

# Education Committee

## JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

**Bill No.:** HB-7013

AN ACT CONCERNING ENHANCEMENTS TO THE LOCAL FOOD FOR SCHOOLS INCENTIVE PROGRAM AND THE CT GROWN FOR CT KIDS

**Title:** GRANT PROGRAM.

**Vote Date:** 3/21/2025

**Vote Action:** Joint Favorable Substitute Change of Reference to Appropriations

**PH Date:** 2/26/2025

**File No.:**

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### SPONSORS OF BILL:

Education Committee

### REASONS FOR BILL:

This bill strengthens and expands farm-to-school initiatives by establishing clear documentation requirements, setting nutrition standards, and ensuring that at least 20% of program funding is directed toward essential support services such as training and outreach. To ensure effective implementation and oversight, it funds one full-time employee dedicated to managing the program and seeks to leverage additional resources through federal and private funding opportunities. Recognizing the growing need to connect local agriculture with school meal programs, the bill appropriates \$1.5 million to the Department of Education in Fiscal Year 2026, and \$1 million annually to the Department of Agriculture in FY 2026 and 2027. These investments are critical for expanding access to fresh, local foods in schools, supporting regional farmers, and fostering healthier eating habits among students. By formalizing standards and funding structures, this bill helps build a more sustainable and impactful farm-to-school system that benefits students, schools, and local agricultural economies alike.

### SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE:

The substitute language changes "may" to "shall" to clarify that money must be used for purchasing local food for school meals if the department uses federal funds.

### RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

[Brian Hurlburt, Commissioner, Connecticut Department of Agriculture:](#) offered testimony opposing the bill. He stated that although the program has seen some participation, additional outreach is needed. He argued that transferring the program would create logistical challenges for the Department of Agriculture (DoAg), as it lacks the infrastructure and staff that the State Department of Education (SDE) currently has in place to efficiently manage the program. He further explained that implementing the proposed changes would require additional hiring and resources, which are not included in the Governor's Biennial Budget. He also noted that shifting the program to DoAg would place a burden on both the department and participating school districts by creating additional administrative responsibilities.

[Charlene Russell-Tucker, Commissioner, Connecticut State Department of Education:](#) offered general comments on the bill. She noted that the bill allows partial reimbursements for schools purchasing local or regional food, but that the current language permitting rather than requiring use within federal meal programs may conflict with USDA rules, potentially making the use of federal funds unallowable. She also stated that the bill requires the Department to pursue federal funding for program administration, which could lead to competition with existing state agencies already applying for related USDA grants. Additionally, she pointed out that the bill mandates hiring one full-time employee to manage the expanded program, a position not funded in the Governor's budget and appropriates \$1.5 million for the initiative, which currently lacks a designated budget allocation.

#### **NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:**

[Holley Atkinson, Co-Owner, Northwest Corner Farm:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating the importance of connecting children's health with local farming. Urges the committee to pass the bill, which would improve the Local Food for Schools program and fund initiatives that bring local food to schools across the state.

[Leo Betjemann:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating concerns about unhealthy, processed school food contributing to illness and poor concentration, referencing both personal experience and broader data. He emphasizes the importance of nutritious meals, especially for student-athletes, and criticizes the lack of nutritional information and insufficient quality of school meals. He urges the committee to support the bill to ensure students have access to healthier, more transparent food options.

[Desmone Gambrell-Claxton, New Haven Public Schools:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating the impact hunger has on students' mental health, focus, and academic performance, noting that proper nutrition is vital for learning and emotional well-being. She argues that local food is healthier, more appealing, and should be accessible to all students, regardless of family income. She urges the committee to support the bill to help children succeed in school and life.

[Dawn Crayco, Northeast Policy Director, FoodCorps:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, highlighting the success of farm-to-school initiatives in improving children's health and supporting local agriculture. She calls for shifting the program's administration to the Department of Education to streamline access to funding and improve coordination between schools and farmers. She urges support of the bill to continue benefiting students, schools, and local farmers, and advocates for continued funding for the CT Grown for CT Kids Grants Program.

[Jan DeAngelo](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, emphasizing that the bill would provide nutritious, locally sourced food for students and staff while educating them about food origins. She also states the benefits to Connecticut farmers and the preservation of farmland, aligning with the state's goal to increase local food consumption.

[Eileen Faustich, Director of Food Services, Milford Public Schools](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating the bill improves the state's local incentive program and supports the continued growth and funding for farm-to-school. She states that providing CT-grown food to kids is important. Since it's local, the food will be healthier, fresher, tastier, and the kids will enjoy it more and eat more nutritious foods. She also states that this bill will aid and additional support at the state and local level to financial support staff training, connecting with local farms, and providing nutrition education to students.

[Maria Fernanda Gombi Vaca, Assistant Research Professor, University of Connecticut Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating the importance of the CT Grown for CT Kids Grants Program in improving student nutrition, health, and academic outcomes. She states her research, which shows farm to school programs enhance students' knowledge, encourage healthy eating, and foster social-emotional skills while supporting local farmers and communities. She urges the committee to pass the bill to continue promoting student and community well-being.

[Nyree Hodges, Community Member and Educator, Connecticut Farm to School](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating that local food should be a right, not a privilege. She states how farm-to-school programs improve student health, academic performance, and community well-being, while also supporting local farmers and strengthening Connecticut's economy. She recalls how local farms filled gaps during the pandemic and praises school gardens for enriching communities and fostering neighborhood pride. She urges continued funding to expand these positive impacts.

[Rachel Khanna](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating the importance of proper nutrition in preventing chronic diseases and promoting cognitive development, since she is a trained chef and cookbook author. She advocates for allowing schools to purchase food from local farms, which would benefit both students' health and Connecticut farmers.

[Dianne Houlihan, SNACT President, Waterford Foodservice](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, praising the bill's proposed changes, such as shifting program responsibility to the Department of Education and expanding eligibility to include childcare providers. She emphasizes that these programs need dedicated funding to be effective and reach their full potential. Urges the committee to support the bill with clear, committed funding to ensure long-term success for both local agriculture and healthier meal options for children.

[Rachel Martin](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, advocating for replacing the Department of Agriculture with the Department of Education to administer the program and expanding eligibility to include childcare providers. She emphasizes the importance of nutritious school meals for student health, academic success, and well-being. She highlights the negative impact of hunger on students' focus and health and urges the committee to support the bill to ensure children have access to healthy meals, which are crucial for their growth and learning.

[Randall Mel, Director of Food, Nutrition, and Wellness Services, Middletown Board of Education:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating the positive impact of the CT Grown for CT Kids Grant and local food sourcing on Middletown students, many of whom rely on school meals. He states that the bill would enhance farm-to-school efforts by expanding eligibility, improving infrastructure, and offering support like technical assistance and funding for equipment. He also states the importance of adding a full-time farm-to-school coordinator and urges the committee to pass the bill to strengthen child nutrition, support local farmers, and build a resilient food system.

[Kate Murphy:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating the success of the CT Grown for CT Kids Grant in her district, where students learned about food origins through classroom gardening and farm visits. She states that During the pandemic, local farms helped fill supply chain gaps, proving the value of strong farm-to-school partnerships. Kate emphasizes the educational and nutritional benefits for students and the economic boost for farmers, calling the program a powerful investment in both children's health and the state's agricultural future.

[Eliza Paterson, Senior Policy Associate, American Farmland Trust & Working Lands Alliance:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating that she sees this bill as vital for expanding access to local food in schools and childcare centers, while supporting staffing and outreach. She states that with agriculture contributing \$5.2 billion to the state's economy and facing farmland loss, this bill helps keep farm businesses viable, supports food security, and benefits over 50,000 students through healthy, local food.

[Shannon Raider:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating that local food is a right, offering better nutrition and broader community benefits. She highlights New Haven's capacity to bring farm products to schools and notes how local farms stepped up during the pandemic. She also shares how a grant-funded community garden has positively impacted her neighborhood by providing food, education, and youth employment. She urges continued support for these programs to build healthier, more resilient communities.

[Chris Senecal, Senior Public Policy Officer, Hartford Foundation:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating that the foundation stresses the importance of addressing food insecurity, particularly among Black and Latine families, through state investment. He states the impact of school meals on academic performance and health and emphasize that philanthropic support alone isn't enough. He also states that the foundation backs the bill's funding provisions and expanded eligibility and offers to collaborate with policymakers on long-term solutions to food insecurity.

[Kimberly Stoner, Director of Advocacy, CT NOFA:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating the benefits of connecting children with local food, farmers, and gardens, highlighting that local food is more nutritious and supports both students and the community. She states that farmers often struggle to provide fresh food to schools due to a lack of resources for processing and serving it. She also states that the bill addresses this by providing schools with equipment and training and mentions a garden in New Haven funded by the program, which has had a positive impact on the community, and calls for more initiatives like this.

[Maraiah Tilley, Food Service Director, Mansfield Public Schools:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating work experience in food services, healthcare, community nutrition, and

food/system work and how locally grown food has been a consistent component in her work. She states that her organization serves bulk milk that comes from a dairy in her town and states that local foods are synonymous with food and cultural education. She mentions that her district has been able to support farmers in the district by using the LSFIP funds to purchase food and states that the funds would enable them to purchase better equipment to process foods. Urges the committee to pass the bill.

[Ashley Vitale](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating that the farm-to-table initiative in their school requires significant time and dedication and would not be possible without this funding. She states that the program has exposed students to fresh, local foods they might not otherwise try, replacing processed meals with healthier options, as well as doing taste tests to generate excitement among students, and the school's farm-to-school coordinator plays a vital role in sourcing local ingredients and developing creative recipes, such as local Brussels sprouts, Mexican-style corn, and yogurt with honey and strawberries. She emphasizes the program's positive impact on student health and its value to the district.

[Ali Ghiorse, Founder, The Foodshed Network](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating the bill's role in improving local food access in schools and strengthening farm-to-school programs. She states her experience as a former chef and food justice advocate, and she argues that public schools are too reliant on the industrial food system, which contributes to environmental degradation, racial and economic inequity, and poor health outcomes. She believes school kitchens and gardens can drive systemic change by promoting equitable, community-based food systems. She highlights a successful partnership between Greenwich Public Schools and the Northwest CT Food Hub, made possible through the current Local Food Incentive Program, and stresses that not all communities have the resources or support to establish similar programs. Lastly, she states that would provide vital assistance to ensure more schools can participate in and benefit from these initiatives.

[Denise Best, President & CEO, Voices of Women of Color](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating the importance of adequately funding programs that support local farms, provide healthy food to children, and educate students about the value of local agriculture.

[Erica Biagetti, Director of Food & Nutrition, Cheshire Public Schools](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating the positive impact of the CT Grown for CT Kids Grant and the Local Food for Schools Incentive Program. She states that her district used the grants to build a greenhouse and upgrade a culinary kitchen, allowing students to grow, process, and learn about food while reducing waste. She also states that these programs also enabled the district to offer more local foods like lettuce, honey, and maple syrup, which students value. She urges support for continued funding to expand these benefits statewide.

[Dennis Chase](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating that farm to school programming is a critical aspect of experiential education that allows students to not only eat healthier, locally grown food, but also to understand where that food comes from and how agriculture and the student's relationship to their food is critical to our state's economic future.

[Terry Colamonico, Manager, Plainville Public Schools](#): offered testimony in support of the bill.

[Jody Cummings, General Council, Mashantucket Pequot Tribe](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating that these programs fund local food purchases for school meals and

support farm-to-school activities like education, training, and infrastructure. She states that her organization has reached over 50,000 youth and funneled \$3.78 million into local communities. She also states that her organization has supplied fresh produce to southeastern Connecticut schools and emphasizes the importance of supporting student wellness through access to healthy food. Urges the committee to support the bill.

[Stephanie Deason, Food Service Director, Stonington Public Schools](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating how farm-to-school funding has positively impacted her district, built valuable partnerships with local farms, and deepened her own commitment to school nutrition advocacy. She notes successful collaborations with farms like Stone Acres, Full Heart, Meechooôk, and the Stonington Kelp Company, and emphasizes the importance of continued funding to maintain and expand access to fresh, locally grown food for students.

[Catherine Hallisey](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating the positive impact of the CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Program on students. She notes how the program has funded school gardens and increased access to fresh, local food in schools, enhancing hands-on education and student nutrition.

[Kimberly Hughes](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating that many children, even in affluent areas, lack access to nutritious meals due to income gaps and life challenges. She advocates for empowering students through food education, autonomy, and exposure to fresh, local foods. She states that local food infrastructure is difficult to navigate for schools without support, and that the bill would help by funding the CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Program and improving the Local Food for Schools Incentive Program. She also shares the success of a local grant-supported program at Charter Oak International Academy and stresses the broader community and environmental benefits of farm-to-school initiatives. Urges lawmakers to visit these schools and see the impact firsthand.

[Rebecca Kelly, Impact Partnerships Lead, FoodCorps](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating that the bill would help schools and early education programs serve local foods, offer food system education, and provide culturally relevant, scratch-cooked meals. She highlights the positive impact of farm-to-school programming, especially in Middletown, where student engagement initiatives like feedback campaigns, cooking clubs, and inclusive meal planning have improved school food services. She shares research showing farm-to-school programs increase fruit and vegetable consumption and support academic, emotional, and social growth. She concludes that a well-funded farm-to-school program is vital for advancing student health, supporting local farms, and creating a more equitable, sustainable food system in Connecticut.

[Joey Listro, Executive Director, New Britain ROOTS](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, emphasizing its potential to enhance the Local Food for Schools Incentive Program and the CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Program. He highlights the positive impact these programs have had in New Britain, including the creation and expansion of school gardens, improved access to fresh local food, professional development for educators, and strengthened connections with local farmers. He states that the bill's proposed administrative and technical assistance will help districts build sustainable, impactful farm-to-school initiatives and urges the committee to support the bill to continue advancing student health and the local economy.



[Samantha May, Nutrition Education Coordinator, Watertown Public Schools:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating that the program enables schools to purchase healthy, locally grown foods, which supports student health and the local economy. She states how farm-to-school programs expose students to fresh produce, encourage healthier eating habits, and connect children with their food sources. She stresses the vital role these initiatives play in student wellness and community development, urging lawmakers to support and advance the bill.

[Claudia Milne:](#) Teacher offered testimony in support of the bill, stating how hunger visibly affects students' ability to learn. She notes that many students fall through the cracks of existing meal programs due to financial instability. She emphasizes the importance of providing schools with resources to expand local food sourcing and education, which supports student wellness, improves nutrition, and boosts the local economy. She argues that the bill presents an opportunity to strengthen small agricultural businesses, ensure a steady supply of healthy food to schools, and inspire future careers in agriculture and food systems, all while utilizing Connecticut's rich farming resources.

[Elizabeth Quiñonez, Senior Director of Child Care Initiatives, United Way of Coastal and Western Connecticut:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating that many families in the region live at or below the ALICE threshold and face food insecurity without qualifying for public assistance. She states that her organization launched “Seedlings to Sprouts,” a farm-to-school initiative that improved nutrition education, food security, and access to fresh produce for childcare providers and families. She also states that the program’s success has led to expanded efforts this year. She urges continued funding for CTG4CTK to strengthen early childhood education, improve access to healthy food, and support local agriculture.

[Heather Peracchio:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating the health and educational benefits of locally grown food, since she has over 20 years of experience in healthcare and community nutrition. She highlights how these grants connect children to agriculture, improve nutrition education, and support local farmers. She urges continued funding to promote community health and strengthen Connecticut's agricultural economy.

[Joan Seguin:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating how providing all students with free, nutritious meals fosters inclusive learning environments and boosts participation, which in turn supports the purchase of fresh, local foods. She also advocates for a permanent \$1 million Farm to School Grants Program and dedicated state coordinators to offer technical support, helping schools expand food sourcing and education while benefiting local farmers.

[Jeff Sidewater, Food Services Program Consultant, Capitol Region Education Council:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating the bill’s role in enhancing local food access in schools by improving infrastructure, outreach, and technical support through the Local Food for Schools Incentive Program and the CT Grown for CT Kids Grant. He emphasizes that these programs help provide nutritious meals, support local agriculture, and offer students meaningful learning experiences like school gardens and farm-to-school education. He urges the Education Committee to support the bill for the benefit of students, farmers, and communities.

[Zane Tickoo:](#) offered testimony in support of the bill, stating personal experiences with the transformative power of farm-to-school initiatives. He describes how these programs create

hands-on learning opportunities, promote healthier eating, and empower students to combat food insecurity and support local agriculture. He urges continued funding to expand these impactful efforts statewide.

[Svetlana Wasserman](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating that this bill improves state local food incentive program and supports the continued growth and funding for farm to school. She states that students thrive when given access to nutritious fresh food that supports local agriculture.

[Jiff Martin, Extension Educator, UConn Extension](#): offered testimony in support of the bill, stating the positive impact of farm-to-school initiatives, including taste tests, farm visits, and technical assistance. He states a recent UConn study showed 97% of school food directors are open to using local products, with funding being the main barrier. He outlined five technical aspects of the bill: expanding eligibility to early care providers, transferring program administration to the State Department of Education for efficiency, allowing the inclusion of federal funds, updating farmer preference terminology to “historically underserved,” and allocating \$1 million annually for CT Grown for CT Kids Grants. Lastly, he states that continued funding and streamlined administration will help meet growing demand and enhance educational and nutritional outcomes for students.

#### **NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:**

None Expressed

**Reported by:** Matthew Domejczyk, Assistant Clerk      **Date:** 4/11/25