

**February 12th, 2025**

**Farm to School & Early Childhood Awareness Day 2025**

**Testimony from Patrick Ackerman-Hovis, Institutional Sales Specialist at Food Connects**

Good Morning! My name is Patrick Ackerman-Hovis and I work at Food Connects, a nonprofit that provides farm to school coaching services in Southern VT and food hub that distributes 100% source-identified local and regional food to more than 100 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 2026 as well as the Local Foods Incentive Grant (LFI) for schools at \$500,000 level funding base appropriation.

The Farm to School & Early Childhood program helps schools to create the structures and build the partnerships we need to be able to bring farm fresh food into our schools and early childhood programs and offer it to our students on a daily basis. These programs are helping students learn about where their food comes from that they are enjoying in school each day, and increasingly the source of this food is the State of Vermont.

In my role as Institutional Sales Associate, I have the privilege of overseeing our VT public school and early childhood 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.

Today Conor Floyd, from the Vermont Agency of Education, shared details about the number of School Food Authorities (SFA) participating in the LFI program. This program continues to encourage schools to be aware of their local purchasing and incentivizes them to increase it each year.

- Food Connects - YOY Sales of LFI items to Vermont Schools
  - 23-24SY - \$310k
  - 24-25SY - \$341k to date
  - A 10% increase with 4 months left remaining in the school year!

Local purchasing is not limited to the school year as the LFI grant also counts local purchasing for SFA's Summer Food Programs, incentivizing year-round local purchasing. These summer food programs align with our Vermont farm's peak growing season so that blueberries, peppers, cucumbers, tomatoes, and lettuce support food security and the nutritional needs of kids over the summer, and increase the market for our producers.

- Food Connects - YOY Sales of LFI items to Vermont School Summer Food Programs
  - Summer 2023 - \$50k
  - Summer 2024 - \$150k
  - A 200%% increase!

In the current school year Food Connects have sold LFI eligible products to 62 Vermont schools from 37 Vermont producers. Among those producers is Green Mountain Orchards in Putney, VT.

Owner Andrea Darrow said, "The push to buy local that was initiated and supported by the Vermont department of agriculture years ago was the best thing that happened for Green Mountain orchards.

We wouldn't be here today without it. We were thrilled to see that initiative extended to schools and other institutions. On a personal level we love hearing our grandchildren boast that the apples their friends are chomping on at school come from Green Mountain orchards!"

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.