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February 21, 2023

My name is Helen Rortvedt and I live in Burlington. I am the Farm to School & Food Access Programs Director at NOFA-VT, and I co-lead the Vermont FEED project. **Please support the Farm to School & Early Childhood grant program with a level funded base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2024. Also, please fund the Local Food Purchasing Incentive program for schools at \$500,000 in base funding.**

Act 67 of 2021, which established the Local Foods Incentive grant program, states that it is the goal of the State that at least 20 percent of the foods schools purchase be locally produced. And, while we are not there quite yet, we have made significant strides forward in relatively short order. Already, in just the second year of the program, 31 of Vermont's 51 School Food Authorities (SFAs) have participated in at least the baseline year program. School nutrition professionals have been telling us for years that they want to buy more local foods but, with little more than a dollar to spend from USDA reimbursements per plate, they lack sufficient funds to do so on a meaningful scale. The Local Foods Incentive provides school nutrition programs with much needed financial resources and encourages them to put Vermont farmers and producers first when making food purchasing decisions. The Local Foods Incentive clearly illustrates the power of a State incentive to catalyze a shift in institutional purchasing practices.

The Farm to School & Early Childhood grant program is a critical connector, bringing farmers and educators together so that children and youth can experience local food, have nutritious meals, and learn about where their food comes from. It helps schools succeed in accessing the Local Foods Purchasing Incentive, and as schools continue to increase their local food purchasing, we will see the further strengthening of our local food supply chain, which will facilitate greater market opportunities for our farmers and producers.

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