

Karyl Kent

Testimony for Universal School Meals

Tuesday, January 24th, 2023

My name is Karyl Kent, I am the School Nutrition Director for Lamoille North Supervisory Union.

I am Grateful to be with you again today to share with you the successes of Universal School Meals and to ask that we finish the great work we started last year, making Universal School Meals permanent.

I want to say “Thank You” first and foremost.

The legislation you passed last Spring to support Universal School Meals, while partially transactional by way of committing funds to continue the program while data could be collected, was much more significantly, Transformational.

By allowing schools to provide free meals for all Vermont students, you have transformed a system and created a culture where children can learn without the distraction of hunger, without shouldering the shame and stigma of their families economic state, where school nutrition professionals can focus on sourcing and serving fresh, local creative meals.

We are seeing all the benefits we talked about last spring when we testified. I would like to share some examples with you.

Our high school nurse told me she sees a lot fewer kids in her office because of hunger. “Universal School Meals is the best thing ever!” she says.

A 4th grade teacher in Waterville shared “ Most of my class eats breakfast and the time directly after breakfast and lunch are the most successful times of the day... Universal School Meals are a necessity for students, and help everyone involved in education.”

From a 1st grade teacher in Cambridge “I have seen a huge difference in my students’ food insecurity levels since we have implemented Universal School Meals. Kids know that each day they will have access to two meals regardless of what is going on in their life.”

From two middle school students: “Thousands of students in Vermont experience food insecurity, and it (Universal School Meals) has been a great step in helping those students and their families. I can’t emphasize enough how relieving it is for some to come to school and know they won’t be starving all day, or singled out for not having enough money... Our whole school wants Universal School Meals to stay...Thank you for passing Universal School Meals. Please keep it permanent.”

As Vermont school nutrition professionals, we rejoiced at the passing of Act 151 last Spring!

We anticipated somewhat higher numbers of participation, but were confident we would not be overwhelmed. As the data bore out, our numbers did increase, but to the extent we expected, which meant that the students caught in the middle of not qualifying for free meals by application, and not having enough money to afford to pay for meals, were indeed now able to eat.

With Farm Fresh School Meals for All, we, at Lamoille North SU have leveraged the local foods incentive grant program, meeting the 15% local purchasing threshold. We are supporting our local farms and producers, utilizing fresher produce and spending more labor hours cooking from scratch. More nutrient dense foods, more school dollars returned to the local economy, all while ensuring students are ready to learn.

One more story, from a middle school student: "I know it might not be what was intended, but personally universal school meals have been a great help to me. I ride the bus to school and it is a rickety, one-hour drive. I get carsick very easily, so it has been great to be able to eat breakfast at school, after the drive instead of before, where there was a danger of me not keeping it down. Beforehand, I never even thought about eating breakfast at school, and simply didn't eat it at all. Once the program began, I realized that I could eat in the morning at school, for completely free. I know that this project was not specifically for me, but it has affected me. I hope it can continue, and that I won't have to go back to starting the day feeling sick."

This last story, from just one student who felt moved to share it, is repeated silently dozens of times in our school and hundreds of times in our state. Whether it is car sickness, eating disorders, anxiety, family stress, economic struggles or just forgetfulness; students' myriad of reasons for not eating are relieved because this body of Vermont lawmakers found the way to make education truly equitable to all Vermont students.

Universal School Meals is here to stay! Let's get this over the finish line with permanent funding from the top of the Education Fund to secure Universal School Meals as the cornerstone of Vermont education.

With much gratitude,

Karyl Kent