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Testimony respectfully submitted to the House Education Committee

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify about S.100. Hunger Free Vermont strongly supports S.100 as one crucial piece in the Farm Fresh School Meals for All package (currently contained in S.100, H.106, and H.439) that, if passed this year, would make monumental gains in addressing child hunger, help destigmatize school meals, and support schools in purchasing more food directly from our Vermont farmers and producers - helping the farm economy across the state.

Passing S.100 this session would mean that children, families, and schools can move through the next school year with the certainty and assurance that school children will never lose access to a nutritious breakfast to start their school day, rather than wonder and worry if, after 2+ years of access to universal school breakfast and lunch, they will lose access to both all at once when the pandemic-related waivers authorized by the USDA school year expire at the end of the 2021-22 school year. **S.100 would help children and families avoid a food access cliff when the USDA waivers expire and will guarantee that in Vermont, kids can count on breakfast.**

Passing S.100 this session would also mean that when the Legislature reconvenes in January 2022, this Committee and others will be able to consider a recommendation about how to move toward full universal school breakfast and lunch in the next few years. This is an exciting commitment to continuing the conversation and working toward true equitable access to school meals for all students.

Finally, passing S.100 this session would ensure that the AOE Child Nutrition Program has the staffing capacity needed to support schools in transitioning to universal school breakfast and launch the local purchasing incentive program (established in the current version of H.106 and funded in FY22 in the Senate version of H.439). This position is critical to the success of both.

We hope that this Committee will help send S.100, and the full Farm Fresh School Meals for All package, to the Governor's desk this session - supporting children, schools, and farmers, ensuring kids and families can count on school breakfast, and sending a strong message of support for one of the keys to an equitable education: the nutritious meals that all students need to learn while in school.

Below are additional details about minor technical recommendations for S.100 and background information on various components of the bill.

### **Technical Changes Recommended for S.100**

- Make language about universal school breakfast mandate consistent:
  - 1264. Food Program (a)(1)(A):

- School districts shall maximize access to federal funds for the cost of the school breakfast and lunch program under the Community Eligibility Provision, Provision 2, or other provisions under these Acts.
- FY22 appropriation of \$8 million for universal school breakfast is not needed because it will not go into effect until FY23 (and the funding needed for universal school breakfast and lunch are included in the USDA waivers for the 2021-22 school year).
- Adjust the effective date so the full bill goes into effect upon enactment, except for the mandate for universal school breakfast - that language is in section 1264 - (a)1(A) and a(1)(B) - which should go into effect for fiscal year 2023. The rest of the bill contains initiatives that should happen between now and then, like the universal school lunch task force and position for AOE.

### **The Importance of School Breakfast**

Breakfast is a critical meal in our day, and universal school breakfast programs have been shown to enhance daily nutrient intake, as well as improve academic performance and attendance rates ([Bartfield, et al. \(2019\)](#), [Crepinsek, et al. \(2006\)](#), [Kleinman, et al. \(2002\)](#)).

In Vermont, we have seen stark differences in school breakfast participation between schools that offer universal school breakfast and those that don't for children of all income levels:

Universal Breakfast participation by income category:

- Free & Reduced: 65.2%
- Paid: 39.5%

Non-Universal Breakfast participation by income category:

- Free & Reduced: 40.6%
- Paid: 9.2%

**"I have the majority of my class now choosing to eat breakfast and lunch this year because it is free.** Usually when they get to 5th and 6th grade they stop taking breakfast. This year I've had many kids come in and ask if the meals are still free! Once I reassure them that they are indeed still free they head off to pick up breakfast. This has been amazing to see because I then know they've had something nutritious before starting their day. I also haven't seen the struggle to make it to snack time this year, like I have in the past. **The kids are able to sustain their focus longer because they have had that meal.**" -- *Erin Paquette, 5/6 Teacher, Waterville Elementary School*

### **Instructional time for breakfast in the classroom**

S.100 puts current Agency of Education policy into law by allowing school breakfast served in the classroom to count as instructional time. One best practice for improving participation in school breakfast is to serve breakfast "after the bell", rather than require students to arrive at school early (sometimes before buses would even arrive) and leave their friends to eat breakfast in the cafeteria before the school day begins. Many schools have been serving breakfast "after the bell" - including in the classroom - for many years with great results. S.100 does not require schools to permit breakfast in the classroom, but if they do, it clarifies that time spent while students are eating breakfast in the classroom counts as

instructional time. **This time is generally during homeroom, a break time, or as the day is getting started and does not take away from other educational opportunities.** This policy was shared in a memo from former Secretary Holcombe in 2015. S.100 would require schools to maximize federal reimbursements for school breakfast, and provides some recommendations for how to achieve this, but each school may choose how best to achieve this goal.

## **Hunger in Vermont**

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an urgent and unprecedented hunger crisis in Vermont. Lack of affordable housing, low wages, high unemployment, a decrease in the number of local, affordable grocery stores, and lack of public transportation were all already contributing to hunger and food insecurity in Vermont, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequities. Prior to the pandemic, food insecurity rates had been declining steadily since spiking during the Great Recession and had been holding steady at 1 in 10 Vermonters for several years. While food insecurity rates were relatively static, there were still too many people in Vermont struggling to put food on the table. 10% is an unacceptable level of hunger in our state.

**According to recent studies released by the University of Vermont, 1 in 3 Vermont households have struggled with food insecurity at some point during the pandemic and households with children are two times more likely to face hunger.** These rates of hunger are higher than at any point in over 20 years and are not letting up. Recent surveys from the U.S. Census showed that 12% of adults living with children in Vermont reported that their children weren't eating enough because they couldn't afford to buy more food. **School meals are vital to childrens' food security.**

As we look ahead to recovering from the pandemic, our goal cannot be to return to where we were; we must do better. Previous recessions indicate that economic recovery for households facing hunger will be slow. After the Great Recession, it took 12 years for Vermont's rate of hunger to return to pre-recession levels, even though other economic indicators recovered much more quickly. We expect hunger to remain high in the coming years, well-past the reopening of the state.

## **Universal School Meals During the Pandemic**

Thanks to *temporary* waivers from the USDA, school meals and summer meals have been available to all children for free, regardless of their family's income, since mid-March 2020. The USDA has authorized waivers allowing schools to continue to serve universal school meals through the 2021-22 school year with the funding needed provided by the federal government.

Schools have gone above and beyond to ensure children have access to nutritious meals during the pandemic, including through school closures last spring, and hybrid and remote learning this school year. **Schools are reporting that stigma around the school meal program has been eliminated, 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.**

## **Supplemental materials included in this testimony**

1. Farm Fresh School Meals for All bill summary

# Farm Fresh School Meals for All

The Farm Fresh School Meals for All package [is included in S.100, H.106, and H.439](#). Together, the full package would bring universal school breakfast to all public school students in the 2022-23 school year, explore a pathway to universal school lunch by 2026, and help get more local food into school meals by launching a local purchasing incentive program to help schools increase purchases from Vermont farmers and producers.

## [S.100 - As Passed by the Senate:](#)

### **Universal School Breakfast and Creation of the Task Force on Universal School Lunch Act**

- Would require all public schools to provide Universal School Breakfast to all students at no charge to the individual student or family beginning in the 2022-2023 school year
  - This timeline allows for no interruption of Universal School Breakfast after USDA waivers that allow schools to provide both universal breakfast and lunch expire at the end of the 2021-22 school year
  - Increase federal dollars supporting the school meals programs by requiring schools to maximize reimbursement for meals at all schools by participating in one of the federal options for providing universal school meals and by incorporating best practices in serving meals
  - Provides funding for the cost of Universal School Breakfast through the Education Fund to individual school districts. \$8 million is appropriated from the Education Fund for this purpose in FY22
- Would establish a task force to bring a recommendation to the legislature in January of 2022, detailing a path to Universal School Lunch by the 2026-2027 school year
  - First meeting on or before 10/10/21; report due by 1/15/22 to the Senate Committees on Education, Agriculture, Appropriations, and House Committees on Agriculture and Forestry, Education, and Appropriations
  - The task force will consist of one member each from the Agency of Education (AOE), Agency of Human Services, and Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets
  - The report would include:
    - Recommendation for funding of Universal School Lunch
    - Recommendation on how student household income data should be collected
    - Information about how other states offer and fund universal school meals
    - Information from VT's federal delegation about opportunities at the federal level to support universal school meals
  - The bill states that the task force shall collaborate with:
    - Hunger Free Vermont, Vermont School Boards Association, School Nutrition Association. of Vermont, Vermont Superintendents Association, VT-NEA, Vermont Principals Association, and the Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators
  - This task force would NOT require any additional funding
  - ***\*\*This task force is also included in [H.106, as passed by the Senate Education Committee on May 7<sup>th</sup>\\*\\*](#)***
- Ensures that AOE Child Nutrition Programs has the capacity needed to establish the local purchasing incentive program (currently in H.106) and to support schools transitioning to provide universal school breakfast by creating one full-time, classified position specializing in the administration of school food programs. \$100,000 is appropriated from the General Fund for FY22 for this position. This position is currently in both S.100 as passed by the Senate and H.106 as passed by the Senate Education Committee on May 7<sup>th</sup>.

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- States that a goal of the state, by 2023, is to have school districts purchase 20% of their breakfast, lunch, or summer meals locally
  - Requires school districts to submit an annual report detailing local purchasing
- Requires a report on the status of implementation of S.100 from AOE, in consultation with Hunger Free Vermont, Vermont Association of School Business Officials, Vermont School Boards Association, Vermont Principals Association, and the School Nutrition Association of Vermont, due 12/15/21 to relevant legislative committees

### [H.106 - Community Schools Act](#)

- *\*\*This bill passed out of the Senate Education Committee on May 7th. The bill is expected to go to the Appropriations Committee next.\*\* The following is included in H.106 as passed by the Senate Education Committee:*
- Includes the Universal School Lunch task force, with the same language as appears in S.100 (above)
- Would create an incentive program for Vermont schools to purchase locally produced foods for their school meal programs, based on the percentage of local food purchased
  - In order to qualify for the incentive, the supervisory union would have to:
    - Develop a locally produced foods purchasing plan
    - Designate a person to be the food coordinator for locally produced foods
    - Develop a process for tracking the purchase of locally produced food
    - Comply with the annual reporting requirement (below)
  - Would require an annual report from each school board estimating the percentage of locally produced food purchased for its school meal program
  - Details of incentive:
    - 15¢ per reimbursable school lunch if the supervisory union purchases at least 15% locally produced food through the school meal program
    - 20¢ per reimbursable school lunch if the supervisory union purchases at least 20% locally produced food
    - 25¢ per reimbursable school lunch if the supervisory union purchases at least 25% locally produced food
    - If a supervisory union grows, raises, or produces food, it shall assign a fair market value to that food for the purpose of reporting its cost
  - “Locally produced foods” is defined by the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets (VAAF) in [Act 129](#), excepting fluid milk. Milk already comprises over 15% of school food costs on average, so to incentivize new purchasing of Vermont products fluid milk has been excluded
  - *\*\*FY22 funding for this program is included in H.439 as passed by the Senate*

### **H.439 - As Passed by the Senate, Budget Bill for FY22**

- Funding is included to launch a local purchasing incentive program to support school meal programs buying more locally produced food. \$500,000 from the ARPA Coronavirus State Fiscal Relief Funds has been appropriated to the Agency of Education to administer grants to school districts
- Level funds the Vermont Farm to School and Early Childhood Grant Program at \$171,000

