Friday, June 21, 2019

Joint Committee on Education
Massachusetts State House
24 Beacon Street
Rooms 511-B & 473-G
Boston MA 02133

RE: S.301/H.556, An act establishing farm to school grants to promote healthy eating and strengthen the agricultural economy

Dear Chairs Lewis and Peisch, and Members of the Committee:

The Massachusetts Food System Collaborative is pleased to offer this written testimony in response to S.301/H.556, An act establishing farm to school grants to promote healthy eating and strengthen the agricultural economy.

The Collaborative is a network of Massachusetts food system organizations, working to promote, monitor, and facilitate implementation of the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan. The Plan was developed for and accepted by the Massachusetts Food Policy Council, a 17-member entity comprising state agency, legislative, and industry representatives, established by the Legislature and Governor to develop recommendations, including legislative and regulatory changes, to promote sustainability and equity in the Commonwealth’s food system.

The Plan represents the views of thousands of residents and farms, as well as hundreds of organizations and businesses. It emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to food system policy, where issues of economic development, natural resources, equitable access to resources, and others are all taken into account when considering laws, regulations, programs, and investments related to food.

The goals of S.301/H.556 are directly addressed in an action item in the Plan:

Expand existing, and support new, farm-to-school programming to increase the amount of healthy and locally produced foods purchased and served by pre- and K-12 schools, childcare, and after-school facilities. Incentivize expansion and creation of farm-to-school programs with public and private funds to support school districts. (https://mafoodsystem.org/plan/goal/rec/action/551/)
Increase the number of schools that have full service kitchens, and provide additional training for food service staff.  
(https://mafoodsystem.org/plan/goal/rec/action/553/)

Supporting programs that provide healthy food for children and educate them about nutrition and agriculture not only help them eat and feel better that day, but can have a transformational impact on their long-term eating habits and health, and those of their family as well. The program established by this bill will target schools where the need for healthy food access and education is greatest, and so will reach families with the most limited access to fresh, healthy food. By supporting scratch cooking and local sourcing of produce, the program will also help sustain Massachusetts farms, enabling them to better protect farmland, steward natural resources, create jobs, and contribute to the state’s economy by purchasing local goods and services. And by investing in infrastructure and training, the program will have a long-term impact well beyond the timeframe of each individual grant.

We appreciate the Committee taking up this issue, and urge you to consider it in the context of Massachusetts’ food system as a whole. The Plan, which provides that context, is available at http://mafoodsystem.org/plan/, and the Collaborative is available to provide additional information and connections to practitioners and advocates who can offer further details, at the pleasure of the Committee.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Sincerely,

Winton Pitcoff
Director