



Feeding Bodies. Fueling Minds.™

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Testimony submitted to the House Education Committee

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Thank you for giving me the opportunity to present the viewpoint of the dedicated school nutrition professionals, who serve Vermont's roughly 90,000 school children every day. SNA Vermont is a strong advocate for increasing accessibility to high quality school meals for all Vermont children. We see the need for more children to be able to eat a school and we hear the positive results in those communities that have been able to embrace universal meals.

First, I want to thank this committee and the Vermont legislature, for all of the support you provide to School Nutrition programs currently. Our state is a leader in Farm to School education, in using local foods in our schools and by expanding access to free meals by funding the gap that reduced price recipients must pay. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the excellent work of the Child Nutrition team at the Agency of Education and the programs that such agencies as Agriculture and Health have developed to enable cafeteria equipment purchases and professional development of school nutrition personnel.

I have been involved in school nutrition for 6 years and currently serve as the Food Service Director for 8 schools in Central Vermont. I have achieved the certification of School Nutrition Specialist after passing a rigorous qualifying examination covering all areas of School Nutrition programs, one of fewer than 1400 in the US and 11 in Vermont. I have had the opportunity to serve on the SNA Vermont Board for 4 years and am currently the President of our State chapter.

The economic profiles of the schools I work with range from a high poverty school that qualifies for the Community Eligibility Program to a low poverty community. I work in both larger communities and very rural districts. My schools range from 80 to over 800 students in enrollment. We typically feed lunch to anywhere from 55% to 90%, and breakfast to 25% to

80% of the students in each of my school sites daily. I have been able to witness many of the challenges facing school food programs and have seen the results of some of the ideas we are advocating for today put into practice.

Here is what I see everyday, even in communities with low poverty, that run a standard meal program:

- Kids coming to school hungry, but not qualifying for free meals, and this problem has been increasing, ironically, as a result of the stronger economy and families tipping over the income limitations to qualify.
- Children bringing food from home with low nutritional value and high in fat, sugar and salt.
- School meal accounts with up to several hundred dollars of negative balance, rolling up to thousands of dollars per school,
- Stigmatization because of accessing school meals, particularly at breakfast

I don't see these issues at the school that has a Universal Meal program. Everyone is encouraged to eat a healthy breakfast and lunch and all of the children think it is normal to do so. Some kids still choose to bring in lunch, but often will augment that with what we are serving, including a wide selection of vegetables and fruits available daily. My staff and the school's administrators don't waste valuable time chasing down student account debt and the school board does not have to wrestle with issues around lunch "shaming" and mounting uncollectable debt, which must be covered annually from the General Fund. We can spend more time cooking food from scratch, sourcing local ingredients and interacting with students to educate them about sound nutritional choices. I hear from the school staff that the ability for every child to have nutritious meals improves student behavior and promotes better learning.

The school that I serve that has the Community Eligibility Program (CEP) is in their last year of eligibility and will not re-qualify. They have no intention of going back to free/reduced/paid model. They know how much universal meals has improved their school and will continue to fund it. I am currently working with other schools about the possibility of doing this by themselves, they are assessing the costs because they are certain of the benefits to their community.

SNA Vermont strongly believes that Vermont should be the national leader in making sure our children all have access to high quality meals at school every day. A Universal Breakfast and Lunch program for all school children in our state would be a smart and cost effective way of achieving improvements across a number of metrics indicating educational achievement.

Now I would like to address some of the issues facing our membership.

One issue where our State Agency has not consulted with Vermont's school nutrition professionals is the new USDA rule providing some flexibility in the requirement to serve only whole grain rich foods.

While we are all in favor of the better nutrition standards adopted under the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act, we now have several years of experience working with whole grains in schools. For the most part whole grains have been well accepted and many products are now available to make these healthy dishes more palatable and accepted by children. For example, at first all whole wheat flour was the typical brown with a distinct, more nutty flavor. A wonderful attribute for many applications, but not for pizza dough, for example. We are now using King Arthur White Whole Wheat flour to make our pizza dough and it is well accepted by our student customers.

We also have experienced some areas that a strict whole grain requirement just does not work. This might be for cultural reasons, it might be because the whole grain product is inferior in taste and texture. In any event, it is causing kids to skip an important source of good nutrition. This strict requirement is also aggravating the financial pressure on many school nutrition programs by decreasing participation. No one I have spoken with in Vermont is in favor of going back to mostly highly processed grain products across the board, but we do want to have some flexibility to offer such items as regular pasta, or white rice. Serving whole grains and educating students about whole grains will continue to be an important aspect of school nutrition programs. The USDA has heard this from all areas of the country and has responded with a rule that at least half of all grain items must be whole grain rich, as was the standard up until 2014. Vermont's Agency of Education (AOE) has chosen to not allow Child Nutrition Professionals in Vermont to have this flexibility to improve their programs. We are one of only two or three states that has refused to implement this USDA rule. SNA Vermont is requesting that we are allowed this flexibility in our programs.

Another huge challenge that we face is keeping up with the administrative and regulatory burden facing our programs. For many School Food Authorities (SFAs), this can be overwhelming, seriously compromising the primary mission we have of feeding our children nutritious meals. We are reviewed by the AOE for our School Breakfast and Lunch Programs every 3 years. These reviews take up a lot of time to prepare for and complete on the part of school food service personnel and SFA business office staff. The frequency of these reviews also negatively impacts the Vermont AOE's mission of providing education and training to school nutrition staff. They don't have the time and staff to do everything.

Once again, the USDA has heard about this issue from all over the country and has responded with a rule allowing states to request changing the review cycle for compliant programs to every 5 years. Once again the Vermont AOE will not implement this common sense solution that will actually free up their resources for other aspects of their mission without compromising their critical oversight duties.

In both the whole grain requirement and the Administrative Review cycle, the Vermont AOE chose to make a decision contradicting the new USDA rule without any consultation with, or input from the School Nutrition community. We strongly advocate for a more open process when it comes to these important issues facing our programs. We also seek a more transparent

process, and a consulting role in, the imminent search for a new Director of the State's Child Nutrition Programs. We are asking for the opportunity to work in partnership with the AOE to find solutions that will improve our school nutrition programs from a nutritional, operational and financial perspective. We are also asking for this Committee's support for this goal.