



**Senate Bill 1: Texas Department of Agriculture  
Expanding Farm-to-School programs without Expanding the Budget  
February 28, 2011**

Good morning, members. I am Lauren Dimitry, Policy Coordinator at Texans Care for Children, and I appreciate the opportunity to offer comments today on Article VI of Senate Bill 1. Texans Care is a statewide nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated exclusively to the children of Texas. We look to our broad base of community-based experts – our partners and 220 members throughout the state who together represent thousands of Texas children—to inform our work and help us in developing our legislative agenda. We co-convene various stakeholder groups that bring together a wide range of organizations, families, and advocates around our areas of focus—family economic security; infant, child and maternal health; children’s mental health; child welfare; and juvenile justice and at-risk youth.

Today, I am providing testimony to support the creation of a Farm-to-School coordinator position within the Texas Department of Agriculture that will *not require the state to appropriate any new funds*. This coordinator would help support the growth of Texas agriculture, increase the availability of quality food in Texas schools, and create opportunities for nutrition education. Increasing awareness around nutrition is an important step toward improving the health of Texas children and families. Currently, at least 20.4 percent of children age 10 to 17 are obese.<sup>1</sup> We know that obesity has long-term health, financial, and social consequences for both Texas families and businesses. We need not look any further than our rising and unsustainable health care costs to see that the obesity epidemic is costing Texas billions of dollars every year. Expanding the capacity of Farm-to-School programs will not only help create new markets for Texas farmers, but also a new opportunity for Texas to fight this costly obesity epidemic.

*66.7% of all adult Texans are overweight or obese, only 33.1% of adult Texans are of normal weight. The cost of obesity to Texas businesses was \$9.5 billion in 2009; by 2030 this cost is expected to rise to \$32.5 billion.*

*Source: Susan Combs, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts*

Farm-to-School programs vary across the country depending on the resources and goals of local communities and schools, but generally they provide opportunities to integrate local agriculture into school meals, and help create educational instruction around fresh foods. In Texas, there is currently a limited Farm-to-School purchasing program coordinated by the Department of Defense and the Texas Department of Agriculture. In order to determine how the program could be expanded for the benefit of Texas schools, farmers, and ranchers, SB 1027 of the 81<sup>st</sup> Legislative Session directed the Texas Department of Agriculture to chair an Interagency Farm-to-School Coordination Task Force. The Task Force was asked to determine ways the program might support schools in their effort to create healthier meals, and promote the Texas farm and ranch industries. The Farm-to-School Coordination Task Force consisted of participants from a number of state agencies, including the Texas Education Agency and the Department of State Health Services, as well as interested parent and agriculture groups.

In early February 2011, the Farm-to-School Coordination Task Force released “*Shaping Texas’s Farm-to-School Future: A report from the Interagency Farm-to-School Task Force*” which included a summary of existing Farm-to-School efforts, current and future challenges and opportunities, and finally a recommendation as to how Texas might increase the availability of local food in Texas schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program. The Task Force recommendation is that the Texas Department of Agriculture utilize existing

resources, and coordinate interested stakeholders, by creating a Farm-to-School Coordinator position within the department.

The Farm-to-School Coordinator would provide technical assistance, connect schools and farmers, manage a database of products and producers, market the program, and establish regional pilot programs so that grant funds may be leveraged to identify best practices and efficiencies. Additionally, over the course of the next few years, schools in the National School Lunch Program will be required to increase the availability of fresh food in order to comply with new national guidelines (as directed by the USDA and the recently passed Child Nutrition and Reauthorization). Farm-to-School programs provide an opportunity to fill new federal requirements with Texas-grown food.

With a \$27 billion deficit, Texas is facing difficult budget choices for the next biennium. As SB 1 stands today, care and services for children in the areas of education, health, and prevention are facing significant cuts. In many cases, these cuts represent a decision not to invest in the future health and safety of Texas children. At Texans Care for Children we think the smartest investment Texas can make is in our children, and we recommend that you bring state revenue into alignment with Texans' current and future needs before making harmful cuts. The Farm-to-School Coordinator position is one of the Legislature's rare opportunities this session to move forward in school nutrition and education in a way that requires neither a cut nor a new financial obligation to the state.

Because the Texas Department of Agriculture is at capacity with full-time equivalent employee positions (FTE), it is our understanding that this opportunity will require the Legislature to raise the Texas Department of Agriculture's full-time equivalent employee cap. However, because the USDA has committed to allow the Department to fund the position with National School Lunch Program Administrative Funding, it will *not require the state to appropriate any new funds*. The Farm-to-School Coordinator would be able to organize existing farming resources, school resources, and stakeholders, while also driving efficiencies in the Farm-to-School program, without using state dollars. We ask for your consideration as we believe this is a valuable opportunity that could benefit Texas schools, children, farmers, and ranchers alike.

**Recommendation:**

At Texans Care for Children we ask you to support the Texas Department of Agriculture's capacity to coordinate existing farming resources and expand the Farm-to-School program by raising the Department's full-time equivalent employee cap. This will allow the Department to create a Farm-to-School Coordinator position that *will not require any appropriation of state funds*. This coordinator position represents an opportunity to support the health of Texas children in a Legislative Session where cuts to children's health services are endemic. A Texas Department of Agriculture Farm-to-School Coordinator position would additionally help support the growth of Texas farms, increase the availability of quality of food in Texas schools, and create valuable opportunities for nutrition education amid a costly obesity epidemic.

Thank you for your time and commitment. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me or the staff of Texans Care for Children at 512.473.2274.

Respectfully,  
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<sup>i</sup> Texas Comptroller Susan Combs. "Gaining Costs, Losing Time: The Obesity Crisis in Texas." February, 2011.