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Appropriations Committee Public Hearing

Governor's Proposed FY 26-27 Budget for Conservation and Development Agencies

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Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Somers, Representative Nuccio, and esteemed Connecticut General Assembly members of the Appropriations Committee, good evening and thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Governor's Proposed FY 26-27 Budget for Elementary and Secondary Education Agencies.

My name is Christine Caruso. I am a parent of a third grader in West Hartford Public Schools (WHPS), a member of the steering committee for the CT Farm to School Collaborative, and an Assistant Professor of the Practice in Food Security and Environmental Justice at Wesleyan University.

Farm to school programs that change purchasing practices to increase local and fresh produce in meal programs, and the CT Grown for CT Kids Grants Program, housed under the Department of Agriculture, is profoundly impactful in supporting kids, farmers, communities, and Connecticut schools. Every dollar invested in these efforts increases economic activity in the state and yields dividends for your constituents. Unfortunately, funding for this program was not included in the Governor's proposed budget. I urge the Appropriations Committee to prioritize the health and nutrition of Connecticut youth and our local farms by continuing funding the CT Grown for CT Kids Grants program at one million dollars per year.

Since 2021, more than 50,000 CT youth have benefited from this program through 133 grants for farm to school projects that span the classroom, cafeteria & community. Since the program's inception, the demand has outpaced available funding, attesting to growing demand and participation in farm to school projects. CT Grown for CT Kids Grants supports schools to improve infrastructure, engage in farm to school planning, incorporate experiential learning opportunities for students, and increase local purchasing power.

As a busy, full-time working parent whose child participates in school lunch, I am heartened by seeing the menu options for local foods appear regularly in the WHPS Child Nutrition (CN) program. As a mother, I know that these efforts in improving the healthfulness and sustainability of my child's school lunch are both an investment in her health and our state's farms. The CT Grown for CT Kids Grants Program ensures that communities across our great state will continue investment to support a thriving local agriculture industry, encourage environmental sustainability, improve meal offerings particularly to our state's most vulnerable children, and improve health outcomes for the next generation.

As a scholar studying institutional foods in PreK-12 programs across the United States, I have also seen first-hand the tireless efforts of Child Nutrition (CN) staff working to improve both the healthfulness and sustainability of school meals programs. Senior staff interviewed in our research consistently demonstrated a health-driven mission for their meal programs, with serving

more fresh produce as a key ingredient for supporting student health. Purchasing locally sourced foods is clearly aligned with this goal and CT Grown for CT Kids Grants Program ensures that these committed and hardworking professionals have the right tools for the job and will promote student well-being.

In closing, I want to emphasize the valuable impact of initiatives that provide increased access to locally sourced foods through the support of Farm-to-School programs across the state. I appreciate your commitment to the well-being of Connecticut's students and families.

Sincerely,

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