

**Bill S.100 , Education Committee
Testimony 3/10/2022
Harley Sterling**

Good morning,

I am Harley Sterling, SNS, School Nutrition Director for Windham Northeast Supervisory Union, and School Nutrition Association of Vermont President-Elect.

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 22-23 school year, and paid for from the education fund. Thank you for listening to my testimony today.

If I had \$100 to spend on public education, I would spend the first, second, and third dollar on feeding the kids. Hungry kids simply do not engage and cannot learn; the evidence for this is overwhelming.

But I don't want to speak to you today about how feeding kids nutritious food in school improves education outcomes on some quantitative scale (15 points, 25%, 30% etc). I am here to testify, about the complete paradigm shift that occurs in our schools when we implement universal school meals (USM). I am talking about a different ball game, a quantum leap, the difference between 0 and 1, nothing vs something. This is not a quantifiable change. It's a qualitative change. A shift in the entire school experience for kids and what we teach them about themselves. In order to fully understand what USM really means, we have to get outside ourselves and remember what it is like to be a kid. Being a kid is about not knowing-- not being able to picture your day from start to finish, or think in weeks, months, or business quarters-- not being able to predict and filter and imagine what the future holds. Being a kid is about being absorbed in the present moment, taking it all in, not knowing what is coming next, always living in the spectacular, and sometimes terrifying, NOW.

So try to imagine being back as a child-- and now imagine you're going through what we grown ups like to describe as, "experiencing food insecurity." What is this really like?

As adults, to put ourselves back in a place of empathy for what this childhood feeling of hunger and vulnerability is really like, I think this takes picturing the worst thing you can imagine happening to you as an adult (You've just lost your job, you've lost your life savings, having to tell your kids a marriage is ending, hearing a loved one was involved in a car accident)--picturing the raw swirling emotion that would course through you at a moment like that.

This is what it's like to be living in the vivid, overwhelming moment as a child-- only you don't have your adult mind, resources, and resourcefulness to reassure you, all you have is the next moment, and you're at the mercy of the next thing that comes your way to tell you if things are

going to be ok, or not.

I remember this feeling well. This is a big part of why I chose to do this school nutrition work.

I can remember being 7 or 8 years old, and being disciplined at school. I was sent out of the classroom to sit at a desk at the end of the hallway alone. I can remember viscerally, the loneliness of hearing the class carry on without me. The voices of friends and laughter coming from behind the closed door. The fear of missing out, the fear of the unknown, the eternity that seemed to pass since I had last talked to anyone. Was life ever going to return to normal? Were my parents going to forgive me? Or was this a major turning point in my life where I'd be cast out forever? I can remember the panic. I think pop psychology might describe this as a "reptile brain moment."

I felt a million things at once and didn't know whether to beg for forgiveness or cover it all up with anger. All I can tell you for sure was that the last thing on my mind at the time was my education.

But you know it was in that moment, of total fear and despair, that something reached me, and offered me a lifeline: it was the smell of lunch cooking down the stairs. I can still remember it like it was yesterday. "Chicken Patty on a Bun" for lunch. And in that moment I knew that, no matter how bad I felt, the lunch ladies were still going to take care of me. No matter how bad I, or others thought I was that day, I was still cared for enough to be fed. No matter what.

For most of us, it requires a lot to picture hunger. I'm not talking about "Long layover, not eating the airport sushi" hunger. *I'm not talking about physiological hunger, we've all experienced that by accident, or some other circumstance.* I am talking about **psychological hunger**. The feeling that would come if I had been told I could not get a hot lunch that day.

While I didn't know it at the time, I was lucky. Eventually, I discovered that I was fortunate enough to come from a very privileged household, where I would never have to worry about going hungry or running out of lunch money.

For many kids in Vermont, this was not the case until USM. They would come to school and walk through halls decorated in colorful posters that say things like, "DREAM BIG; YOU ARE LOVED; WE ARE HERE FOR KIDS; OH THE PLACES YOU'LL GO." But for many of them, when they smell lunch cooking and come down to the cafeteria, they meet the gate-keepers and they meet the cash register-- That's where they get a different message-- one that says: what category do you fall into? Are you "IN-NEED?" Did your parents "forget" to send you lunch money again? Are you privileged? Kids find out quickly which category the adults in their lives have placed them in.

As adults, we can kid ourselves through euphemisms like "income eligibility guidelines" or "need-based programs;" But kids see this how they experience it, as modern-day segregation.

Some kids get certified eligibly needy, some kids get certified privileged-- and many kids get left out in-between.

Show me your money or show me your papers. That's what we say to kids.

Is this any different in the eyes of a child, than having two different water fountains?

As my colleagues have described in their testimony, I guess the more accurate metaphor would be having one water fountain, next to another coin-operated water fountain, next to a vending machine full of sparkling mineral water.

Regardless, the message is the same to kids. Which line do you stand in? Do you get to sit at the front of the bus, or do you sit in the back?

How can we think this is the right way to nourish our kids in school? How can we look at our children, and choose to go back to a time where we labeled and segregated kids based on their family income?

I am told that this body has the power to change all of this.

It's time to embrace the moment. Public education is supposed to be the great equalizer. It's the foundation of equal opportunity in America, yet hiding in plain sight is the monstrous reality that opportunity isn't served equally. Either sign up for segregation, and let's hope your parents aren't too proud to sign you up, or you may go hungry. Show me your money, or show me your papers.

I understand that USM comes with challenges. But with all the challenges that we have asked our kids to overcome over the last two years, are we going to send them the message that this challenge, that other states have now resolved to overcome, is too great for us? That the psychological safety of our kids is important to us, but the price is just a little too high?

We have an opportunity to make a generational, qualitative change for our kids.

I say the value of a child's psychological safety cannot be quantified in dollars. Let's make Vermont schools a place where every child who walks through the halls knows they are cared for enough to be fed, every meal, everyday, always, no matter what.

Let's teach our kids that we are here for them, and that our values value them, and aspire for them to live, not in a world of fear and scarcity, but in love and abundance.

Let's end the drafty patchwork of programs and forms, and make caring for all our kids universal. Let's show them that we can make this happen.

Let's choose kids, not money.

Thanks for listening,

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