



March 3, 2023

Dear Chair Putnam and members of the Senate Agriculture, Broadband, and Rural Development Committee,

I am writing to urge your support for Senator Gustafson's Farm to School and Early Care Bill, SF 2158, and its inclusion in the final Agriculture Omnibus Bill.

IATP is a member of the Minnesota Farm to School Leadership Team and Minnesota Farm to Early Care Network Advisory Group, and has worked on supporting Farm to School and Early Care programs in Minnesota for over a decade, collaborating with schools, Head Starts and early cares to implement local purchasing, creating supportive resources and conducting evaluation activities to bolster the growth of these initiatives statewide—including evaluation of MDA's Farm to School Grant Program. We believe the plan outlined in this bill has the potential to be transformational in harnessing the positive momentum we see in Minnesota and taking our Farm to School and Early Care programs to the next level.

It is critical to increase the funding for MDA's Farm to School and Early Care grant program, which reimburses schools for purchases made from local farmers and has a separate grant for equipment purchases so that more schools can do scratch cooking. Last year, we saw a \$4.25 million dollar federal infusion of funding to MN to support MDA's Farm to School grant program and there was still more demand than funding available. Now is a critical time to make the investment of increasing funding for this grant to \$5 million per year, as it will leverage the momentum created by that federal investment and signal to farmers, schools and early cares that there is sustainable support for local purchasing that they can plan around. Other states have already been supporting Farm to School at higher levels than what we have in Minnesota: Oregon funded a similar program at \$10.4 million in 2019; Michigan funded a similar program at \$9.3 million in 2023.

We are also thrilled at the Governor's support to include early care providers as eligible applicants to the MDA grant program, as was the original intent of stakeholders when the program was initially created. In the Farm to Early Care Mini Grant pilot that we at IATP administered demand greatly exceeded available funding:

- During the first round in 2021, 14 out of 94 applications were funded.
- In 2022, we had 369 applications for the Farm to In-home Early Care mini grants (both Spanish and English language applications). We had funding to offer 26 mini grants of \$250. We had 91 applications for the center-based Farm to Early Care mini grants. We had funding to offer 8 mini grants of \$2,000. Another way to think about this demand: The requests for the In-home Mini Grants totaled \$92,250, while we had \$6,500 to give. The requests for the Center-based Mini Grants totaled \$182,000, while we had \$16,000 to give.

This represents a large untapped market for our farmers, and there is a lot of interest out there. Our littlest eaters depend on early care meals for a huge percentage of their nutrition intake,

and it's a window of opportunity to influence their taste preferences and eating habits that will carry forward for the rest of their lives.

This program is a win for our farmers, our students and our communities. Especially our rural communities, by keeping these dollars circulating in the community and providing another market for farmers who are not near the Metro area. IATP and U of MN Extension's recent evaluation report on the first round of MDA's Farm to School Grant found that every dollar spent by schools through this grant generated an additional dollar of impact in local economic activity (please see the one pager summary of evaluation results and longer report for background information). This bill provides support for continued evaluation activity to capture economic impact, document successes, identify barriers to access and opportunities for improvement as this program grows beyond its pilot years. This will be especially important to capture the full impact and potential from last year's large infusion of federal funding.

Additionally, this bill would support geographically based coordinators to support the scaling and purchasing of local food. We consistently have heard from partners the need for a coordinator position to work with farmers and interested markets to help with food safety and training, pricing, relationship building, etc. Having these positions potentially filled by partners who know their community and what they need would make MN a leader in supporting our farmers, especially our beginning and emerging farmers.

This Farm to School and Early Care bill is a worthy investment that supports the health of our children, the livelihoods of our family farms and the connections in our local communities.

Please support and vote yes on the SF 2158 Farm to School and Early Care bill.

Sincerely,

Erin McKee

Community Food Systems Program Director