



February 18, 2025

Dear Chair Putnam and members of the Senate Agriculture Committee:

I am writing to urge your support for Senator Gustafson's Farm to School and Early Care Bill, SF 1559, 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.

SF 1559 would add permissive language to allow MDA to administer federal funding from USDA through MDA's AGRI Farm to School and Early Care grant. This grant, which reimburses for purchases from MN farmers, has consistently had greater demand than the amount of funding available. MDA recently signed a "Local Food for Schools (LFS)" Cooperative Agreement with USDA to receive \$13.2M over 3 years, representing a huge increase in funding to MDA's Farm to School & Early Care grant. This funding must be used only for local food purchases for K12 and early care meals, and does not include any percentage for administration.

MDA's grant program is currently funded at \$1.14M/year in state funding, but demand for this support is consistently greater than available funding.

- FY2023: when MDA had a previous infusion of federal funding to boost the amount available to \$4.2M, they received 128 Farm to School grant applications for \$5.43M total in requests.
- FY 2024: MDA received 92 applications requesting \$1.85 million for the \$1 million available.

In our evaluation work examining the impact of this grant program, we saw that the grant can act as an incentive for schools and early cares to establish buying relationships with MN farmers that often extend beyond the terms of the initial grant, with schools purchasing more than they are reimbursed for and integrating local farmers into their regular buying practices. Our partners at U of MN Extension found that every dollar spent on Farm to School generates an additional \$1 of local economic activity. As of September 2024, grantees have used FY23 funds to purchase from 437 producers, including meat, dairy, grain, fruit and vegetable growers around the state.

Farmers are scaling up to take advantage of these funds, and increased funding is vital for farmers to rely on this critical market and make their own investments to scale to wholesale markets. We believe that the permissive language in this bill represents a powerful opportunity to leverage our state support to access significant federal funding, resulting in a huge increase in funding for MDA's popular Farm to School & Early Care grants. With the current uncertainty about whether federal funding will come through, we also hope that this committee will support increasing funding for this program if our federal agreement is not honored.

Farm to School and Early Care initiatives enhance the well-being of Minnesota kids, empower local farmers and create a positive economic impact. We urge you to support this bill!

Sincerely,

Erin McKee, Community Food Systems Program Director