



# School Meals in Vermont: Current Successes, Challenges, & Opportunities



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# HUNGER IN VERMONT

**13%** of Vermont households are food insecure **(1 in 7)**

- 14.3% Nationally

**17%** of children live in food insecure households **(1 in 5)**

- 19.5% Nationally

*(U.S. Census Bureau, 2014)*



# Meals and snacks provided at school & out-of-school programs are the most important anti-hunger safety net for children



- Universal school meals
- School breakfast
- School lunch
- Afterschool meals & snacks
- Summer meals & snacks
- Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Program



# School Meals Benefit Children in Many Ways:

- Improve learning and focus
- Improve math test scores by up to 17%
- Improve chances of graduating
- Reduce tardiness and absences
- Reduce illness and hospitalization
- Reduce obesity risk
- Reduce behavior problems and depressive disorders
- Reduce school nurse visits for stomach complaints and headaches



# A Sample of Research Studies that Document the Benefits of School Meals

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- Deloitte and the No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices. (2013) *Ending Childhood Hunger: A Social Impact Analysis*.
- Leos-Urbel, J., Schwarts, A., Weinstein, M., Corcoran, S. (2013). *Not just for poor kids: The impact of universal free school breakfast on meal participation and student outcomes*. *Economics of Education* (36) 88-107.
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- Morris, C. T., Courtney, A., Bryant, C. A., & McDermott, R. J. (2010) Grab 'N' Go Breakfast at school: observations from a pilot program. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 42(3): 208-209.
- Murphy, J. M. (2007). *Breakfast and Learning: an updated review*. *Current Nutrition & Food Science*. (3) 3-36.
- Washington Appleseed. (2013). *The Future of School Breakfast: an analysis of evidence-based practices to improve school breakfast participation in Washington State*.
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# SCHOOL MEALS

Nearly **38,000** children in Vermont receive free or reduced price meals in school (43%)

Hunger Free Vermont works to expand access & reduce stigma so more children eat healthy school meals:

- Work with AOE to simplify procedures and contribute capacity
- Create and distribute outreach materials & training for schools, families, and professional organizations
- Provide customized data and technical assistance for schools, districts, and SUs
- Focus on breakfast growth, universal school meals, & vulnerable summer and afterschool time
- Work with farm to school network to improve quality & strengthen community





# School Meal Programs are Complex and Vary Widely in How They are Funded and How They are Run

- Majority of funding is from per-meal reimbursements from USDA
- Additional funding can come from:
  - Families that pay for school meals (although what families are charged is not really the full cost of the meal)
  - A la carte food sales (“competitive food”)
  - Sales to school staff
  - Catering
  - General town funds for the school budget (taxes)



# Many Vermont School Meal Programs Require Additional Investments From Their Towns' Education Budgets



- Federal reimbursements are not sufficient to cover the cost of quality food & fresh fruits and vegetables
- Vermont's small schools limit economies of scale
- Unpaid meal program debt from families who can't afford to pay must ultimately be paid for in towns' education budgets
- Most school meal program deficits would be eliminated if school food service staff benefits were included with the rest of school staff benefits in towns' general education budgets
- Treating school meal programs as separate from the overall educational mission is a key cause of school meal programs "deficits"



# Vermont School Meal Program Successes

- 97% of Vermont schools provide **breakfast**
- 98% of Vermont schools provide **lunch**
- 52 Vermont schools provide **universal meals** to over 11,000 students - Vermont had the fastest initial uptake of the new USDA universal meals provision (Community Eligibility) of any New England State, and uptake has increased by 65% over last school year (compared to 20% nationally)
- Vermont is ranked 6<sup>th</sup> in the nation for the percentage of low-income children eating school lunch who also eat school **breakfast**
- Vermont has the highest percentage of schools with **farm to school** programs of any state
- Vermont is ranked 4<sup>th</sup> in the nation for reaching low-income children with **summer meals**—last summer we increased the number of summer meals sites by 12%, and reached 9% more kids
- The number of **after-school meal programs** has increased by over 400% in the past 5 years



# The Vermont Legislature Has Been Instrumental in Achieving These Successes

- **Act 22 (H.54) - 2003**
  - Required that school districts participate in the School Breakfast Program unless the school board holds a public discussion and votes to exempt a school from the requirement
  - 29 schools immediately started school breakfast programs
  - Today, only 8 schools do not serve breakfast (3%)
- **Act 87 (H.408) - 2010**
  - Family cost of reduced-price breakfast covered by State General Fund
  - Participation of reduced-price eligible students in school breakfast increased 85%
- **Act 50 (FY 2014 Appropriations Act)**
  - Vermont becomes the first state in the nation to eliminate the reduced-price category for families
  - Participation of reduced-price eligible students in lunch increases 6% at a time when participation in school meals declined overall
  - Other states are now using Vermont as a model; 4 have also eliminated the reduced-price category for families



# Vermont School Meal Program Challenges

- Old IT system in AHS is a barrier to more schools providing universal meals because “direct certification” documentation is not accurate
- Only 30% of Vermont students eat school breakfast
- Only reaching 20% of low-income children with summer meals
- Many more schools could be providing afterschool meals
- School meal programs remain under-resourced and under-valued





# School Consolidation Under Act 46 Creates Opportunities & Challenges for School Meal Programs

- The last few schools in Vermont without meal programs could get them
- Greater coordination and economies of scale could improve meal quality and meal program finances

- Spending caps make school meal programs a target for cuts to staff and food quality
- Spending caps further endanger funding for summer and afterschool programs, which endanger these critical sources of nutritious meals and snacks for food insecure kids when school is out

# Hunger Free Vermont's Vision for Moving Forward to Reach All Vermont Students with Dignified, Quality School Nutrition



- **Now**
  - Expand universal meals to every eligible school
  - Use innovative approaches and partnerships to increase school breakfast participation
  - Bring summer & afterschool meals to all high poverty communities
  - Partner with State agencies, the New England Dairy & Food Council, the Vermont Farm to School Network, the School Nutrition Association of Vermont, and Voices for Vermont's Children to eliminate stigma and ensure access to high-quality school meals for every Vermont student
- **The Future**
  - Make Vermont the first state in the nation to provide universal school breakfast and lunch to every student in every school!



# How the Legislature Can Help Move this Vision Forward in the 2016 Legislative Session



- Fund the approved new IT system for AHS
- Pass S.202 - the universal school meals & farm to school pilot project
- Preserve funding for the State Farm to School Grant Program



Because nutrition is so critical to effective education, every discussion of the future of Vermont schools must include a discussion of school meal, afterschool meal, and summer meal programs.

