

Testimony before Maryland General Assembly

SB121 Maryland Farms and Families Fund, Maryland Food and Agricultural Resiliency Mechanism Grant Program, and Maryland Farm-to-School Meal Grant Pilot Program - Alterations and Establishment

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Beth Brewster, Supervisor of Food Services at Caroline County Public Schools

Good afternoon,

My name is Beth Brewster, I serve as the Supervisor of Food Services at Caroline County Public Schools.

We are one of 24 school districts in the state, and we are very excited about this legislation, specifically as it relates to the creation of the Farm to School Grant Pilot program. This is a beginning to incentivize school districts to purchase local produce to help build food resiliency in our community, grow the local economy, give our children more nutritious foods, and to help small to medium size farmers the ability to continue to farm.

I have served Caroline County in this role for nearly 11 years, and it has been a mission of mine to ensure that our 5600 school children are able to eat nutritious fresh foods every day they come to school. We put a very strong emphasis on local Maryland produce and try to incorporate it in our menu at least two to three times a week.

For the last five years many of my staff members who wanted to work during the summer have processed nearly 10,000 -15,000 pounds of local produce a summer to serve during the school year. As we know the farmers are growing when school is not in session. This has allowed my staff to gain extra hours and for our children to eat local foods throughout the school year. We also purchase from our local orchard 40 bushels of apples a month, and purchase 6000 apple cider doughnuts for our breakfast program from the orchard as well. We have also contracted with a local baker for 6000 blueberry muffins a month made with local blueberries. This program has allowed us to purchase overages and uglies from our local farmers to increase the income of the farm. As we grow, we will be able to contract and guarantee to purchase from the farmer what is grown. We also purchase our lettuces and other leafy greens from our two hydroponic farmers in the area.

The Farm to School Grant pilot, modeled off of successful Farm to School grant programs throughout the country, would allow my district to receive .20 cents per meal for every school meal we include a Maryland grown or produced food component. The .20 cents per meal reimbursement would be one of the most advantageous of any incentive program in the country.

This would help us to offset the cost of staffing for processing of produce and the purchase of local produce which tends to run a bit higher. This would also help to increase the number of days in the year we serve locally sourced foods.

This program would allow me to increase the amount of locally sourced foods I serve the children and families in Caroline County. And what better a time to enact a program that would help to address many of the supply chain shortages that we are seeing now with the pandemic. We have learned much from the pandemic. One of the most glaring for me is the need to make Maryland more food resilient and increase the number of produce farmers we have in Maryland.

This provision was very thoughtfully crafted to glean from the lessons learned and insights of policymakers, advocates, school nutrition directors, and administrators from across the country. The grant model allows for school districts to opt-in for participation with very little administrative burden. The pilot program allows for 2 years of program implementation, before moving into a more formalized program.

Caroline County was very honored to sit on the Maryland Food System Resiliency Council to explore ways to make the State of Maryland more food resilient. This Farm to School Grant pilot program was recommended in the inaugural report to the General Assembly in November. This is a starting point to increase the farm to school/institution initiative.

As we know, an integral part of our food system is through primary and secondary schooling. Let's take a real step in the direction of ensuring Maryland agriculture is leveraged on the plates of our next generation, and that we build out our resiliency to help respond to this crisis, and prepare for future ones.

We sincerely hope for your support. Thank you.