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**Vermont House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry
Testimony on Universal School Meals (H165)
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**Presented by
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Good morning Chairman Durfee and distinguished members of the House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, and Forestry. Thank you for providing this opportunity to share success stories related to our school district's experience with Universal School Meals.

My name is Mike Leichter. I currently serve as the Superintendent of the Harwood Unified Union School District in Washington County. While I am in my first year as a school superintendent in Vermont, I have over 30 years of experience as a teacher and principal in eastern Pennsylvania in urban, suburban, and rural settings including 13 years as a school superintendent in a school district of 5400 students.

When my wife and I contemplated a move to Vermont based on our long history of travel to this state, especially over the past 4 years as our youngest child attended UVM, one of the reasons we were drawn here is the state's commitment to its children. Your commitment to providing school meals to all students this school year is just the latest example of what makes our state a great place for children and families.

I have three very specific examples of how Act 151 is making a positive difference in the lives of our students. While the examples are based on real situations, I will use fictitious names to protect the identity of the children and their parents.

1. **Many students do not eat breakfast and come to school hungry.** As educators we know it is hard to focus on learning when your stomach is empty. Prior to the pandemic Harwood worked very hard to increase participation in the breakfast program with little success. While the schools served some breakfasts for students, our food service staff struggled to increase participation. Harwood Unified Union School District breakfast participation nearly doubled as the result of universal free meals. Let me talk about Sam. Sam's family struggles to get him out of bed and to the bus stop in time to catch the bus. As a result, he skips breakfast. Sam can exhibit disruptive behaviors in his elementary classroom. The principal and teacher have concluded that his behavior is truly triggered by hunger. Having a universal meal program allows the school to offer Sam food without fear of a cost for his family. Nearly every teacher we spoke with in this building can tell you a story of a grocery store trip to stock up on a child's favorite food because they know they often come to school without breakfast. Sam has an amazing relationship with our cafeteria chef and is ever appreciative of her love and support. Eating breakfast at school for

Sam has decreased his disruptive behaviors so he can focus on learning and has increased his positive connection with adults in the school.

2. **Teenagers will often choose not to eat due to the social stigma of a “free lunch.”** Sydney is a teenager who relies on the Harwood cafeteria as the only reliable food source. Sydney recently spoke to one of the principals while standing in the lunch line about the fact that all students can now get their lunch from school without cost. Sydney said that this made it easier to get lunch as opposed to other years when it was the perception of many students and classmates that “only the *free* kids” get a school lunch. We have a lot of students like Sydney and universal lunches are increasing lunch participation and decreasing negative social stigmas for children.
3. **We have many struggling families who do not meet the federal free and reduced lunch criteria.** The Smith family historically carried a very high lunch debt every year. Both parents work and one of the parents holds multiple jobs to make ends meet. They have three growing children who are hard-working and caring children in our schools. This was always a sticky point for the relationship between the school and family. Parents would often speak with the principal and share that "I forgot the check, I'll bring it next week..." The principal simply wanted all of the children to have a healthy and relaxing lunch without feeling badly that their parents were struggling to feed them while at school. This is no longer a worry for children, families, or the principal thanks to universal meals for Vermont children.

Free public schools are a hallmark of our nation. There are no cash registers at the public schoolhouse door asking children to pay in order to learn to read, receive transportation to and from school, or participate in extracurricular activities. We provide educational resources to all students without concern for family income. I encourage the House to keep the cash register out of the public school cafeteria for this same reason.

Schools want to focus on learning while also ensuring that students’ basic food needs are met. Removing the school as a 'collector' of money for breakfast and lunch bills allows us to remove one more factor that may cause stress for children and be a barrier to Vermont families feeling fully supported.

Thank you for your consideration!