

April 3, 2014

To Whom it May Concern;

In January of this year I heard a story on the news that upset me terribly. It concerned a group of thirty students in Utah that had their lunch taken out of their hands and thrown into the garbage because their parents were behind in paying. I don't think any other news story ever hit me as hard as this. I was mortified that this could happen in our country but took some solace in knowing that it would never happen in Vermont.

Imagine my dismay when I found out that it did indeed happen in Vermont and in fact it has happened right in Springfield, where we live, where we raised our son and where our grandchildren will attend school.

About ten years ago I was a mentor with the "let's do lunch" program at the elementary school. Toward the end of the year I was within earshot to the lunch attendant asking children when their parents intended to pay up their outstanding bills and asking these children to go home and remind their parents that they owed money for their lunches. Excuse me, these are children. They should never have to be involved in their parents finances and they shouldn't have to worry about whether or not they will get lunch if their parents haven't paid. I hope that at the time I complained to someone but I truly don't remember. I'm complaining now though.

My very dear friend, who is also my grandson's godmother, let me know that a couple of years ago her daughter was asked to toss her food into the garbage, as her parents owed money to the school. Her daughter was taken by surprise and questioned the person asking if she was correct in that she should throw her lunch into the garbage. The person reiterated that yes, she was to throw her lunch away. Her daughter was in junior high when this happened. Luckily a friend of the girl saw what happened and paid for her to go back through the lunch line and purchase another lunch. My friend did go to the school and complain and she was assured that this was not school policy and it would never happen again. No, it isn't school policy. The school contracts out the lunch program and there was obviously no oversight. I wonder how many children this has happened to that were too embarrassed to let their parents know or felt they would be somehow in trouble.

Another friend let me know that a handicapped child was withheld their lunch as a form of punishment by their aide. This aide was let go, thankfully. However, I am led to question what kind of environment allowed for this aide to even consider that was OK to do. How could someone even begin to think it was OK to withhold food as a form of punishment?

While the incident in Utah was the catalyst that got me thinking, the things that have happened right here in Springfield have steeled my resolve to attempt to get some laws passed that would prevent any child in this state from ever having their lunch thrown away on them. My hope is that no child in grade school or middle school would ever have to be involved in the finances of their family or have to worry about whether or not they will get their lunch. How sad to think that children ages five to eight are asked if

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their parents intend to pay! To me it is child abuse to ask a child to throw out their lunch. It's going to leave a scar that may last forever and it should be illegal.

I spoke with someone at the US department of education who referred me to the USDA. At the USDA I was told that there is a program called "Healthy Hungry Free Kids" and that section 143 deals with my concern. I was told that each state was supposed to come up with their own ways to comply with this. The section states very simply: The Secretary in conjunction with the state and LEA's shall examine current policies and practices relating to providing children who are without funds a meal, and prepare a report with recommendations. USDA is provided the authority to act on appropriate solutions. Funding, None. When I asked how in the world there wasn't a national law stating that no child should have their lunch thrown away I was told that would take an act of congress. They acknowledged that there is a problem, as the people who are to pay full price for their lunches are the ones being effected.

I then spoke with Lori Kolgan from the state nutrition program. She said the lunch program is the only program in our school system that collects money. Each school was to develop a policy as to how they deal with accounts that are overdue. Perhaps there could be a provision in the general fund to pay off unpaid lunch bills.

In short, I was told by the USDA that it is up to the state and I was told by the state that they are waiting for a directive from the federal government.

Zach McLaughlin, our superintendent, did get back to me and assured me he would speak with the person who heads Café Services about their policies. He said that last year in Springfield the district absorbed over \$3000.00 in unpaid lunch bills. He expressed concern that if there were a written policy that the figure may go up. He also feels that there are people who need assistance that for some reason or another are hesitant to fill out the papers necessary to receive assistance. I understand his concerns and sympathize with him, but I still think there should be a written policy protecting children.

I did write to Senator Bernie Sanders and Congressman Peter Welch. I have heard back from Bernie Sanders. His letter is attached. This is what I heard from Peter Welch, "Dear Linda, I agree. That was outrageous. It's something, I believe, would NOT happen in VT. Keep up your advocacy., Peter". Seriously! This is the response from my congressman when I reiterated the story that I have also told you here.

My response from the white house is attached. I am also attaching Code F28 from Springfield that deals with school lunches. There is no mention in it about funding or finances. It seems that if something is going to get done it is going to have to start with the state.

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My hope is that there will be a state law that prohibits the lunch provider from discussing finances with children under high school age. By high school I think that children probably know what the household finances are and that they should begin to be responsible enough to make a lunch for themselves at home if they haven't got the money to purchase a lunch. They should also be adult enough to know who to go to at the school if they don't have lunch with them or money to purchase it. (Perhaps this should be part of their orientation when they enter high school so that each child knows who they can turn to discreetly.)

I would also like to see a policy that states that no child shall ever be withheld lunch or asked to throw their lunch away. We are too great a state and too great a nation to have to ever think about this again. Our children should always come first. A child can not learn on an empty stomach.

I'd like to thank Alice Emmons for her persistence in helping me with this. I would also like to thank each one of you for your time and consideration of this matter. I hope that there can be a bill that this concern will be attached to this year but would fully understand if it can't get done until next year. I just pray that it can and will get done.

Sincerely and respectfully,

Linda Kelley