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Key Provisions and Effects of the Universal School Meals Act (Act 151)

The Universal School Meals Act is not a complicated bill, although the precise language in Act 151 is important to ensure that Vermont's Universal School Meals Program works with the federal rules that govern school meal programs and federal reimbursements for school meals.

- Act 151 created a one-year universal school meals program that provides free breakfast and lunch to all public school students.
- Approved independent schools physically located in Vermont may also participate in the one-year universal school meals program for those students who attend on public tuition.
- Vermont's Education Fund supplements federal per-meal reimbursements, so that school meal programs receive the full "free rate" amount (as set by the USDA) for every breakfast and lunch they serve to students that meet federal nutrition rules.
- Schools that participate in the universal meals program are required to maximize access to federal funds by participating in whichever provision of the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Acts will yield the best federal per-meal reimbursement rate.
- Act 151 also created a one-year moratorium on the ability of a school district to ask for an exemption from participation in a school meals program under 16 V.S.A. § 1265—meaning that every public school in Vermont is now providing breakfast and lunch during the current school year to all students under this act.

Additional Economic Benefits Linked to the Universal School Meals Act:

- Increased student participation means increased federal funding for Vermont school meal programs.
- Increased funding supports increased purchasing of Vermont farm products by schools.
- The specific way Act 151 is written means Vermont can draw down the maximum in Pandemic-EBT funding during this school year and in summer 2023 – meaning additional millions of dollars families will receive to spend on food at their local grocery stores and farmers markets.
- Vermont schools no longer have to absorb tens of thousands of dollars in school meal program debt – while states without universal school meal programs in place are facing the highest levels of families in debt to school meal programs ever seen.

Farm Fresh School Meals for All - which includes universal meals, the local purchasing incentive and the Farm to School & Early Childhood grant program - is a piece of the food security puzzle for families. Knowing that their children can get 2 meals every day at school can alleviate the weekly stress of trying to make ends meet.

Most federal pandemic-related income and food supports have ended, including expanded unemployment insurance, direct payments to individuals and to families with children, COVID paid sick leave, rental and mortgage assistance, increased Meals on Wheels funding, and the Farmers to Families Food Box program, to name just a few. Congress just ended the emergency maximum allotments for 3SquaresVT households.

Research conducted by the UVM National Food Access and COVID Research Team shows that in Vermont, families with children have been five times as likely to experience food insecurity during the pandemic as have families without children. Their most recent survey shows that 2 out of every 5 people of all ages in Vermont are currently experiencing some degree of food insecurity.