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**Vermont House Education Committee
Vermont Senate Education Committee
Farm to School Grant Testimony
January 13, 2026**

*Presented by
Dr. Michael Leichliter
Superintendent of Schools
Harwood Unified Union School District*

Chairman Conlon, Chairman Bongartz and distinguished members of the House and Senate Education Committees,

Good afternoon. My name is Mike Leichliter. I live in Duxbury, Vermont, and I serve as the Superintendent of the Harwood Unified Union School District, which serves six towns from Waterbury through the Mad River Valley.

Not long ago, I was monitoring students in the lunch line at Brookside Primary School in Waterbury. Allison, one of our lunch staff, leaned down and asked a kindergartner if she wanted green beans. The student did not answer right away. She paused, studied the green beans, tilted her head, and clearly gave the question some serious thought. Then she asked, very earnestly, “are they fresh or frozen?” That moment made me smile. It also told me a great deal. That is not a question five year olds ask by accident. It reflects awareness, expectation, and experience. It reflects the goals of Vermont Farm to School.

I am here today to ask that you please support the Farm to School and Early Childhood program with level funding at a base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2027,

and that you also support the Local Food Incentive program for schools with level funding at a base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2027.

As a superintendent, I am keenly aware of the financial pressures facing public education. We are making difficult budget decisions across Vermont and in my district. I feel those pressures every single day. Districts like mine have chosen to embrace high quality, locally sourced foods as part of our educational mission. If these grants are reduced, districts will be forced to choose between increasing local subsidies to sustain these programs, which ultimately places additional pressure on the Vermont Education Fund, or shifting to less expensive and more highly processed food options.

In our district, approximately 25% of school meals are locally sourced. That did not happen by accident. It happened because Vermont built the structures and incentives that make local purchasing possible. The Local Food Incentive and Farm to School grants allow schools to work directly with farmers, plan responsibly, and serve food that reflects Vermont values.

Before coming to Vermont, I served as a school superintendent of a school district of 6000 students in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in the heart of an area often described as the garden spot of America. Despite that abundance, local food rarely made its way into my school cafeterias. Schools relied on frozen and highly processed meals because they were easier and cheaper to serve. We were able to do it in a less expensive way, and providing less healthy food for children was the tradeoff. The issue was not access. It was intentionality and investment. Since moving to Vermont in 2022 I have learned that choices indeed have consequences.

That is why sustained and dedicated funding matters. Robust Farm to School and Early Childhood programming depends on predictable investment so schools and farmers can plan, build relationships, and maintain progress, and it requires clarity from both legislators and the public about our shared priorities. I respectfully ask that you please support the Farm to School and Early Childhood program and the Local Food Incentive with level funded base appropriations of \$500,000 each for Fiscal Year 2027, ensuring that our systems remain strong enough to support the curiosity, health, and learning of Vermont's children.

Thank you for your time and for your thoughtful consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions.