

Joint Committee On Ways and Means Subcommittee On Education
Oregon State Capitol
900 Court Street NE
Salem, Oregon 97301



March 23, 2023

Co-Chairs McLain & Frederick and members of the Committee, my name is Melina Barker and I am the Director of the Oregon Farm to School & School Garden Network. The Network has 1,900 community members that are primarily food producers, child nutrition professionals, and educators.

Farm to School is a national movement and Oregon has one of the longest standing programs in the nation. Oregon's Farm to School Grant Program is a comprehensive suite of funding programs that supports the purchase of Oregon foods for schools and early childcare education centers; funds hands-on farm and garden educational programs; supports equipment and infrastructure for food producers; and funds technical assistance and training for the farm to school community.

Over the last 10 years the Farm to School Grant Program has allowed our state to:

- Increase the number of school gardens from 170 to 780 s—now including at least 1 in every county.
- Grow from a few highly motivated school districts serving Oregon foods on the lunchline to a point where it's the norm in over 170 school districts and early childhood education centers to offer Oregon food before, during and after school as well as in the summer.
- Grow from 40 to 356 food producers selling to schools and early childhood education centers.

I am testifying today in support of full funding for the Farm to School Grant Program at the current level of \$10.2 million dollars included in the Oregon Department of Education's budget. A reduction to the current level of funding for the suite of grant programs would have significant impacts on the programs that depend on this funding for local food and educational programs. In 2019 this program was funded at \$15 million dollars and included several important expansions, most notably the inclusion of early childhood education centers, such as HeadStart centers, who are feeding and teaching our youngest and most vulnerable children. Mid-biennium budget cuts in 2020 reduced funding to the current \$10.2 million where we have managed to sustain the program. As we emerge from the pandemic crisis, we are having more success supporting these new programs to participate in purchasing local food. Cuts to this program below current funding levels would make grants smaller and more competitive, restricting participation.

Farm to School programs build healthy life skills, connect schools and communities and support social-emotional learning through connection to place, nature and nourishment. Now is the time to ensure that we provide sustained and reliable funding for these programs so students, food producers and schools can continue to build dependable relationships and deepen partnerships. I ask that you support including this grant program in the Oregon Department of Education's budget at \$10.2 million. Thank you for your time.