

Testimony To: Senate Committee on Health and Welfare

Testimony Provided By: Rick Hildebrant, MD, Commissioner

Subject: Farm to School

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I am here to discuss Farm to School and Farm to Early Childhood programs from a public health perspective, focusing on their impact on nutrition, equity, and long-term health outcomes. These programs represent a strong upstream investment in prevention and population health.

The Vermont Department of Health has been a longtime partner with the Vermont Farm to School and Early Childhood Network. We have supported this work because it is grounded in evidence and aligned with our public health goals. Through evaluation projects conducted by the Department of Health and our partners, we have seen steady growth in programming across the state and measurable improvements in behaviors that matter for health.

Healthy eating habits do not start in adulthood. They start early, and they are shaped by exposure, familiarity, and experience. Roughly half of a child's daily calories come from school meals. For many children experiencing food insecurity, school meals are the most reliable source of nutrition they have. In Vermont, two in five people experience hunger, and that reality makes the nutritional quality of school meals a public health issue, not just an educational one.

Farm to School programs directly improve what children eat during a large portion of their day. Research from the USDA shows that these programs increase fruit and vegetable consumption and positively influence children's knowledge, attitudes, and openness toward healthy foods. A CDC funded report from Vermont FEED found that schools participating in farm to school programs reported roughly twice the national average in vegetable consumption. Students who know a farmer or who grow food themselves consistently eat more fruits and vegetables.

These are not small findings. Fruit and vegetable intake is associated with lower risk of chronic disease, including heart disease, diabetes, and certain cancers.

Establishing these dietary patterns early has a compounding effect over a lifetime.





Vermont already ranks among the highest states for daily fruit and vegetable consumption. That did not happen by accident. It reflects years of intentional investment in school nutrition, community food systems, and education. Farm to School programs are a key contributor to that success, and they help ensure that these benefits are shared equitably across communities.

Early childhood is especially critical. Ninety percent of brain development occurs by age five. Science directly links high quality nutrition during this period to brain development, learning, and long-term cognitive outcomes. Farm to Early Childhood programs ensure that our youngest Vermonters are exposed to healthy, nutritious foods while food preferences are forming and neural development is at its peak.

These programs do more than put healthy food on the plate. They encourage trying new foods, engage families in meals, and use hands-on learning to normalize healthy eating. Children bring these experiences home, influencing family food choices and extending the health impact beyond the classroom.

From a public health perspective, Farm to School contributes to outcomes in several important ways. It provides equitable access to healthy, local food and food education for children and families. It promotes health and wellness through the routine inclusion of nutritious foods in schools and early childhood settings. It supports the development of healthy eating habits, particularly increased preference for and consumption of fruits and vegetables. And it strengthens school nutrition programs in ways that help address child and family food insecurity.

The structure of the program is one of its strengths. The three C's approach, Cafeteria, Classroom, and Community, ensures that behavior change is supported at multiple levels. Cafeteria improvements increase access to nutritious meals. Classroom learning builds knowledge and skills. Community partnerships reinforce these habits outside of school. From a health standpoint, this is exactly how sustainable behavior change happens.

In Fiscal Year 2024, the Farm to School and Early Childhood program awarded 73 grants totaling just over \$370,000. Those grants reached more than 8,600 children and over 115,000 students statewide. That is a significant population-level reach for a relatively modest investment. Importantly, these funds are paired with technical assistance, mentorship, and peer learning, which helps ensure that health improvements last beyond the grant period.

The health benefits also intersect with economic and community health. By sourcing more Vermont-grown food, schools support local agriculture, strengthen food system resilience, and reduce reliance on distant supply chains. Strong local food systems are increasingly recognized as a component of community health, particularly in the face of economic and climate uncertainty.





From a prevention standpoint, this work matters. Chronic disease is one of the largest drivers of health care costs and preventable suffering. Programs that improve diet quality early in life are among the most cost-effective strategies we have to improve population health over time.

In closing, Farm to School and Early Childhood programs are not ancillary programs. They are core public health infrastructure. They improve nutrition, support brain development, address food insecurity, and lay the foundation for healthier adults and healthier communities.

Continued support for this work is an investment in prevention, equity, and long-term health outcomes for Vermont's children and families. The evidence is strong, the reach is broad, and the return on investment is clear.

Thank you for your time and for your continued commitment to the health of Vermonters.

