



**Senate Agriculture Committee
January 20, 2021**

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

I want to touch briefly on what we have learned during the pandemic, and our requests to the legislature this session, 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 thank both the Agency of Education staff and the Agency of Agriculture for mobilizing so quickly to direct COVID funding to school nutrition, early childhood providers and farmers. The \$100,000 of CRF funding that was directed to the FTS grants program 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.

As you will hear this morning, 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 local 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. Students are also 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. It is a critical year to support schools in their effort to feed families and improve the health of our kids, while benefiting 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. 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.

To expand the ability of schools to purchase more from Vermont producers, we support passage of a local purchasing incentive bill, that we call "VT Food for VT Kids." 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. The program has been successful in numerous states - even sustaining local purchasing through the disruption of the pandemic.

I am happy to come back to the Committee at any time to discuss these programs in more detail or provide you with further information. Thank you!

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