

## Testimony for Farm to School & Early Childhood Awareness Day 2026

Tuesday January 13, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story with you today.

My name is Alyson Grzyb. I have worked in the field of early childhood education for almost 30 years. I am currently the Director of the Bennington Early Childhood Center in Bennington, VT. We are a pre-qualified pre-k partner site through the Agency of Education and a 5 STARS quality early childhood education program through the Child Development Division of the Agency of Human Services. We serve 70+ children, ages one through eight, from our community annually.

I am here today to talk about Farm to School and Early Childhood funding and how it has positively affected my program and to respectfully request that you please support the Farm to School and Early Childhood program with a level funded base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2027.

At my program, we have always had a great connection to gardening, harvesting, composting, and making and eating our own food. We have gardens on our property and we engage the children in activities pertaining to growing, tasting, harvesting, cooking and eating food. These sorts of experiences fit naturally into early education curriculum. We are, however, always on the lookout for ways to improve our programming and in 2021 the opportunity to be a part of the Farm to Early Childhood Institute came across our radar. Going through the Institute helped us to think more deeply about the three C's of Farm to School - Cafeteria, Classroom, and Community - and helped us to form a values statement and action plan to guide our growth in our commitment to Farm to School and Early Childhood education. Our plans included

expanding our outdoor classroom opportunities by completing and outfitting a pavilion space, building a story walk trail, providing meal activities and supplies to families, purchasing more locally grown/raised food, expanding our raised bed gardens, planting more fruit bushes/trees on our property, making more connections with local farms, and planting a pollinator garden. As we worked on these goals we applied for more grants and received the Farm to Early Childhood Grant in 2022 and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) grants in 2022, 2023, and 2024. As we continued to grow our connections to the land, we not only wanted to support the children, families, and staff of our program, but also other children, families, and early childhood educators in the community. In 2024 we helped to organize a Farm to Early Childhood Education Mini-Conference here in Bennington County. It was so well-received that we helped to organize a 2nd annual Farm to Early Childhood Education Mini-Conference last year and are currently working on the 3rd annual conference to be held in March of 2026. These mini-conferences have brought professional learning experiences to early childhood educators in our region and sparked further interest in Farm to School and Early Childhood activities and connections. One of my staff is now a Farm to Early Childhood mentor to another early childhood program in the area, assisting them as they go through the Farm to Early Childhood Institute. She and I have both been attending Farm to School and Early Childhood meetings with Dana Hudson from Shelburne Farms to plan a gathering to continue to build community connections in our region. And, our center just recently applied for a grant to support the purchase of CSAs for four area early childhood programs, including our own.

Farm to Early Childhood educational initiatives are strong in our region thanks to state-supported grant funding. The impacts of Farm to School and Early Childhood are deep and meaningful including exposing children to the process of growing, harvesting, and eating healthy and nutritious food, fostering community relationships and supporting local farmers, and promoting curiosity and confidence in children through nature-based programming that supports

social emotional development and wellness, to name a few. We need these funding sources to remain stable so that we can keep moving forward and continue to make connections with more and more programs and schools, thus growing and sustaining deep connections to our food sources, nutrition, and ecological sustainability.

As we enter into this new legislative session, please continue to support the Farm to School and Early Childhood grants program with a level funded base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2027.

Thank you for listening. It is my hope that hearing stories like mine, which highlight the impacts of this funding, will help you to make informed decisions for the future of Farm to School and Early Childhood Education in our State.