



February 26, 2024

Dear Chair Putnam and members of the Senate Agriculture committee:

We are writing to support Senator Gustafson's bill, SF 3528, which would add home-based family childcares as eligible applicants for MDA's AGRI Farm to School and Early Care grant. This grant, which reimburses for purchases from MN farmers, previously was only available to K12 schools to apply for, and last session eligibility was expanded to include center-based early cares for the first time. Adding home-based family childcare providers will ensure that these funds are available in settings throughout Minnesota, and allow all licensed early care settings to apply for these valuable funds to jumpstart local purchasing.

This change is critical to ensure these funds are available to settings throughout the state. Family childcare providers are the backbone of childcare in Greater Minnesota<sup>1</sup>. In Greater Minnesota, there are more childcare spots in home-based settings than in centers<sup>2</sup>. The nature of population density means that in many parts of the state, childcare centers are not feasible and home-based settings are the way families can access care. 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.

We know that home-based family childcare providers are interested in purchasing from local farmers. In 2022, a pilot Farm to Early Care mini grant opportunity we administered received applications from 369 home-based providers from all over the state. Making home-based providers eligible for Farm to Early Care grants would incentivize local purchases, opening up an additional market channel for MN farmers.

Minnesota has four "sponsoring organizations" that act as intermediaries between home-based family childcare providers and MDE to access federal reimbursements for meals and snacks. They are already eligible applicants for MDA's Farm to School & Early Care grant on behalf of their center-based clients, and could potentially fill the same role for home-based providers.

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 home-based family childcares to implement local purchasing, creating supportive resources and conducting evaluation activities to bolster the growth of these initiatives statewide.

SF 3528 will ensure that all Minnesota children, regardless of their care setting, can receive support to access fresh Minnesota food, and will open up another market for our farmers. We urge you to support this bill!

Sincerely,

Erin McKee, Community Food Systems Program Director

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ruralmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Childcare-in-rural-Minnesota-after-2020.pdf> "Childcare in Rural Minnesota after 2020" article, Center for Rural Policy and Development Report, Page 11

<sup>2</sup> <sup>2</sup> <https://minnesotareformer.com/2022/02/11/the-state-of-child-care-in-minnesota-in-four-charts/> "The State of Childcare in Minnesota" article, Minnesota Reformer