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Testimony respectfully submitted to the House Education Committee
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Chair Webb and Members of the House Education Committee:

Thank you for the time and thoughtful consideration that you have given S.100 this biennium. There has never been a more critical time to make Universal School Meals permanent in Vermont and we are grateful that you are prioritizing this legislation and hearing from so many voices this week. We ask that you pass S.100 with breakfast and lunch included, and that the state funding needed come from the Education Fund.

Over the last two years, Universal School Meals has become the norm in Vermont schools. **For two years, every student has been able to eat a nutritious breakfast and lunch every school day along with their classmates without worry, stress, or shame.** They have tried new fruits and vegetables and learned about the food coming right from the farms in their own communities. They have been able to focus with full bellies on learning. In a time of great upheaval and instability, food in school has been something they can count on. With S.100, you have the opportunity to make this a permanent reality for all students in Vermont.

Below is additional information and context for some of the topics that the Committee has discussed so far, including information about how the federal government has supported school meals during the pandemic, instructional time, and the importance of including both breakfast and lunch in S.100.

Hunger in Vermont Remains Extraordinarily High

Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, families with children across Vermont continue to face unprecedented rates of hunger. Families are grappling with inflation, a lack of affordable housing, ever-increasing food costs, and disruptions in the supply chain. According to recent studies released by the University of Vermont, **1 in 3 people in Vermont were food insecure in 2021. Families with children are five times more likely to be struggling with hunger.** These rates of hunger are far higher than prior to the pandemic, and are higher than at any point in over 20 years.

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. **School meals are vital to childrens' food security.**

School Meals During the Pandemic

Thanks to temporary waivers from the USDA, school meals have been available to all children for free, regardless of their family's income, since mid-March 2020. These waivers expire in June, and can only be extended with Congressional approval. That authority was notably left out of the omnibus budget bill this week. Currently, there is no indication that Congress will grant USDA the authority to extend these waivers.

This means that without the passage of S.100, schools across the state will lose Universal School Meals at the end of this school year. They will have to scramble over the summer - when they are busy running summer meal programs - to develop a new school meal program essential from scratch for the fall - one that brings back registers, school meal debt, stigma, and a class divide in the cafeteria.

True Universal School Meals Means Breakfast and Lunch

Universal School Meals has the power to bring equity to the cafeteria and ensure that children are fed and focused while at school. This is only possible when both breakfast and lunch are available for free. Please amend S.100 to include both breakfast and lunch. As long as one meal separates children by income, school meal programs will be associated with poverty, and shame and stigma will keep children in need from eating.

Combining universal school breakfast and lunch is key to seeing the full breadth and depth of positive impacts associated with Universal School Meals. Numerous studies have found many positive impacts related to Universal School Meals, from diet quality and food security to academic performance and school attendance. However, studies looking at just universal school breakfast had mixed results.¹ And, the results are powerful: Universal School Meals (breakfast and lunch) has been found to improve student performance in math and English Language Arts by up to 10 weeks of learning.²

Instructional Time for Breakfast in the Classroom

S.100 would codify current Agency of Education policy by allowing school breakfast served in the classroom to count as instructional time. This language would not change current policy or practice. 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" for many years with great results. S.100 does not require schools to permit breakfast in the classroom, but if they choose to do so, 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 (see

¹ Cohen, J., Hecht, A. A., McLoughlin, G. M., Turner, L., & Schwartz, M. B. (2021). Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review. *Nutrients*, 13(3), 911. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu13030911>

² Shwartz, A.E. & Rothbart, M.W. (2019). Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal School Meals on Student Performance. The Maxwell School Center for Policy Research Working Paper Series. Paper No. 203. <https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/docs/default-source/research/cpr/working-papers/wp-203-let-them-eat-lunch.pdf>

attachment A). S.100 would require schools to maximize federal reimbursements for school breakfast and lunch by striving to increase school meal participation, and provides some recommendations for how to achieve this, but each school may choose how best to achieve this goal.

Universal School Meals in Other States

More and more states are taking action to ensure that all students have access to the food they need while in school. The Vermont Legislature introduced the first Universal School Meals bill in the country in 2020. Now, in 2022, we are just one of many states across the country working toward permanent Universal School Meals. Maine and California passed legislation in 2021 making Universal School Meals permanent in their states. Many other states are following suit by considering legislation and funding related to Universal School Meals, including Arizona, Colorado, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

Attachments:

- A) 2015 AOE Memo regarding breakfast in the classroom

August 25, 2015

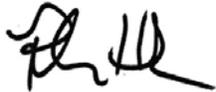
Dear Superintendents and Principals,

In recognition of the growing levels of hunger and poverty in so many districts, and in acknowledgement of the strong relationship between good nutrition and healthy physical development and learning, we encourage you to consider some after the bell time for breakfast, consistent with national standards and practice.

Breakfast after the bell, served in the classroom, or during a morning break in the cafeteria, provides greater access to breakfast for all students. Many schools have incorporated a morning activity, announcements and other opportunities for student engagement during breakfast in the classroom. Please remember that meals served in the classroom count as instructional time. In addition, to support the significance and benefits of school breakfast as part of a child's school day, the legislature provides the reduced price meal fee that had previously been charged to families.

As your new school year is underway, please consider what measures you might take to ensure all students have sufficient access to school breakfast. A child who is hungry is a child who cannot focus on learning, may have more visits to the school nurse, may be absent more often and may be subject to behavioral issues.

Best,



Rebecca Holcombe
Secretary of Education

