



Testimony for VT House Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, May 18, 2021

Bills S.100 and H.106 Recommendation

Good Afternoon, my name is Scott Fay and I manage the Child Nutrition Program for the Essex Westford School District. I am also President-Elect of the School Nutrition Association of Vermont. Thank you for allowing me to be here today, I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts and perspectives on why bills S.100 and H.106 are so important.

Universal school meals and local purchasing incentives offer an opportunity for us to change the food culture in schools while challenging the stigma often associated with school meals. Schools that have the financial resources to purchase more local ingredients also have the opportunity to increase their scratch cooking while lessening the use of heavily processed foods. The passing of universal meals legislation will allow students to start and finish their days with high quality nourishment and help set them up to be successful throughout the entire school day.

In order to avoid ending the year with a deficit, many school districts lean on strategies to raise revenues and offset losses which further fuel the free lunch stigma. With universal meals, districts won't need to use robust a la carte programs, like snack bars and vending machines, to generate off-setting revenues. Instead, schools will be able to put more focus on serving high quality, healthy and reimbursable meals that appeal to students and provide them with the nourishment they need to learn. Our goal should be providing high quality nutrition to help students succeed in school rather than raising enough revenue to avoid a deficit. The increased participation that we have seen with universal meals this year more than outweighs the loss of revenues associated with the a la carte sales.

It is estimated that one-third of eligible students choose to skip school meals all together rather than endure the stigmatizing and sometimes embarrassment often associated with school meals. In the Essex Westford School District, we have decided to close our a la carte service lines during the past year and we were able to focus all of our energy on the meal program. We have seen a drastic increase in participation in our meal program which has helped to normalize our serving lines. Universal meals have provided us with the opportunity to help minimize the stigma around school meals and that has been the most valuable silver lining we have found with our COVID meal service plan.

The School Nutrition Association of Vermont recently conducted a survey looking for input from school staff and administrators on how Universal School Meals have impacted their students. I would like to share a few of their comments with you.

One of Vermont's school nurses said "I feel that I have seen less students with stomach aches this year, fewer kids presenting to the health office needing a snack. Having regularly available food allows for kids to focus on their academics and gives them the energy they need to remain engaged in their learning."

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A Colchester teacher added “I have had more students than ever eating the provided breakfast and lunch. I can see that they are eating healthy meals and they are usually finishing their entire meal so they have full bellies to start the day. Since more students are eating a complete meal, kids have had more energy and fewer meltdowns as well as more stamina to complete their work. One other perk is that many kids have tried foods that they haven't tried before and they are really enjoying them. Kids are becoming more adventurous healthy eaters! Parents also feel less stress to provide meals for their child because school provided them, so they could put that money towards something else.”

Finally, in response to the question “Looking through an equity lens, have school meals at no cost to students or their families made an impact in your school/district?”, an administrator from Colchester wrote “100% yes. I feel that students feel more comfortable taking food when it is there for all to take rather than just the percentage that "need it" I think this is because they realize other students are hungry too and see them taking it and feel less likely to stick out.” and “I think kids eating together has created a new way to look at community. While they always ate in a large cafeteria the universal access to the same meal in small groups has fostered a new sense of community.”

The passage of these two bills will also allow us to continue our work on developing a stronger Farm to School Program in our district. While focusing our energy on more local purchasing and scratch cooking, we can continue to expose our students to new and nutritious foods through taste tests as well as expanding our school gardens. Our students will also be given the opportunity to learn more about our local food systems through strengthened partnerships with farmers and businesses in our community.

In closing, I ask that you please support bills S.100 and H.106. These bills allow Vermont's schools to focus their collective energy and financial resources where they should be, in providing the best possible meal service to Vermont's students and finally removing the school lunch stigma. At the same time, they incentivize schools to spend more money on Vermont products further improving our local economy. Thank you again for allowing me to speak here today.

Sincerely,

Scott Fay
Essex Westford School District
School Nutrition Association of Vermont