

Bill S.100 , Education Committee

Testimony 3/10/2022

Karyl Kent

Hello, my name is Karyl Kent I am the Director of School Nutrition for Lamoille North School District and a board member and past president of the School Nutrition Association of Vermont. 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 2022-23 school year, and paid for from the education fund.

A free breakfast for all program might seem like a starting place, but in reality the USDA minimal requirements for breakfast, a serving of whole grain, a serving of fruit and milk, does not nourish a child well enough to last throughout the day. It is enough to get them to lunchtime, but if we do not provide free lunch as well, they will suffer from blood sugar lapses, inability to focus, brain fog, and attention deficiencies as their hunger increases and their thoughts turn to “when can I eat again”.

Vermont schools provide social-emotional wellness as part of every school’s curriculum. You cannot separate out nutrition from wellness. How can we stand for access to education if we are impeding that access by not providing daily nutrition to ALL students? In Vermont, we educate the whole child, nutrition is at the heart of keeping our students whole, well, fueled to learn and poised for success. Impeding access to breakfast and lunch is impeding access to education and a strong future. Tax dollars are more fully utilized in education when basic needs are met and students are prepared to learn.

The cafeteria is a classroom, it is where students learn and practice social skills, learn about nutrition, local food economy and cultural diversity through shared meals. In the broken system of paid meals, some students also learn about a system of have’s and have nots, of inequity, social injustice. They learn to navigate hunger by practicing deception, and thievery. Some kids who have nothing to eat turn to pocketing snacks and fruits and lying to cashiers. Other students often take on the responsibility for feeding their friends who have nothing to eat. They tag along in the lunch line with a friend and the friend buys them a meal, or let them select items for their tray that they like and they share the meal.

Just before Covid, I had three students on separate occasions come to me and asked “what can we do to help kids on campus that are hungry?” They asked about the leftover food we had after lunch and why we couldn’t just give that to kids who needed it. In response, we started the after school supper program and opened an on-campus food pantry. The after school supper program saw 160 kids on a typical afternoon.

It should not be the responsibility of our students to take care of their peers, nor should it be the responsibility of teachers to buy snacks to feed hungry kids. It is the student’s responsibility to learn, it is our responsibility to make sure they have everything they need to learn including books, laptops, health services and food. We should no more have cash registers in the cafeteria than we should have cash registers in the libraries. Can you imagine checking out books and sending a bill to parents for them?

Universal School Meals allows us to focus on kids, not money. Time that would have been spent chasing delinquent bills and trying to get payments from families that cannot pay will instead be used procuring

local foods, integrating cultural diversity into our menus, creating efficiencies in our production and developing creative solutions to meeting the needs of our school communities. Let us do what we do best, what we were hired to do, feed kids well and prepare them to learn. Universal School Meals must be stable and sustainable. I think it should be paid for “off the top” of the Ed Fund, distributing the cost across the state, and not affecting individual school budgets.

This letter was shared with me by an instructor, Michael Tilton, who has seen firsthand the effects of Universal School Meal with his students, I feel it beautifully demonstrates the equity we have experienced with USM:

“I work as the Planning Room coordinator at Lamoille union middle school (LUMS). I have been working with kids in educational, mental health and residential settings for the past fifteen years. I feel strongly that the universal school meals program is an invaluable tool in rebuilding our youth after two chaotic years, and beyond. I would like to share some of my personal observations from the view of the planning room.

When you walk through the halls of LUMS, you will see many smiling faces and the typical vibrant energy of most middle schools. Get to know some of these faces, and will soon learn that many shoulder burdens that no 12-14 year old should bear. Generational Trauma, poverty, mental health struggles, substance abuse, loss of parents to the opiate epidemic, housing instability, the list goes on. Despite all of this, they continue to navigate one of the most developmentally complex times in their lives. One of the biggest benefits of the universal school meal program has been the elimination of both real and perceived barriers to accessing nutrition. The ability to say “just go grab a lunch” to a student is profound. No more “but I didn't bring any money”. The kid who struggles with an eating disorder can have easy access to a variety of nutritional options when they feel they can eat. The kid who forgot their lunch can get a meal without worrying that they will sink the family budget. The kid with anxiety who spent their entire morning gaining the resolve to get on the bus can start their school day with a breakfast sandwich. I am impressed by the resiliency of these kids every day, however resiliency only goes so far, and these kids need our support.

Unpacking from the pandemic and rebuilding our youth will be a challenge for years to come. The masks have become optional, the Plexi Glass barriers have come down. As these barriers are taken down, please do not re-install barriers to our children accessing nutrition.”

Universal Breakfast and Lunch, funded off the top of the education fund, access to education, wellness and nutrition, every day for every student. This is how Vermont cares for kids, this is how we feed the future.

Thank you for hearing our stories and your thoughtful consideration of Universal School Meals.

Karyl Kent,

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