

My name is Karyl Kent, I am the School Nutrition Director for Lamoille North School District.

Thank you for inviting us back again. I appreciate your deep conviction to understanding the benefits of Universal School Meals.

I would start by acknowledging my own privilege. Many of us in this room grew up not having to experience the ongoing stigma that so many children face daily. Having to describe what stigma is and why it is so harmful is akin to describing discrimination on any group that we ourselves are not a part of. My empathy and advocacy come from working in a system that unintentionally, creates a culture of haves and have nots, as my colleague describes: of iPhones and Samsungs.

As we consider the future of school nutrition programs with Universal School Meals, we see a system that is equitable and free from discrimination and stigma.

I attended a conference on Hunger and the Brain a few years back, what stuck with me is that children from households experiencing food insecurity, or financial hardship, or domestic tension or numerous other stressors, learn to continuously scan for danger. They read the room, the body language and facial expressions and nuances in how they are spoken to by others, especially by those in positions of power over them. They develop these skills to keep themselves safe. When a child interprets a situation as unsafe the body triggers the fight, flight or freeze response. This response shuts down cognitive and digestive systems, increasing heart rate and blood pressure. It takes between 20-60 minutes for the body to return to normal levels. Whatever nutrition we have served to that student is now unavailable to them.

I have seen this in my elementary cafeteria when a less than friendly server was snarly and grouchy at students in the morning, I have seen it at the cash register when students are told they have no money on their account.

What is stigma?, what does it look like?, sound like? and most importantly, what does it feel like?

Imagine you are out to dinner with colleagues, you are on a tight budget but you are excited to be invited and want to be part of the team, you feel you can manage it financially if you are careful. You look over the menu and decide on a simple chicken Caesar salad to stay in your budget. Others are indulging in appetizers, seafood, steaks, dessert and drinks. At the end of the meal someone says to the server, "we'll just split the bill between all of us". Your heart is in your throat as you know that you have bills to pay and this could sink your budget. Not wanting to call yourself out and draw attention, you throw your card in with the others and keep your fingers crossed. Then the server returns to the table and announces in front of everyone, I'm sorry, your card has been declined..."

That's stigma. As an adult we have mechanisms to cope. Children do not.

I would like to ask you all to try this exercise:

When you go to lunch in the statehouse cafeteria, imagine yourself as a student, your meals are not covered by a stipend, or the free meals program. You know your family is struggling financially, you know you are so hungry, you have no money in your pocket. You do Not know if there is money in your lunch account because mom handles that, or you KNOW there is NO money in your lunch account. Do you take a lunch tray and fill up? Take a chance you won't be called out? Do you just go without for fear of being called out?

Here is how one student describes it...

"It takes me back to middle school, before my mom earned her degree and got her job. I was a free lunch kid. A seemingly nice lunch lady would say "its okay honey", giving me that look that I know all the kids behind me could recognize. I would be embarrassed to get in line. I would wait at the lunch table, not eating until I had seen that it died down- then quickly trying to finish my lunch in the remaining few minutes of the period. The free meal plan for all eliminates the effect of this."

Another student said this:

"I have had friends who were eligible for free lunch and it was very embarrassing for them to admit because in my old school it meant you and your family were poor and you needed charity. I felt terrible for her and it makes this stigma that getting assistance or help isn't okay and they would rarely eat to avoid the stigma."

When I was the school nutrition manager at Richmond Elementary School, I attended a training on ACE's, not only for my work in the school, but also as director of nutrition for Our Community Cares Camp, a summer feeding program and free summer camp for all children in the Chittenden East community. Representative George Till (ways & means committee) helped to organize this training.

Most of you may be familiar with Ace's, Adverse Childhood Experiences assessment that is used to predict health outcomes for children with multiple markers of childhood trauma. I bring this into the conversation, because we cannot know what children are carrying with them day to day. What experiences are contributing to their trauma at any level. School lunch stigma may seem insignificant on the outside, but why would we risk adding to any child's markers?

I was reminded of the ACE's training when I read this student's comment:

"I've had to have free meals because I don't have both parents present in my life and my grandmother has had to raise me by herself. Students would make me feel bad for not being able to buy my own food and said I was a moocher even though I never asked for anything from them."

Stigma affects free and reduced Students, it affects students who do not qualify, it affects students who can easily afford meals, it creates another way for children to see each other differently and categorize one another. As we strive to teach inclusion in our schools, let's start in the cafeteria with basic human needs.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration.

Karyl Kent