

Comments of Bonnie Hallam

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I would like to first thank Senator Waugh and Senator Wenger for giving us the opportunity to share information about the Kindergarten Initiative and how it might be expanded into a statewide farm to school pilot. I will discuss today how our Kindergarten Initiative is getting kids excited about eating Pennsylvania-grown food, changing behaviors in both children and their parents, and how a \$1 million grant program could successfully fund expansion of the program in seven Pennsylvania school districts.

The Food Trust was founded in 1992 with the mission of improving access to affordable, nutritious food. Many areas in our state have poor access to healthy food and consequently, higher rates of health problems like obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. That is why The Food Trust operates 19 farmers markets in Southeastern Pennsylvania. We have also embarked on a highly successful partnership with the Commonwealth to bring more supermarkets to communities that need them. A core part of our mission is educating young people about good nutrition so they can reach their full potential. We provide comprehensive nutrition education programs in 100 schools in the Philadelphia area that are scientifically-based with a strong research and evaluation component. University of Pennsylvania obesity researcher Gary Foster has recently completed a three year study on our programs that shows they are effective in lowering BMI or Body Mass Index in students.

The Kindergarten Initiative is a new program that educates young children and their families about healthy diets and the importance of eating fruit and vegetables. Now in its second year, the Kindergarten Initiative is operating in 8 schools, serving 30 classrooms with approximately 800 children. Shortly, we will add three more schools as part of a research project with UPenn to gather data on the program. We expect to be serving close to 1,000 children by the end of November, 2005.

The goals of the Kindergarten Initiative are to help children make healthy food choices early and to have them understand where food comes from, the farm. We want to reverse the epidemic of childhood obesity that is plaguing our nation by building good eating habits that will last a lifetime. Our program has shown that connecting children and their families with delicious, locally-grown food has a significant impact on their eating behavior. Research shows that early eating patterns dictate future eating behaviors, so with this in mind, we have focused the program on young children and how eating fresh and nutritious foods contributes to overall health and wellness. We are also committed to Pennsylvania farmers who we hope will benefit through increased fruit and vegetable consumption by children. If we continue to lose farms in Pennsylvania, we will be throwing away an opportunity to get children excited about eating healthy through innovative farm to school programs like our Kindergarten Initiative. By working together with local agriculture, we believe we have created a win-win for both children and Pennsylvania farmers.

There are three educational components of the Kindergarten Initiative: interactive, standards-based classroom lessons; seasonal farm trips; and eating and learning about Pennsylvania grown snacks which are provided up to 3 days a week. These experiences take place all year long in a sequential framework that moves the child from why he/she needs healthy foods, to where they can get them, to how they can grow their own, so the messages are consistently reinforced. Children are eating new foods in a safe and encouraging environment and they are having fun at the farm, affective experiences with their peers which educators know help students retain knowledge and set behaviors.

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In order to accomplish this wonderful classroom approach, teachers attend about ten hours of professional development, are given teaching materials and curriculum resources, as well as a fully developed curriculum alignment plan that provides them with a mechanism for integrating nutrition and local food concepts into their already existing curricula. We establish strong relationships with teachers and principals in participating schools and teachers are supported through classroom visits, regular communication and on-going appreciation of the work that they do to make the program successful. Teachers are rewarded with opportunities to purchase nutrition education materials to enhance their teaching and incentives for children that carry nutritional messages. Seasonal farm trips are scheduled for the teachers by Kindergarten Initiative staff at a local farm, helping children to recognize the farmer as their friend and someone who is close to where they live, part of their community.

Parents receive information about the Pennsylvania grown, nutritious snacks and are asked to provide healthy snacks for their children on the days when the Kindergarten Initiative is not providing snacks. With this approach, parents are brought in as partners in the endeavor. To further engage parents and enhance the sustainability of the program, we have instituted a “weaning process” whereby in each succeeding year that a school participates in the program, parents take on more and more of the responsibility of providing healthy snacks for students. After four years, we hope to be providing a Pennsylvania grown snack a few times a month, with parents and teachers in Kindergarten Initiative schools being committed to a model of healthy school snacking.

If we are truly serious about changing children’s early eating patterns, we must find a way to bring parents and the community into the work. The Kindergarten Initiative reinforces what children learn in school by providing parents with a variety of programming options. We make sure that there is on-going communication to parents throughout the school year by way of a monthly packet of information that is sent home in a special folder. We provide an extra bus for parents to attend all farm trips and last year, we had about 150 parents join us on our visits. In addition, we try to do monthly events such as cooking demonstrations, parent-child cooking classes or other field trips that engage parents in our efforts. We reach out to community organizations such as faith-based communities and make connections with parent/teacher organizations.

Snacks are procured through a local school district distributor. Our distributor has a processor who preps the food for teachers so they do not have to go through any cleaning, cutting or preparing of fruits and vegetables. Snacks come in large trays or sometimes in individual servings. The types of snacks that we are currently purchasing from local farms include cut up

cantaloupes, apple slices with yogurt dip, tomato and cucumber salad, cut up red peppers, cucumbers, green beans, carrots and broccoli, fresh tomato salsa, mixed green salad and local peaches. As the season changes, we expect to add dairy items such as fruit yogurt and cheese, as well as dried and canned fruits, fruit sauces such as apple or pear sauce, fruit and vegetable-based muffins or breads such as sweet potato or pumpkin, greenhouse grown mixed greens, tomatoes and possibly fresh sliced squash with low-fat dip. We expect to purchase about 2400 pounds of Pennsylvania produce, and contribute approximately \$80,000 to the Pennsylvania agricultural economy.

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The Food Trust acts as a liaison between farmers and distributors. We have been particularly excited this year about working with our new distributor, Ron Krader, someone who had not formerly bought Pennsylvania products and in the beginning was skeptical as to the practicality or the feasibility of doing a farm to school program. Ron is now a true believer and a wonderful partner, who has traveled with us to a Pennsylvania farmers' auction and is interested in buying Pennsylvania products for other orders he has to fill.

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Our success has been documented in an evaluation of our pilot year. During the 2004-2005 school year, the Kindergarten Initiative conducted programming in 4 schools with 15 teachers and approximately 450 students. Students were assessed in the beginning of the school year and again at the end of the school year to evaluate change in nutrition and agriculture knowledge. Teachers were asked to complete 2 evaluation forms. The first form inquired about their experience with the initiative and changes they may have experienced themselves or with their students as a result. The second form asked teachers to comment on the activities intended for parents, and any changes they may have noted as a result of those efforts. Parents were also surveyed about the initiative. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected on the snack food component of the initiative. Findings show significant changes in children's knowledge about nutrition and local food. More than 90% of participating parents believe that they have changed the way they shop, cook or talk to their children about food. Teachers report high levels of satisfaction with the initiative. The new study that we are starting with the University of Pennsylvania will provide us with additional data on BMI, school performance and attendance.

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With this kind of success, we feel that our program is an ideal candidate for a statewide farm to school pilot. A \$1 million grant program could successfully fund Kindergarten Initiatives in 7 cities or school districts with 4 new schools in each area. The program will reach 2,800 children. Schools interested in launching a Kindergarten Initiative would apply to the Dept. of Education or the Dept. of Agriculture with a plan to procure locally-grown snacks for their program. The Food Trust would contract with the State to administer the program and provide training, technical assistance, and materials to schools selected to participate in the pilot. The Food Trust would help to facilitate partnerships with county intermediate units, local distributors, local farmers and school district food service managers.

The Food Trust has a history of building strong partnerships that result in meaningful change. Given the opportunity, we will use our expertise in this area to establish the alliances that will make the Kindergarten Initiative Farm to School Program as successful throughout the state of Pennsylvania as it has been in the Philadelphia area. Working together with state leaders, farmers, educators, and parents, we can provide our children with everything they need to

develop good eating habits that will last a lifetime. Thank you for allowing us to present our ideas for healthier children and healthier farms to you today.