My name is Amy Malinowski, and my pronouns are she/her/hers. I'm a white woman living in Burlington. This is my first time giving testimony and I'm writing it in on behalf of Rights And Democracy.

I grew up in Jericho, Vermont--being homeschooled and then attending public school, attending Vermont Technical College for a year, and then attending Babson College in Massachusetts. While at Babson, I worked very closely with the Dean of the undergraduate school and graduate school. I designed and taught curriculum at youth camps both in Vermont and in Ghana, Rwanda, and Uganda. After graduating, I moved to California and worked at a charter middle school in East San Jose where almost all students qualified for free or reduced lunch and identified as Black or Chicano/a. I then went on to work at a tech non-profit in Oakland focused on helping first generation, Pell grant eligible students of color around the country in navigating their financial aid forms for college. I say all this to help locate my perspective within the breadth of experiences I have had across the education spectrum. I have spent a lot of time studying the design of our educational environments and systems--and the sneaky (and not so sneaky ways) that white supremacy and capitalism are working to preserve the status quo. I have had a lot of observations over the years, but today, I'm here to speak directly to the topic of universal school meals.

While working at the middle school, I learned that for many of my students, the lunch they got at school was the only dependable meal of the day. That's incredibly traumatic for anyone's body to experience. This is a public health issue--we need to reduce the roll of chronic stress in people's lives and food insecurity has a profound, long-term impact on our relationship with food and our bodies. As Ijeoma Oluo, author of So You Want to Talk About Race, shared in Anti-Diet, "I grew up really, really poor, and food insecurity was a real part of my day-to-day life… So I always had this kind of grasping, desperate relationship with food… We would have times where we had absolutely nothing, and then on the first of the month we'd go shopping… we just tried to eat as much as possible because we had food. You get this 'I have to eat it all now' feeling." This experience is incredibly common and there is emerging research on the connection between food insecurity and disordered eating. Here is a passage written by Christy Harrison, MPH, RD in Anti-Diet:

> A 2017 study of a low-income population in urban San Antonio, for instance, found that food insecurity is associated with significant levels of rebound eating, with more than 56% of participants reporting binge eating, overeating, or night eating. The risk of these issues increases with rising levels of deprivation, and 17% of people with the most severe food insecurity were found to meet *clinical criteria* for an eating disorder--far higher than the single-digit rates of clinically diagnosed eating disorders in the general population. This shows that the stereotypical view of eating disorders as a disease of wealthy white folks is sorely mistaken; most of the participants in this study were Latinx and Black people living far below the poverty line.
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> Food insecurity and diet culture don't exist in separate silos, either: the same study found that those with the greatest degree of food insecurity also had the highest levels of internalized weight stigma, as well as the highest levels of bulimic behaviors and overexercising as a way to compensate for eating. (Those last two findings surprised even the researchers, who had expected not to find compensatory behaviors in this highly food-insecure population.) So even if if binge eating begins in response to food insecurity rather than concerns about weight and shape, it's clear that diet-culture beliefs about body size also come into play for those who lack reliable access to food. The increasing pressure on this population to use food-assistance dollars for "healthy" food rather than "junk" food is another example of how diet culture is infiltrating the conversation about food insecurity and piling more stigma on an already marginalized group.
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> The nexus of food insecurity and disordered eating is complicated--and inadequately understood. I don't have all the answers, but I do know this: we need to make a lot of changes at the collective level to help stop the cycle of poverty that keeps people stuck in food insecurity--not just because of how it affects people's relationships with food, but because it's a matter of social justice. And for anyone trying to heal from disordered eating--regardless of race, generder, income, or educational level--the most important thing is having enough to eat on a continual basis. So instead of trying to curtail access to foods deemed "unhealthy" in low-income communities, limiting what people are able to buy with food-assistance dollars, and engaging in "anti-obesity" campaigns that serve only to reinforce weight

stigma, we as a society need to work on ensuring that everyone has reliable, consistent access to food.

Besides supporting a more peaceful relationship with food, the research shows that universal meals allow for students to focus on learning and decrease financial anxiety:
- A study of NYC middle schools showed universal school meals improve performance in math and english language arts by up to 10 weeks of learning ("Let them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance," Center for Policy Research, 2019)
- A research done by the Department of Education at UVM found that with universal school meals, financial anxiety and overall stress declines. 98% of staff say that universal school meals have reduced financial stress on students and families. 52% of school nurses agree student stress levels have declined. 83% of staff say that universal school meals have reduced stress on administrators related to family financing. ("Universal Free School Meal Programs in Vermont Show Multi-Domain Benefits," University of Vermont, 2020)

If we can agree that all students who need food should have access to it, I want to now speak a bit to the logistics of that access. My professional training and background is in human centered design and behavioral design. And my work at the tech non-profit was largely about applying that lens to understanding how bureaucratic systems like financial aid, which are supposedly intended to create more access to higher education, end up creating inaccessible processes where it's ridiculously hard to prove you are "poor enough" to use them and where, all too often, more harm is done in the end. While I was focused on financial aid intricacies (and let me tell you, that's a whole other testimony I could give!), we would often talk to other folks also trying to use tech to cut through bureaucracies such as applying for food stamp programs. From my own experience and from the stories of other designers working in the space, I was left with the overwhelming impression that all these systems are designed by people who care more about people proving they are "poor enough" to get access to support, than about actually giving the support. I share this to say that when it comes to designing social support programs, we should really question any reaction bubbling up inside us that wants "proof of neediness" or "proof of worthiness" in order to get access--especially if you are hearing this and are white. If the idea of universal access to a program with no proof of family income makes you uncomfortable, it's important to interrogate why that is. As Dean Spade writes in Mutual Aid, "Charity, aid, relief, and social services are terms that usually refer to rich people or the government making decisions about the provision of some kind of support to poor people--that is, rich people or the government deciding who gets the help, what the limits are to that help and what strings are attached. You can be sure that help like that is not designed to get to the root causes of poverty and violence. It is designed to improve the image of the elites who are funding it and put a tiny, inadequate Band-Aid on the massive social wound that their greed creates." It is important to recognize the real impact of the "limits" we design or the "strings" we attach to these kinds of social support programs. In 2019, the Urban Institute found that up to 42% of Vermont children living in food insecure households were not eligible for free school meals or for 3SquaresVT. Adopting a universal school meals model would allow all students access to the same healthy meals and remove the application process, which could minimize stigma around accessing school meal programs. This school year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and temporary federal waivers, all schools in Vermont are providing free school meals to all students regardless of their family's income. "Schools are reporting that stigma around the school meal program has been wiped out, more students are eating at school, and students are more attentive and ready to learn because they are not hungry and worrying about when they will eat next. Teachers are also reporting that students are sharing with them that they are worried about what happens when these meals are not available for free anymore." (Hunger Free Vermont) The pandemic has opened a portal into a more just and equitable future and we must seize this opportunity. We can't return to the old system. We need to permanently take the money out of school meals so that every student can eat at school every day. S.100 is a bill that would ensure that every public school student in Vermont would be able to eat school breakfast and lunch regardless of their family's ability to pay.

Thank you for hearing our voices today!