

My name is Cassie Fraser, I am the Director of Marketing for The Abbey Group, a food service management company headquartered out of Sheldon, VT that feeds many of the schools across our state. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am asking 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.

I joined The Abbey Group during the onset of the pandemic and have seen how universal school meals have leveled the playing field for all students for the remainder of the 2020 school year, as well as throughout the 2021-22 year. When school's had to pivot to remote learning in the spring of 2020, food service teams, teachers, and support staff pitched in to keep all of our children's access to food constant because of its known importance. It is no secret that consistent, high quality nutrition has a direct impact on a child's ability to learn. It is our responsibility to create the conditions necessary for learning and making sure that we are meeting our kids' basic needs while in school is paramount to doing so. And this means that we need to fund access to both breakfast and lunch so that all of our students have the same opportunities to have the need for nutrition met.

We are also keenly aware that the pandemic has strained our state's middle and low income families, who make up a majority of our population. Many parents lost their jobs while the price of food rose, and continues to rise due to supply and labor shortages, and now also because of international affairs. Working for a food service management company has opened my eyes to how many students and their families rely on their schools to help make ends meet nutritionally, and taking that away from them for any period of time now that it has become the norm would truly be a blow to them. There is no better time for our great little state to move forward with Universal School Meals, both breakfast and lunch, beginning in the 2022-2023 school year so that there is no gap between free meals being available to all students.

I am also in a unique position that allows me to see how different food service looks from district to district because of local funding, whether that be an abundance or a lack thereof. This is why it is so important that we pay for Universal School breakfast and lunch from the education fund, rather than by each school district. This will ensure that the cost is distributed across the state and further make Universal School Meals more equitable for all of the children we serve. I often hear or read about our state legislature wanting to create equity among Vermont state residents, and I, and The Abbey Group, believe that Universal School Meals, both breakfast and lunch, are a key first step in creating it for our state's children. We are truly looking at an amazing opportunity to support their futures, and the futures of all Vermont families.

Again, I am imploring you today 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.

Thank you all so much for your time and consideration.