

## **Testimony of Grace Symula**

**March 16, 2022 - s.100**

My name is Grace Symula and I am a 9th grader at Essex High School. Thank you for allowing me to be here to speak today. As a student, I am asking you to pass S.100 and keep school lunches and breakfast free in Vermont. Universal school meals benefit everyone. Having free lunches lifts the stress about packing lunch and the anxiety about having enough money to get food. Before universal meals, every morning I would run around trying to pack lunch for the day, and wondering if this would be enough food for me. The need to keep USM is real, students are hungry and school meals are a key part in helping that. I had guilt from asking my parents if I could have money for the holiday hot lunch so I could be included with all of my friends. The idea that we may lose the ability to maintain an inclusive and equitable school nutrition environment is really concerning. Every single student I have talked to is in agreement, and supports what we are testifying for. They have all voiced their strong opinions, pleading with us that you keep meals free. Here are some statements from students at Essex High School. Freshman student Maecy Odit said “I think we should keep meals free. Having to pay upwards of \$10 in all a week is too much for me. Plus, I have more important things to spend money on. I used to not get school lunch because it was just too expensive”. Another Freshman student, Ada Jorschick, explained “I think it's important because some people might not be able to pay the expense, and it should be free to help students who can and can't afford it”. With that point I would like to touch on Free and Reduced Lunch. According to the data in 2019 and 2020 off the VT.Gov website, the percent of students approved for free and reduced meals is 38.32 percent statewide. If we keep meals free, the unnecessary stigma surrounding having to get a free and reduced lunch will disappear. The lunchroom provides good food to all students, even having meals to accommodate specific diets such as vegetarianism, gluten free and other food allergies. If I forgot to pack lunch one day, I would panic that I didn't have enough money in my account. Not having to worry about lunches would help stressed parents who might worry about not having enough food in the house and having enough time to pack it. With the rising cost of living and food prices, this would be beneficial to families of all classes. So again I plead, please, keep our lunch and breakfast free for all.