



March 18, 2022

To the members of the House Agriculture Finance and Policy Committee,

I am writing to express my strong support for Rep. Lippert's HF 4120 Farm to School and Early Care bill.

Even in its beginning rounds of funding, the reimbursement for purchases from local farms that the MDA Farm to School grant offers is already having a positive impact on Farm to School activity in Minnesota. In the second round of funding offered in the fall, there were 68 applications for over \$1.3 million dollars in requests for the \$748,000 of funding available, with many schools taking advantage of the "First Bite" version of the grant designed specifically to support schools trying out local purchasing for the first time. I served on the grant review committee for this competitive round of funding, and can share that we had to make difficult decisions and leave out schools with great plans to use this funding to support their local farms. Rep. Lippert's request to increase the funding to \$1.6 million will set the program up to meet demand, connecting more children to fresh healthy local foods and bolstering a stable market for farmers who are diversifying their business models to include institutional sales.

Additionally, as a member of the MN Farm to Early Care Network Advisory Group, I am thrilled that HF 4120 will open up eligibility to include early care providers as potential applicants for this grant! Farm to Early Care initiatives currently do not benefit from much institutional support in Minnesota, yet their interest in supporting local farmers is high. They know how powerful it is to reach our littlest eaters with fresh local foods during the window when they are developing their taste preferences and eating habits. In my work, I have partnered with the early care provider company New Horizon Academy and with a third of Minnesota's 34 Head Start Programs around the state to launch Farm to Early Care initiatives at all their centers; access to grant funds would allow these early care providers to purchase a greater quantity and variety of local items, opening up a whole new market for local farmers. For example, New Horizon Academy has over 68 centers across Minnesota, and St. Paul's Head Start Program alone serves over 1,140 children. The Head Start Programs I partnered with were also very focused on supporting emerging farmers when possible. These are big potential markets for our farmers, and I am looking forward to MDA supporting local procurement in this space.

I urge you to support HF 4120 and the positive impacts it will have for our farmers and communities!

Sincerely,

Erin McKee

Community Food Systems Program Director

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