



Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont

Nourishing people, land, and justice through organic agriculture.



-Memorandum-

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NOFA-VT | VT FEED
Farm to School & Early Childhood Awareness Day
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Hello, members of the committee.

For the record, my name is Kayla Strom. I am a resident of Richmond, Vermont, and I serve as the Farm to Institution Program Director at the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont. I am here today as a representative of the Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here and to share the impact that Farm to School and Early Childhood programming has on Vermonters. This work supports our schools, our farmers, our local food economy, and our communities. We are here today to ask for your support for level funding of two critical programs in Fiscal Year 2027: the Farm to School & Early Childhood Grants Program, and the Local Foods Incentive, both at \$500,000.

Together, these programs connect young people with food systems education and Vermont agriculture, while simultaneously supporting our farmers and food producers.

To offer a bit of context: the Vermont Farm to School & Early Childhood Network was created in 2008 in response to a growing movement of schools that wanted to serve local food in their cafeterias while using food and farming as an integrated educational tool to support student learning and engagement.

This approach is reflected in our "Three C's" Model of Change: Classroom, Cafeteria, and Community. For long-term impact, these three elements must be connected, creating a win-win-win for students, farmers, families, and communities.

I have seen the impact of Farm to School firsthand. In my role, I work closely with school nutrition programs across the state to increase local food purchasing in schools and early childhood settings, while ensuring these institutional markets work for Vermont farmers.

Again and again, school nutrition professionals tell me that the connections they're building with local farms, bakeries, and food businesses are made possible because of these programs. They are proud to support their neighbors. And kids are growing up understanding what it means to be nourished by their communities. These programs are not just feeding students, they are shaping a generation that values local food, supports Vermont farmers, and strengthens our rural economy.

Vermont has invested in three cornerstone programs that work together to improve student health and learning while benefiting our agricultural community:

- First, the Roza McLaughlin Farm to School & Early Childhood Grants Program, established in 2006, has served more than 300 schools and early childhood programs in every county of the state. It provides capacity-building and technical assistance to help programs develop and strengthen their Farm to School efforts.
- Second, the Local Foods Incentive (LFI) supports increased local purchasing so that more of the approximately \$25 million schools spend annually on food stays here in Vermont. Over the past decade, local purchasing in schools has grown from 5% to 14% statewide, and more than 150 Vermont farms now sell to schools and early childhood programs.
- Third, Universal School Meals (USM) ensure equitable access to meals for every student, in every ZIP code. For many students, school meals provide nearly half of their daily calories, making access to nourishing food essential for health, learning, and success.

I also want to note that today is also School Nutrition Day at the Statehouse, and many school nutrition professionals are here with us celebrating five years of Universal School Meals. That's five years of ensuring that every student has access to the food they need to learn, grow, and thrive.

These three programs (the FTS grants, LFI, and USM) work together as a virtuous cycle. Universal meals and Farm to School increase participation in school meals, which improves program revenue. That revenue allows schools to purchase more local food and prepare more scratch-cooked meals, which further increases participation and continues the cycle.

In previous years, the Agencies of Education and Agriculture, Food and Market have provided reports to this committee on the Local Foods Incentive and Farm to School grants. We would be happy to return later this session to walk through that data once the most recent reports are available.

Today, you will hear directly from students, a school nutrition professional, a farmer, and a food producer about how these programs are making a difference on the ground. As you'll hear, the state's investment in these programs truly matters.

Before closing, I also want to highlight two events happening today:

- At 10:00 a.m., Representative Richard Nelson will recognize Farm to School and School Nutrition Day on the House Floor.
- At 11:00 a.m., there will be a Universal School Meals press conference in the Cedar Creek Room.

I urge you to continue supporting these efforts with level funding of \$500,000 for both the Farm to School & Early Childhood Grants Program and the Local Foods Incentive. As a network, our goal is to reach 30% local purchasing in schools by 2030. To get there, we must continue investing in the programs that help schools access, afford, and integrate local foods.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to strengthening Farm to School and Early Childhood efforts in Vermont. We're happy to take questions after each speaker, and we've also provided a handout to committee staff with additional information. Please don't hesitate to reach out to any of us with follow-up questions.

Thank you.

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