

Farm to School & Early Childhood Awareness Day 2025

February 12, 2025

Aziza Malik (Teacher)

My name is Aziza Malik, and I am a fifth-grade teacher at Champlain Elementary in Burlington. As a teacher, I have the privilege of watching my students grow—not just academically, but in their connection to the world around them. One of the most magical ways this happens is through **Farm to School** programs.

Food is a powerful connector. It brings my students together, builds curiosity, and fosters a sense of pride. I've seen students who struggle to engage in traditional lessons light up when they harvest potatoes, chop vegetables for a soup, or cook a meal they've seen in their own homes. These moments matter. They turn learning into something real and relevant.

But I've also seen the other side—when students come to school hungry. It is heartbreaking. No child should have to learn on an empty stomach. **Farm to School ensures that our students not only have access to meals but that those meals are nourishing, local, and meaningful.**

Rather than just hearing from me today, I want you to hear from my students—because they are the ones truly experiencing the impact of this program.

Shania O'Neill (Student)

Thank you for allowing us to be heard. My name is Shania O'Neill, and I am a fifth grader at Champlain Elementary in Burlington.

One thing I love about **Farm to School** is that we get to **grow our own food** in our school garden and then see it in the cafeteria for lunch. This year, my class harvested potatoes, and we made **homemade french fries**. I think the fries were very tasty like fries you would get at a restaurant—they tasted so good probably because we grew them ourselves! Cooking them made me realize how simple it is to make real food, and I think it changes the way we eat. When you know where your food comes from, you think about it differently.

We also cooked **curry together**, using a recipe developed by last year's fifth graders. It was really cool to see that a dish many students eat at home was now part of our school meals. It made me feel like **food connects us all in a special way**. I think every student should have the chance to experience that.

Maddie Wegner (Student)

Hi, my name is Maddie Wegner, and I'm also a fifth grader at Champlain Elementary.

Having a school garden **connects us to our food** in a way that many kids don't get to experience. We can walk through the garden, pick fresh herbs and berries, and make what we call "**yum yum packs**." They taste better than candy—seriously! And they're way healthier. Wouldn't it be better if we were eating things we grew ourselves in the garden instead of Jolly Ranchers.

I never thought I'd like **herbal spritzers**, but when we harvested **different kinds of herbs** and made a **healthy version of soda** with what we grew, I realized it was actually really good! Instead of Sprite, we made **lemon balm spritzers**—delicious and healthy! I don't think I would have ever tried it otherwise.

Because of our garden, I know how to grow food, how to cook it, and **how good fresh food can taste**. Every school should have that opportunity and experience.

Ibrahim Mohamed (Student)

Hi, my name is Ibrahim Mohamed, and I'm a fifth grader at Champlain Elementary.

My favorite school meal is **macaroni and cheese**, and I think everyone should have the chance to find their favorite meal at school. Some students might not always have food at home, and **school meals make a big difference**. How can we learn if we're hungry?

School meals also help us try new things. Before I had free school meals, I never regularly ate mac and cheese! Now, it's my favorite. I eat it every time it is on the menu. But this isn't just any mac and cheese—we use **Shelburne Farms cheddar**, a **local cheese made with Vermont dairy** from a farm that practices **sustainable farming**. I've been able to visit **Shelburne Farms** to see firsthand how this cheese is made and try all the varieties including their amazing aged cheddar (chef's kiss).

I think **all students deserve free, healthy, and local meals** because no one should have to worry about being hungry at school.

Closing (Aziza Malik)

You've just heard from my students, and their stories say it all. **Farm to School isn't just about food—it's about learning, connection, and ensuring that every student has access to fresh, nourishing meals.**

I urge you to support the **Farm to School & Early Childhood program** and the **Local Foods Incentive**. These programs are changing lives, and they need to continue.

Thank you for your time and for listening to the voices of my students. We appreciate your support!