

To: Vermont House Committee on Education

From: Don Tinney, Vermont-NEA President

Date: 10 March 2022

Good morning. For the record, my name is Don Tinney, a 31-year veteran English teacher from South Hero, currently representing 13,000 educators as president of Vermont-NEA. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today as you consider this important piece of legislation that will not only improve the health and nutrition of Vermont's children and youth but will improve the learning conditions in every single Vermont school.

Children's healthy development depends upon proper nutrition throughout their growing years. We know that pre-natal nutrition is critical for the healthy development of babies, and we also know that the need for healthy nourishment never ends. Nourishing meals must be an integral part of every student's school day to support adequate brain development and functioning for academic learning.

Vermont educators work hard each day to create safe, compassionate learning environments, where all students grow intellectually and socially. When students are hungry, they simply cannot concentrate on class activities or lessons. Making sure our students are well-nourished contributes not just to the quality of their lives but to the quality of their learning. Children distracted by their hunger simply cannot learn because they cannot focus on their lessons, and when students can't focus, in my experience, they distract their peers, thereby disrupting other students' learning opportunities.

During the pandemic, political leaders, pediatricians, parents, and community members from all walks of life, called for our students to return to in-person learning as soon as possible. As this committee has graciously acknowledged, Vermont educators put forth heroic efforts from the onset of the pandemic to keep their students engaged, to open the schoolhouse doors to in-person learning in the fall of 2020, utilizing a hybrid model in many schools, and to return this school year to endure the surges of the Delta variant, omicron, contact tracing, quarantining, and the chronic unpredictability associated with the pandemic. Everyone involved with public education has gone above and beyond the call of duty to keep our students physically in school, because we know that school is much, much more than just a place to deliver instruction. We frequently heard this articulated in the governor's press conferences: our students need to be in school for their mental health, their social and emotional well-being, their connection to the greater community. This commitment necessarily must include feeding our students.

Vermont educators are committed to making sure that every school in Vermont is a sanctuary for every student. All students must feel welcomed, safe, and nurtured. Providing healthy, universal

breakfast and lunch for all students is one of the most effective ways for achieving this goal. Our schools have been doing this throughout the pandemic, so not only do we know how important it is, but we also know how doable it is. It has been working.

In an email to me earlier this week, one of our members relayed a heartwarming and heartbreaking anecdote that one of her colleagues shared: *I have a student who is so glad to have free breakfast and lunch available to them without needing any free/reduced lunch paperwork. In the past, their mother wouldn't always be able to complete the paperwork or deposit money in the account, so that student would go without breakfast or lunch. This year the student has **not** gone hungry because of the universal school meals program.*

We know, just like healthy play at recess and quiet moments of silent reading, school meals are an integral part of the school day. Nourishing our students--satisfying their hunger and quenching their thirst--is as important as delivering academic instruction. We also know that breaking bread with one another is one way in which we build community, since dining together allows students an opportunity to get to know each other a little better and have authentic conversations, in the same way we adults get together over coffee or participate in luncheon meetings.

Vermont-NEA stands in full support of universal breakfast and lunch programs in our schools. I am more than happy to answer any questions you may have, either in my role as Vermont-NEA president or as the English teacher who spent hundreds of dollars every year keeping the top left drawer in the corner cabinet stocked with granola bars.

Thank you.