

To: Vermont Senate Committee on Education

From: Don Tinney, Vermont-NEA President

Date: April 7, 2023

Good afternoon. For the record, my name is Don Tinney, a 31-year veteran English teacher from South Hero, currently representing 12,000 educators as president of Vermont-NEA. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today as you continue to consider legislation to make Universal School Meals permanent in all Vermont schools.

Vermont-NEA has supported Universal School Meals since the concept was introduced and pilot programs were implemented in select school districts a few years before the pandemic. Educators have never doubted that children's healthy development and academic learning depend upon proper nutrition. Our unwavering support for Universal School Meals is now even stronger after educators have seen the profound results of this expanded nutrition program in our public schools since 2020.

Nourishing meals are now an essential part of every student's school day; they have been woven into the fabric of the school community. The universal nature of the current program has not just provided improved nutrition for our students, it has eliminated the stigma associated with the previous free-and-reduced system. When I ask educators how the Universal School Meals program is going, almost everyone says, "I wish we had done this years ago." As I reported to you in February, one elementary school teacher called Universal School Meals "a godsend."

As a general rule, I personally try to avoid the use of hyperbole in my spoken and written language, but I have to say that ending Universal School Meals would be disruptive and chaotic, if not downright catastrophic, for our public school communities. Our students and the educators who serve them are enduring stress and uncertainty in ways never before experienced in recent history. Whether it is the threat of school violence, hurtful rhetoric of the culture wars, the anxiety related to the economy and political discord, or the personal losses from the pandemic or from addiction, no student is immune from experiencing trauma in their young lives. Providing a safe place and a nourishing meal or healthy snack is one way, if only for a little while, that we can bring peace and security to the lives of our students.

As you know, Vermont educators work hard each day to create safe, compassionate learning environments, where all students grow intellectually and socially. When students are hungry, they simply cannot concentrate on class activities or lessons. Our educators are grateful for the role Universal School Meals play in creating a healthy school climate. As I mentioned in my previous testimony, we see the school nutrition program as an integral part of the entire learning program—the same as math, science, English, recess, and physical education. That might have been a challenging argument to make in 2019, but I assert that it is not debatable in 2023. The evidence is clear that this government program has been a success and we need to continue to build upon that success to continue to meet the growing needs of our children.

In closing, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge all those folks who continue to work hard in providing healthy meals and snacks to our students. When we mention school meals, folks will often envision students standing in the cafeteria line--hoping it's mac-and-cheese day and not broccoli day--and not fully appreciate the complex system and hardworking personnel that make the meals possible.

My mother taught middle school language arts for 25 years in Grand Isle, but she began her career in education as the school lunch agent in the Colchester School District, so I started learning about school nutrition programs sixty years ago. Since I grew up before the days of childcare centers and kindergarten, I spent a lot of time riding from school to school in the backseat of a Plymouth Valiant with #10 cans and boxes of frozen ground beef. I dare say I was probably the only four-year-old in America who knew what the initials USDA stood for. I observed my mother spend hours figuring out menus that met federal guidelines, coercing local chefs to give her recipes that could be adapted to serve hundreds of children, and constantly keeping track of meal tickets, cash, coins and checks long before computerized spreadsheets and apps.

As you consider this important legislation and the political ramifications involved, please remember that we must pay attention to the workforce that feeds our students, a workforce that is dealing with personnel shortages that we see in every other enterprise. Our food service workers are important personnel in every public school, they nurture our children, and with their smiles--and maybe a little extra scoop of mac & cheese--they make someone's day a whole lot better.

Thank you. I'm happy to answer any questions.