

Contact: Jaycie Puttlitz, Wellness Coordinator, Winooski School District
Email: jputtlitz@wdschools.org / Tel: 802-383-6130

March 19, 2019

10:15am-11:00am Senate Agriculture Committee
1:00pm-1:45pm House Agriculture & Forestry Committee

Good afternoon Chair and Members of the House Agriculture committee. Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today and considering the benefits of school nutrition programs.

My name is Jaycie Puttlitz. I am the Wellness Coordinator for the Winooski School District. I was previously the Wellness Coordinator for the school district in Colchester, where I am a resident and where my children still attend school.

Thank you for supporting programs to ensure Vermont children have access to complete, healthy meals in school and can help them acquire the knowledge and skills needed to form lifelong, healthy eating habits. In particular, thank you for your deep support of funding the Farm to School and Early Childhood Grant Program. **I am here to support further funding of school nutrition programs, specifically to increase universal meals programs in the State of Vermont in the near future.**

Five years ago, when I started in Winooski as the wellness coordinator, the district was just implementing a universal free meals program. I spent time, working closely with our food service provider, The Abbey Group, in educating staff and students about the program and its benefits. Three years ago, we changed the breakfast program for all schools to be offer *after the school bell*, and increased breakfast participation significantly. We are also able to provide dinners to students who participate in afterschool activities.

After initiating universal free meals in the Winooski school, we immediately noticed a sharp **decline in Health office visits** due to symptoms of hunger. As a trauma informed school, we are acutely aware of when our students come to school hungry. Hunger is one of the first needs we address when students are unable to focus on learning.

For many of our students, not having enough food to eat at home, or worrying about what they will eat when school is not in session, is a real fear. In fact, on the Friday afternoon before Winter Break, I spent time gathering together leftover, uneaten food from the cafeteria and our share baskets for two students to take home because they told an adult they were worried about having enough to eat during the vacation week. Having up to three meals a day at school not only provides students with the nourishment they need, but also **reduces the anxiety** they feel, and helps them focus on learning.

Another benefit to having meals in school is that the **nutritional quality and variety** is better for their health. We are able to access more locally grown foods and offer more fresh vegetables and fruits in our meal programs. When children have access to these high quality foods, not only do they get better nourishment, but they also **develop and practice better eating habits** which can lead to lifelong, healthier choices. Before we implemented Breakfast after the Bell, I

Contact: Jaycie Puttlitz, Wellness Coordinator, Winooski School District
Email: jputtlitz@wsdschools.org / Tel: 802-383-6130

March 19, 2019

10:15am-11:00am Senate Agriculture Committee

1:00pm-1:45pm House Agriculture & Forestry Committee

noticed students would bring bags of chips and soda to school first thing in the morning for breakfast which were purchased at the corner store. Those **poor food choices have declined** since they know they are guaranteed a healthier breakfast when they arrive at school.

Poor nutrition is linked to academic performance, as well as many preventable, chronic diseases. Schools play a critical role in influencing healthy behaviors and improving the overall wellbeing of Vermont children. School nutrition programs are fundamental to shaping the health of our communities now, and in the future.

Please make school nutrition a priority in the budget. We can pay a small amount for good nutrition now, or a large amount for poor outcomes later.