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To: House Education Committee

Fr: Betsy Rosenbluth, Project Director of VT FEED, Shelburne Farms

Da: March 10, 2022

Re: Universal School Meals Bill S.100

My name is Betsy Rosenbluth and I am the Project Director of VT FEED, a partnership of Shelburne Farms and NOFA-VT. I want to first thank you for your support passing the Local Purchasing Incentive for schools last year and its continued funding this year. It's been great to see almost half of all VT SUs apply for the program in the first year.

Farm to School and Universal Meals work together to support VT families so that no Vermont child is distracted at school by hunger. For many students almost half their daily nutrition comes from school meals. Every Vermonter should have access to the nourishing food we produce in this state, regardless of zip code, and while we address food insecurity we are also helping our agricultural economy and educating our kids about local healthy foods. That is the win-win of these programs. Over 100 Vermont farms now provide food to feed our youth across the state through early childhood and school nutrition programs.

So towards this goal of improving food security while expanding markets for VT producers, we know we can make a difference this year by **ensuring families do not lose universal school meals after this current school year**, by passing the universal school meals bill (S.100) - with *both* breakfast and lunch included.

Universal Meals with Farm to School increases participation in school nutrition programs, so more students are nourished and ready to learn. Fresh VT products and universal meals increase meal participation, which then gives school food programs access to more federal dollars to buy more local food, sending more money back into the VT economy. These programs together will make a substantial impact on both COVID recovery and the long term health of Vermont kids and farmers.

Now is the time to pass S100 and ensure that every student has access to a nourishing breakfast and lunch without stigma or shame. From my own experience, my daughter

refused to buy her lunch in her Burlington middle school, regardless of how fresh the meals were, simply because of the stigma attached to standing in the school meal line and the peer pressure she felt. This was eye opening for me, having a job dedicated to connecting youth with local nourishing food. If you have ever visited a cafeteria serving Universal Meals, you can see for yourself how much the culture shifts when every student has access to the same meals, regardless of family situation.

Public education in Vermont is not a pay as you go proposition - higher income parents are not charged school fees for their child's Chrome Books, bus rides to school, textbooks or soccer balls. They pay through their taxes. It should be no different for school meals which provide the nutrition that is foundational to student success.

We have heard many stories from many different districts about the change that has happened with universal meals in all schools. Meal participation rates go up, classroom culture has changed, and the stress of individual students that rely on school meals has been reduced.

S100 helps VT families and helps students succeed. Please make sure it is two meals each school day. And we can do this in VT while benefiting our rural economy. This is the year to build more resiliency in our local food systems, ensure our youth are well nourished, and expand opportunities for our farmers.

