

CT General Assembly Education Committee
Public Hearing Testimony
Submitted by
Jiff Martin, Mansfield, Connecticut March 17, 2021
Testimony in Support of Bill HB 6621

An Act Concerning Assorted Revisions and Additions to the Education Statutes

To: Representative Sanchez, Senator McCrory, Representative Barry, Senator Daugherty, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and Members of the CT General Assembly Education Committee:

My name is Jiff Martin. As a resident of Mansfield, a food systems professional, and a parent of two children attending public schools, I am testifying to express my strong support in favor of HB 6621. My remarks today refer to section 3 of the proposed bill which would create a CT Grown for CT Kids Grant program. I have worked in food and agriculture related coalitions, networks, and programs in Connecticut for the past 19 years. In my professional role as a sustainable food systems educator, I work on a daily basis with farmers, community-based non-profits, school food directors, as well as leaders in municipal town halls and state agencies. Together we strive to increase access and availability of fresh, local, healthy food for Connecticut's residents.

HB 6621 will infuse innovation into our school cafeterias, outdoor learning spaces, school gardens, and classrooms. My testimony highlights 6 aspects of the proposed legislation.

1. Aligns with existing programs – There are currently two state funding mechanisms designed to fuel local agriculture enterprises, each funded at a level of \$500,000 and both managed by the state's Department of Agriculture. The Farm Transition Grant Program is intended for farmers and the Farm Viability Grant Program is intended for non-profits and municipalities. In joining alongside these two existing programs, a CT Grown for CT Kids Program strengthens and aligns with the state's investment in local agriculture, while creating a source of funds that would expressly benefit schools. Small grants would accelerate the role of schools as a potential buyer of locally grown products and also increase pathways to educate and inform youth about the cultural history and significance of food and agriculture.
2. Equity in implementation – In order to prevent opportunity hoarding, the proposed language ensures that alliance districts will be given priority for awards, that applicants will need to show community support for their proposals, and each award round will have at least 10 awardees.
3. Expands existing statute - Although it is not clear in the current bill language, the concept (and naming) of this new grant program essentially expands upon existing statute (CGS §22-38d), enacted in 2006 which charged the Dept. of Agriculture with the Dept. of Education to coordinate a promotional week each year called Connecticut-Grown for Connecticut Kids Week. Momentum for this celebration in cafeterias and classrooms each fall has increased significantly in recent years thanks to the coordination of our state agencies along with partners through the CT Farm to School Collaborative. In the spirit

of continued collaboration, the proposed bill recommends creation of an Advisory Committee led by Dept. of Agriculture and Dept. of Education to manage the selection of awards.

4. Includes Early Care: The proposed legislation will benefit K-12 districts as well as early childhood providers. Thousands of children spend a significant amount of time each week in early care and education settings. These small grants represent an opportunity to boost local procurement for early care providers, integrate hands on nutrition education opportunities for our youngest residents, and foster connections between early care providers and local farmers.
5. Benefits small scale farmers: In addition to a school district's usual wholesale accounts and distributors, school food directors are able to purchase locally grown products directly from farmers through a federally approved procurement tool called 'micro-purchases.' This works well when a school food director wants to feature a seasonal product on the menu or run a taste test before incorporating a new item on the menu. For farmers, selling vegetables to a school meal program is an excellent way to connect with the youngest consumers in the state and the next generation of buyers. Over time, a strong working relationships between the school food director and a local farmer can have a meaningful value to a farmer's income. And these relationships build social capital and increase visibility for the farmer's farm stand or CSA operation.
6. Joins national momentum - HB 6621 proposes a commitment to farm to school that is similar to programs created in many other states, including our regional neighbors in NY, MA, VT, and ME. Sec 3b proposes a mechanism that would support innovation in all three core elements of food procurement, classroom education, as well as school gardens.

"Between January 1, 2017, and December 31, 2018, 32 states and the District of Columbia proposed 81 farm to school bills and resolutions. Of the 81 farm to school bills and resolutions introduced, 25 passed. Each of these bills relate to at least one of the core elements of farm to school: 50 relate to local food procurement, 34 relate to food and agriculture education, and 22 relate to school gardens."

--State Farm to School Policy Handbook: 2002-2018, National Farm to School Network

In closing, I urge members of the Education Committee to support HB 6621 and its language that establishes a CT Grown for CT Kids grant program. Thank you.