the Westminster Center School garden and FTS culture does not end there though. This FTS culture has been a resource for our entire district and in some ways the value of these grants has been mined by our entire region. Now I know that this is the house agriculture committee so let me explain what I mean.

This thriving FTS spirit in WNESU has set an example for how we do things around the district. Our annual Thanksgiving harvest feasts now feature more local food than ever before because our connection to food and to our area really demands of us to make it that way.

This year, you may have heard of the food and meal boxes that schools have been able to send home to kids while schools are closed to ensure kids have continued access to school meals during all of the extended closures. These boxes contain bulk food and prepared meals equivalent to a week's worth of meals. This has been made possible thanks to the hard work of the CN professionals around the state, especially the Burlington School Food Project who really blazed the trail and of course the incredible support of VT AOE CNP. So our district was able to send home holiday meal boxes, during the extended school closure periods. These meal boxes contained food equivalent to about a week's worth of meals for children. So like I said, our strong FTS culture down here, the seeds of which have really been cultivated the last few years by these farm to school grants, the culture sets an example for how we try to go about doing things now. And these meals boxes presented us with a chance to turn to our local food growers and producers to help ensure that all children in our communities have access to the great local food grown right here while they're not in school.

Remember we're a relatively small district down here, but each of the four times we offered these weekly boxes, over 500 kids showed up to receive them.

So what did families actually receive? 2,100 pounds of potatoes, 852 quarts of yogurt, about 6,000 apples, 600 pints of cider, 1,100 loaves of bread, 1,416 pounds of carrots, 300 tubs of hummus, 400 blocks of cheese, and 300 tortilla packets. also bolstered the local food economy—buying food from 10 Food Connects farms and food producers:

Basin Farm, Champlain Orchards, Dutton Berry Farm, Grafton Village Cheese, Green Mountain Orchards, Harlow Farm, Mi Tierra Tortillas, The Bread Shed, Valley Veg, and Yalla Vermont. Over \$19,000 was spent at these local food businesses. "This is money that is going straight back into the community," says McKenna Hayes, Food Connects Food Hub Co-Director, "being paid out to area producers and distribution staff, who in turn use those funds at other local businesses."

We know that every dollar invested in Farm to School returns \$1.60 to Vermont's local economy. But I would argue that that figure may not even be the whole picture.

I've said before that I believe Vermont is a generation ahead on farm to school over neighboring states. And these grants plant the seeds of **what makes Vermont Vermont**.

I don't know about you but I'm not happy just having the lead. I want to be a part of the state that continues TO lead. We have some of the best CNP and EDU folks in the world here in VT. Please help them write the next great FTS success story. Please support our kids and farmers by

***FULLY FUNDing the Farm to School and Early Childhood grants program at \$500,000.***

***Thank you***