



# WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

P. O. Box 7882 Madison, WI 53707-7882

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Contact: Rep. Don Vruwink, 266-3790

## **Farm-to-School Deserves Support** Healthy Lunch Program is Threatened by Budget Cuts *By Representative Don Vruwink*

Farming is a major part of Wisconsin's history, economy, culture and identity. Our state is a national leader in growing cranberries, ginseng, sweet corn, cherries and potatoes – and of course milk and cheese production.

As much as we export products to other states and countries, there is also a market demand in our own communities. Sometimes it takes resourceful thinking and collaboration to create a market opportunity in the agricultural industry.

In 2009, legislators on both sides of the aisle did just that when they created the Farm-to-School program, which connects farmers to schools and brings locally-grown, fresh, minimally processed foods to school cafeterias and classrooms.

Farm-to-School also offers hands-on learning such as school gardening, culinary classes, farm visits, and integrating food knowledge into the curriculum.

In just eight years, Farm-to-School measures have been adopted in almost 50 percent of Wisconsin school districts, including Whitewater, Fort Atkinson, and almost every school district in Rock County.

One key to any successful effort is a leader who spearheads logistics and implementation. For the statewide Farm-to-School efforts, that person is the director, who essentially acts as the quarterback.

Among the director's achievements are directing \$1.4 million in commodity funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to purchase Wisconsin-grown fruits, vegetables, dairy products, and other nutritious foods.

The director secured more than \$200,000 in federal grants to conduct training and develop supply chains. The Farm-to-School director was instrumental in bringing the 8<sup>th</sup> National Farm-to-Cafeteria Conference to Wisconsin in 2016. This event alone had a more than \$1 million economic impact for the state.

Despite this success, the Farm-to-School position was eliminated in the 2017-2019 state budget proposal. This is truly unfortunate because Farm-to-School spurs over \$9 million in purchases of

Wisconsin-grown foods by Wisconsin schools each year, benefitting more than a half a million students. That is certainly an impressive return on investment.

Farm-to-School strengthens local economies by expanding markets for our agricultural producers; promotes healthy eating habits; and increases awareness of agriculture, nutrition, and the environment. It would be a shame for us to lose the progress we have made.

The Legislature has the power to restore Food-to-School funding. Momentum to put the director position back in place has quickly grown. Nineteen agriculture groups and other concerned advocates, including the Farm Bureau and Farmer's Union, submitted a letter to the co-chairs of the budget-writing Joint Committee on Finance asking for the position to be restored.

I believe in the value of the Farm-to-School healthy eating program, and with growing support from stakeholders, I am hopeful it will be restored in the biennial budget.

*Rep. Don Vruwink represents the communities of Whitewater, Milton, Edgerton, Footville, part of the Village of Oregon, and several townships.*

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