

**February 8th, 2024**

**Farm to School & Early Childhood Awareness Day 2024**

**Testimony from Tom Brewton, Institutional Sales Associate at Food Connects**

Good Morning! My name is Tom Brewton and I work at Food Connects, a nonprofit that provides farm to school coaching services in Southern VT and distributes 100% source identified food to more than 80 schools throughout VT, NH, and Western MA. Thank you for your time today.

I am here today to ask that you please support the Farm to School & Early Childhood program with level funding base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2025 as well as the Local Foods Incentive Grant (LFI) for schools at \$500,000 level funding base appropriation.

In my role as Institutional Sales Associate, I have the privilege of overseeing our VT public school accounts. On a weekly basis, I talk with food service professionals about products that the Food Connects Food Hub can deliver to their schools that meet the VT definition of local for the LFI.

Since the implementation of this grant, sales of VT beef have drastically increased. Prior to the LFI, it was really difficult to sell VT local proteins to public schools, primarily due to food service budgetary constraints. Now that schools have a financial incentive to source VT products, this barrier to entry has been reduced. In fact, one of the easiest ways for VT public schools to increase their local purchasing percentage is by sourcing VT “center of the plate” proteins, like ground beef and beef patties.

Boyden Farm in Cambridge, VT is Food Connects’ primary beef supplier. Mark Boyden is a 5th generation family farmer and cares deeply about serving public schools. He says, “The big thing is getting kids to expect local food, and they keep that when they grow up. That’s more important than sales.” During the school year of 2021-22, Food Connects sold approximately \$35,000 of Boyden Farm beef to VT public schools. During the following school year, we sold approximately \$48,000, representing a 37% increase year over year. Lastly, during the current school year, we have already sold approximately \$50,000 with still 5 months remaining in the school year. I am confident that more VT public schools will continue to increase their ordering of VT beef so that they can meet the local purchasing thresholds for the LFI.

A separate program that has proven to support the LFI has been the The Local Food For Schools Program (LFS), which is a partnership with the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets and four Vermont food hubs to provide local food to Vermont schools at no cost. This is a one-time program funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The intention for this program is to create long term relationships between VT public schools and food hubs even after these one-time funds have been used.

The LFS funds were made available to schools beginning in September 2023. Here are just a few success stories I would like to highlight:

- Thanks to the LFS Program, 4 VT food hubs worked together to ensure that every School Food Authority (SFA) in the state can receive deliveries from a food hub. The four VT food hubs are Vermont Farmers Food Center in Rutland, ACORN Food Hub in Middlebury, Green Mountain Farm Direct in Newport, and Food Connects in Brattleboro.
- Together, we are delivering to more than 150 VT public schools. More than 60 schools are new customers this school year thanks to the LFS program.
- Last school year, we collectively sold more than \$400,000 of locally and regionally sourced food to VT public schools. This year, we have already sold more than \$430,000 to VT public schools with still 5 months remaining in the school year. The LFS Program has been a significant driver for this increase year over year.
- Colleen French is the Assistant Food Service Director at Champlain Valley Union High School and has been working in food service for 23 years. Her district was assigned to Food Connects as their food hub to use their LFS funds this school year. Here are a few things Colleen had to say about the program. “When I learned about the LFS Program, I was so excited to partner with Food Connects and offer my students more local food. We have had so much fun trying out new items like VT cheese curds from 5 Generations Creamery to make poutine. I also really appreciate how I can count LFS orders that meet the Vermont Local Definition towards our local food purchases for the Local Foods Incentive Grant. Even though I have used up all my LFS funds, I still plan to continue to order from Food Connects going forward.” Relationships like the one Food Connects has with Colleen is what the four food hubs are working hard to cultivate across the state.

In conclusion, by supporting the Local Foods Incentive Grant at \$500,000 level funding base appropriation, you will help ensure that our children have access to a diversified range of local, nutritious foods while providing a sustainable market for our VT farmers. From our farmers to our children, the LFI is a win-win.

Thank you so much for your time.