



March 27, 2023

Chair Putnam and members of the Committee,

I am the Community Food Systems Program Director at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, a member of the Minnesota Farm to School Leadership Team and Minnesota Farm to Early Care Network Advisory Group, and have worked on supporting Farm to School and Early Care programs in Minnesota for 13 years.

- Thank you to Senator Gustafson for championing Farm to School and Early Care with her bill (SF 2158) this session, and to the committee for your support in including early childcare education centers as eligible recipients of this funding and appropriating \$150K for a full time farm to school coordinator role at MDA.
  - Allowing littlest eaters the ability to benefit from farm fresh products is important, as they 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. Early cares also represent a large untapped market our farmers can sell to, and we are excited to see these connections unfold.
  - A full time position at MDA will provide crucial statewide coordination support to farmers, grantees and eligible applicants to ensure the success of this grant program. We appreciate your recognition of this important role!
- We are disappointed that the Omnibus Bill did not include pass through funding support for **Regional Coordinators**. As you heard during our bill's hearing, regional local food coordinators are incredibly impactful. Having a point person like Aimee Haag for Dassel Cokato, Litchfield and Hutchinson school districts to be a contact for school food service teams and local area farmers has allowed these three small districts to scale their local purchasing from \$0 to \$825,000 worth of local food in just three years. These positions matter! We have grants recipients and farmers calling members of the Farm to School leadership team regularly asking to be connected with local farmers or learn of opportunities to sell to their local school districts, but we unfortunately don't have capacity to meet the level of demand we see in communities. There is a need to fund these types of positions. We could see stories like Aimee's replicated across the state. The dollars that we use for feeding our students have power, and we should make sure we are supporting and uplifting our local economies and farmers with these dollars— these positions support that.
- **With a proven track record of success and a record surplus, we also hoped to see a greater investment in the amount of funding for MDA's Farm to School & Early Care grant program.** Year over year demand for Farm to School funding grows. Thank you for a \$200K increase, however simply put this is not enough to sufficiently meet the demand of our schools and students for fresh, local products in our schools. Last year, Minnesota

had a one-time federal infusion of funds for our Farm to School grant that allowed them to offer \$4 million in funding for this program, and demand still exceeded that funding level. Schools and farmers are scaling up now to use that funding, and don't want to see that work dissolve when funding drops down to \$1 million next year. Now is a critical time to make the investment of increasing funding for this grant, 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.

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

Thank you for the support you have offered in including early cares in the MDA grant and funding a full time MDA coordinator. We hope you will consider an increase for grant funding and including support for regional marketing positions to let these programs reach their full potential.

Thank you!

Erin McKee