

**Beth Roy, Hartland**

Universal School Meals Bill (S.100) Testimony Thursday March 10, 2022

Good morning, my name is Beth Roy, and I am a resident of Hartland. I am a local school board member, the Farm to School Coordinator for the Rivendell Interstate School District in Fairlee, and a parent.

I am here today to ask the committee to pass S.100 and include both breakfast and lunch at no cost to all Vermont students, starting with the 2022-23 school year, and paid for from the education fund.

As a school board member, I have seen how universal school meals over the pandemic have positively impacted my community. Our meal program is discussed at almost every school board meeting, from trying to figure out how we could fund universal meals on our own even though we do not meet the community eligibility option for universal meals, to funding more staff to support our meal program and making kitchen improvements to give our food service professionals the ability to include more local and whole foods on our menus. Our full board and administration are focused on having every student have access to the same things while at school, whether it is educational opportunities or food.

As a board member I also view universal school meals as an amazing educational opportunity. Our board has discussed how if we keep universal meals, we could start offering our meals family style. Serving our meals family style would give the opportunity for classes to eat together while supporting students socially and emotionally and having important moments for learning life skills. I feel our universal meal program can build a stronger school community, but this family style meal option would not be available to our school if we were to not have universal meals.

As a farm to school professional I have seen our food service professionals more available to try new menu items and include more local items on the menu since they have less paperwork to follow up on. I have also seen that families and students are hurting right now. More families seem to qualify for free meals everyday. Last week I had a student disclose to me that her family's food stamps were running out and that she needed to eat less. I felt empowered to be able to reassure her that she can always eat breakfast and lunch at our school and that she does not need to eat less at school and that it is the school's responsibility to make sure she had what she needed to learn including food.

As a parent, universal meals have been a positive impact on my family's life. I remember when the pandemic first closed school back in March of 2020 our school meal professionals pivoted so quickly and started delivering breakfast and lunch to our bus stop daily. This walk to the bus stop was a daily highlight. Our family was tired, worried, and stressed balancing both our new remote employment situations along with our two children's remote schoolwork. The simple act of the school providing meals for my children gave us a feeling that we were cared for by our community and gave us hope. Today my children are back in school, and the meals are still there for them, free every day. We are a middle-income family and universal meals have given us more wiggle room in our family budget as well as more time, with less lunch making and squabbling over what goes in the lunch box, and time is truly invaluable to a family with two working parents.

In closing, I ask the committee to please pass S.100 and include both breakfast and lunch at no cost to all Vermont students, starting with the 2022-23 school year, and paid for from the education fund.

Thank you for your time and attention.