

Testimony in support of HB 6621 - Section 3: Establishing a CT Grown for CT Kids Grants Program

Dear Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, and Members of the Education Committee,

My name is Dana Stevens and I am a parent and resident of Hamden, CT. I previously coordinated two statewide Connecticut farm to school programs, and currently work with Farm to Institution New England (FINE), a six-state network of non-profit, public and private entities working to mobilize the power of New England institutions to transform our food system. I am writing in these capacities to request your support for **HB 6621, specifically section 3 establishing a CT Grown for CT Kids grants program.**

The CT Grown for CT Kids grant program would strengthen the connection communities have with fresh, healthy food and local food producers by changing food purchasing and education practices at schools and early care sites. I have seen the benefits of farm to school initiatives as an AmeriCorps service member with FoodCorps in 2011, as the program coordinator for FoodCorps CT in 2011-2013, and the program coordinator for Put Local on Your Tray program (an ongoing collaborative project lead by the CT Dept of Agriculture, CT Dept of Education, and UConn Extension) in 2013 - 2015.

We know from other states in the region (e.g., Vermont) that funding like that proposed in bill **HB 6621** for CT Grown for CT Kids can support food-insecure students with healthy, local food, educational experiences for students through STEM and nutrition curriculum. Farm to school funding also supports mental well-being of students by bolstering resilience, and providing social emotional support. Funding makes it possible for school districts as well as early childhood providers to cultivate relationships with local farmers to purchase, promote, and serve locally grown food.

Research compiled by the National Farm to School Network (<http://www.farmtoschool.org/Resources/BenefitsFactSheet.pdf>) shows that funding for farm to school initiatives such as that outlined in HB 6621 Section 3:

- Strengthens communities economically (Each dollar invested in farm to school stimulates an additional \$0.60-\$2.16 of local economic activity, in one case resulting in \$1.4 million overall contribution to the state)

- Increases market stability, diversification and economic growth opportunities for farmers, including forward contracting, and exploration of processing and value-added product creation for institutional markets
- Increases student and teacher meal participation from 1.3 %to 16 % (average +9 %), generating increased revenue for schools through meal programs
- Improves early childhood and K-12 student health behaviors
- Increases fruit and vegetable consumption, especially among students who ate the least
- Improves household food security and food access

Data analyzed by Farm to Institution New England from the USDA farm to school census (<http://dashboard.farmtoinstitution.org/schools>) show that year-round availability & high price point are the two biggest barriers for districts in the region wanting to purchase more local food. The CT Grown for CT Kids grant program would allow districts to utilize proven farm to school strategies (such as cooperative buying, off-season processing, processing equipment purchases, forward contracting, season extension & school gardens) to develop sustainable farm to school supply chains.

Across my experiences as a farm-hand, an educator, a farm to school program manager, a member of the New England farm to institution network, and a parent, I have witnessed the power that local procurement, school gardens, and nutrition education can have on the wellbeing of students, staff, farmers, local economies, and communities. This bill would add invaluable resources to communities across Connecticut doing exemplary work taking care of their students, teachers, farmers and land. I respectfully ask for your support of this bill.

Thank you for your service,

Dana Stevens, M.S.
Farm to Institution New England
Hamden, CT