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Testimony submitted to the House Commerce & Economic Development Committee

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify on School Nutrition Day about the the crucial role school nutrition programs play in reducing child hunger, improving family economic stability, improving health and learning outcomes, and about our vision for the future of school meals in Vermont. Hunger Free Vermont is Vermont's statewide anti-hunger advocacy organization. We are a non-profit with the mission to end the injustice of hunger and malnutrition for all Vermonters.

Over the last 25 years, Hunger Free Vermont has worked with many partners to maximize the use of all of the child nutrition programs in Vermont, and compared to other states, we have done a great job. Vermont currently ranks second in the nation for the percentage of low-income children who receive afterschool meals; second in the nation for the percentage of low-income children who receive summer meals; and third in the nation for the percentage of low-income children eating both school lunch and school breakfast. There is much to celebrate here, and you, our state legislators, have been one of the partners contributing to these outcomes by eliminating reduced-price fees for school meals, and by supporting increasing investments in Vermont's Farm to School and Early Childhood Program.

While hunger in Vermont has improved in recent years--especially for children, far too many Vermonter families are food insecure and many more are just one missed paycheck or unexpected expense away from food insecurity.

- Currently, 1 in 10 Vermonters are food insecure, which means they struggle to access food, especially food that is nutritious and culturally appropriate, in a dignified way.
- Families with children are more likely to be food insecure. 1 in 7 children live in homes struggling to put food on the table.
- Many Vermonters who are working don't make enough to cover all their basic needs, like food, shelter, childcare, and medicine. For those who are eligible, 3SquaresVT, school meals, WIC, and other nutrition programs help make up the difference.
- Many working families earn too much to qualify for these programs, yet still face shortfalls in meeting their basic needs. For example, as many as 42% of the children who are food insecure in Vermont may live in families that are not eligible for free school meals or 3SquaresVT.

We know that eating is elementary to education. Children have a basic need to be well-fed in order to learn well. When children are hungry, their health and learning outcomes, their brain development, and their workforce readiness are all affected gravely. We also know that the constant worry food insecure families face about how to keep hunger at bay diminishes the opportunity for adults and children alike to perform at their best and to make the best choices. The data show that full use of the federal child nutrition programs is key to ensuring that Vermont's children have access to nutritious food every day. When parents and guardians know

that their children are getting healthy and delicious meals at school, it frees up their food budget to focus on also providing enough healthy food at home.

We further know that a universal model, in which school breakfast, school lunch, afterschool, and summer meals, are provided to all students regardless of their family's income — and are treated as a critical foundation for their education — is the approach that ensures the greatest participation and the best student outcomes.

Universal school meals mean that every student can eat at school every day, and that every student has the same access to nutrition at school—as they already do when it comes to textbooks, lab equipment, art supplies, and sports equipment. Since 2014, Hunger Free Vermont has helped nearly 25% of Vermont public schools, serving over 16,000 students, take the money out of school meals. This year, we are launching a campaign to make it possible for all Vermont schools to offer universal school meals. Next year, we will be back with a specific proposal for how to make that happen.

For now, I want to tell you why we are launching this campaign. We partnered with the University of Vermont to conduct a two-year study on the impact that providing universal school meals has had so far. The results are in — and they are powerful. Broadly, universal school meals has a positive effect on student learning, school culture, food quality, school meal program finances, student, family, and school administrators' stress, the relationship between principals and families, and more.

For example:

- 83% of staff at participating schools agree that universal school meals make students more ready to learn.
- 98% of staff at these schools agree that universal school meals have reduced financial stress on students and families.
- 81% of staff agree that with the universal school meals program, differences in family income are less visible, and as a result 72% agree that it has produced an improved social climate.
- And, 64% of staff agree that the school is able to purchase more locally grown or produced food.

In addition, you may have read an article in *VT Digger* last week about a study that was just released by the Urban Institute titled, “Evidence-Based Strategies to End Childhood Food Insecurity and Hunger in Vermont.” The study's first recommendation is to “Make school meals free for all students.”

Educators, anti-hunger advocates, researchers, school nutrition staff, and parents all agree that it is time for Vermont to make a bold move to fundamentally re-envision our approach to school meals because of the tremendous benefits it brings for students, parents, and educators, and because it is unlikely that we can reach many more of the 18,000 children (and their families) who are still at risk of hunger in our state by continuing to operate within the traditional school meal programs structure and assumptions. This is because as we raise the minimum wage and Vermont's economy continues to improve, we are likely to see more families become ineligible for free school meals, yet unable to afford to pay for them, due to the high cost of living in Vermont.

Hunger Free Vermont strongly supports raising the minimum wage, because the only way to fully end hunger with true dignity is to ensure that working families can earn enough to buy the healthy—and local—food they want and need.

My one request to each of you today is to eat lunch or breakfast at one (or more) of the schools in your district before the next legislative session, and to talk with your local educators about what it takes to finance those meals -- you will be amazed. Your first opportunity is on Monday, April 8th--just fill out this handy reservation card and we will connect you with your school!

24%
of VT Public
Schools!

UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS

Every Student. Every Meal. Every School Day.

Eating is Elementary to Education

- Well-fed children perform and behave better in school
- School cafeterias develop healthy eating habits when everyone is at the table

No Student Should Learn What Hunger Feels Like At School

- Learning is the student's responsibility. Making sure they have what they need to learn is our responsibility.
- Children have a right to eat, and all students need good nutrition in school to learn well.

Money Free Cafeterias Are Welcoming Places

- Reduced stigma leads to wider participation in school meals and an improved school climate



Two USDA Pathways to Funding Universal School Meals

Provision 2:

This provision is available to any school for providing breakfast, lunch, or both at no charge to all students. Reimbursement is based on meal participation rates at the time the school enrolls.

Community Eligibility Provision:

This provision is available to eligible schools for providing both breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge. Reimbursement is based on the percentage of directly certified students (children in households receiving 3SquaresVT or Reach Up; foster, homeless, and migrant children; children in Head Start)



Watch the Universal School Meals video and learn more about these provisions by visiting

www.hungerfreevt.org/school-meals-hub/

76 Vermont Schools Are Currently Providing Universal School Meals To Over 16,400 Students

Barre City Supervisory Union
Barre City Elementary & Middle School
Bennington-Rutland Supervisory Union
Currier Memorial School

Burlington School District
C.P. Smith Elementary
Essential Early Education Center
Hunt Middle School
Integrated Arts Academy
J.J. Flynn Elementary
ONTOP/Horizon School
Sustainability Academy

Caledonia Central Supervisory Union
Walden School

Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union
Bakersfield (P2)
Berkshire Elementary (P2)
Enosburg Elementary (P2)
Enosburg Middle/High (P2)
Richford Elementary
Richford Junior-Senior High School
Montgomery (P2)

Grand Isle Supervisory Union
Alburgh Community Education Center
Isle La Motte School

Kingdom East Supervisory Union
Concord School
Gilman School
Lunenburg School
Sutton Village School

Lamoille North Supervisory Union
Eden Central School
Johnson Elementary
Maple Run Unified School District
SOAR Learning Center
St. Albans City Elementary

North Country Supervisory Union
Charleston Elementary
Coventry Village School
Holland Elementary
Lowell Graded School
Newport City Elementary
Troy School

Orange East Supervisory Union
Waits River Valley Union School

Orleans Central Supervisory Union
Albany Community School
Barton Graded School
Brownington Central School
COFEC Head Start
Glover Community School (P2)

Irasburg Village School (P2)
Orleans Elementary
Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union
Lakeview Union School
Rutland City School District
Northeast Primary School
Northwest Elementary School
Rutland Intermediate/Middle School

Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union
Bennington Elementary
Early Education Program
Molly Stark School
Monument Elementary
Mt. Anthony Middle School
Mt. Anthony Union High School
On Point Elementary
Pownal Elementary
Shaftsbury Elementary
Woodford Hollow School

St. Johnsbury School District
St. Johnsbury School

Washington Northeast Supervisory Union
Cabot School (P2)
Twinfield Union School (P2)
Windham Central SU
Newbrook Elementary (P2)

Windham Southeast Supervisory Union
Academy School
Brattleboro UHS #6 (P2)
Green Street School
Oak Grove School

Windham Southwest Supervisory Union
Readsboro Elementary

Winooski School District
The Family Center
John F. Kennedy School
Winooski Middle School
Winooski High School

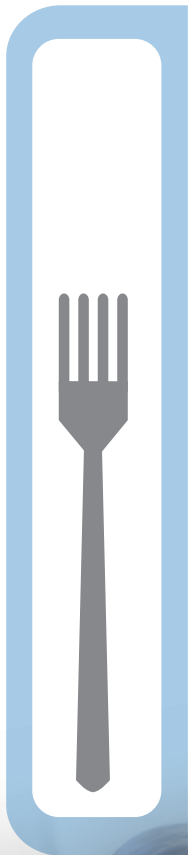
Independent/Private Schools &
Education Programs

Baird School (Burlington, VT)
Centerpoint School (Winooski, VT)
Choice Academy (Barre, VT)
Kindle Farm School (Newfane, VT)
King Street Youth Center (Burlington)
Laraway School (Johnson, VT)
Sacred Heart School (Bennington, VT)
Sheldon Academy-Vermont Achievement Center

2018-2019 School Year

UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS SERVE UP MANY BENEFITS

Since 2014, Hunger Free Vermont has helped nearly 25% of Vermont public schools, serving over 16,000 students, take the money out of school meals. Now the results of a two-year study by researchers from the University of Vermont are in! They show that when all students receive breakfast and lunch at no charge, and when no kid is singled out for needing “free school lunch,” students and schools experience extraordinary benefits!



83%

of staff at participating schools agree that universal school meals

MAKE STUDENTS MORE READY TO LEARN. ◀ ██████████

92%

would recommend universal school meals to other schools.

98%

of staff at these schools agree that universal school meals have

REDUCED FINANCIAL STRESS ON STUDENTS AND FAMILIES.

81% 

of staff agree that with the universal school meals program, **DIFFERENCES IN FAMILY INCOME ARE LESS VISIBLE.** And as a result 72% agree that it has produced an **IMPROVED SOCIAL CLIMATE.**



Universal school meals — Every student. Every meal. Every school day.

NO STUDENT SHOULD LEARN ABOUT HUNGER AT SCHOOL.

Learning is the student's responsibility—making sure they have what they need to learn is our responsibility. All students need good nutrition to learn well.



83%

of staff at Vermont universal meals schools agree that universal school meals have reduced stress on administrators related to family financing.

64%

agree that the school is able to purchase more locally grown or produced food.



“ Eating is now on a level playing field. All children are welcome . . . School meals are ‘cool.’ Eating healthy is ‘cool,’ and children try more things. ”
—Vermont School Principal

62%

of nurses at Vermont universal meals schools say that since universal meals began they need to give less food to students outside of meal times.

52%

of nurses at Vermont universal meals schools agree that since beginning universal meals, students' stress levels have declined.



“ I have seen that there is less hunger, missed meals, and stress on parents about affording meals at school. All of these have a positive impact on child, learning, families and health.” ”
—Vermont School Nurse

“ Students know they have meals at school and parents become aware of attendance because the meals are available. With students in school, teachers are able to teach. Students become better academically and also learn to adjust to social situations better. ”
—Vermont School Principal



*Information in this handout is from a 2016-2017 research study conducted by the University of Vermont's Department of Education with principals, nurses, paraeducators, counselors, business managers, and meal program staff from 67 Vermont schools currently providing universal meals.