

March 29, 2022

Good Afternoon My Name is Kathy Alexander and I am the Director of the Addison Northwest School District and the Mt Abraham School District. Both in Addison County

I am so happy to have the opportunity to be here again to speak with you one more time about Universal School Meals. I cannot express enough my gratitude for the level of commitment this committee has shown for working very hard to understand what is at stake here and for taking heroic steps toward finding a path to ending the broken system. As you already know, your work is on the cusp of what I think is going to be pervasive change in our Country and perhaps even further. I just returned from a short trip to London and there was a 10 minute report on the news with all the same issues being discussed and grappled with in the UK. The bottom line - providing meals to children attending school is part of the educational system that sets students up for success.

During the last two years, we have been able to provide Free meals to all students in school every day – we have seen what it is like, what the results are and how it works. Like in the Wizard of Oz the curtain has been pulled back to reveal what is really going on with School Meals programs, what is real, and what has been an illusion. We need to take this lesson and move into a better future for our schools and our students.

What is real is that students come from a wide variety of economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds in schools. What is real is that they ALL need to be fed and nourished during the school day in order for them to learn, grow and develop. They all need the same tools and the same opportunities. Our schools must provide these opportunities equally and without barriers.

The illusion has been that our system provides equal access and that the ways in which we sort students into the haves and have nots does not have consequences. The curtain is drawn – with school meals we are segregating students in school, we are not providing equal opportunity, we are causing shame and we are not feeding all students.

We have pretty sophisticated Point of Sale Systems in our schools that help us keep track of students who eat meals and sort those students into the three categories, free, reduced, and paid. We have certainly evolved from providing tickets to students who qualify for free/reduced meals to these systems that eliminate “overt identification” at the register. One system we use in one of my districts even goes so far as to insert “fake balances” in all the eligible students’ profiles so that it appears that they have money in their accounts when they are actually not paying for meals and have no need for a balance. This is done so that, in the event that someone looks at the register, it is not apparent that these students are poor. Talk about an illusion – pretty elaborate. Well intentioned?, yes – complicated and perhaps convoluted way of addressing this issue? , absolutely.

The unintended result of the National School Lunch and Breakfast program is that there is a strong culture in schools in which everyone knows who has money and who doesn't (or rather they think they know and they definitely think it is important to know). The knowing has become important in a quiet but kind of insidious way. Teachers, nurses, administrators, secretaries all think they know who qualifies but you would be surprised how often they get it wrong but they all spend time thinking about it. This is the culture we have created through the National School Lunch and Breakfast program. The undercurrent that is pervasive but unspoken or spoken in whispers about who can have free meals and

who can pay and the truth is that the piece of paper people provide us so we can determine who can have free or reduced meals does not even come close to telling the real picture of a single families situation.

A lot of people connected to education spend time trying to qualify families so “kids can eat”. Just think about that for a minute. **“So kids can eat” we are talking about FOOD.** School nurses, principals, teachers, and of course school nutrition staff all try to figure out who and how to get applications so kids can eat. Then we get applications and many students still do not qualify so.... They don’t eat... or they do eat but they are not supposed to because they have no money. Again, what kind of concept is that – not supposed to eat... I ask you.... What is wrong with this picture????

If you think all the attention to this fairly elaborate and flawed qualification system eludes children you are wrong and you have already heard the voices of some these students. Children are smart – they pick up on everything. I was just visiting my two year old granddaughter who can tell immediately when the people around her are upset, distracted, sad and more. Kids are totally tuned in! and they certainly get the cultural norms that exist in their spaces. When school meals are for EVERYONE kids sense that – they hear it in their teachers voice as he tells them to line up for lunch – knowing everyone will get lunch and not worrying about whether money was turned in or lunchboxes were forgotten – they know it when they walk in the cafeteria and see most of their friends on line. If school meals are NOT FOR EVERYONE they know it when their friends are scared or embarrassed to be spoken to by the lunch lady for not bringing money. Cultural norms are real things and they are set largely by people in power. They can help bring people together or set them apart.

There is no denying that understanding family income and need is important in education – and there should be a reasonable system that EVERYONE must utilize to identify the range of economic needs so that available services and supports can be offered to mitigate issues caused by poverty in our broader school communities. But food in school is not a service or a support it is essential and basic and the need for food is not nor should not be determined by or delivered based on income. Going forward I believe we can be successful in asking parents to provide family information if we help develop an understanding that this information is used to create a picture of the range of need in our school community as a whole, a baseline to build our system for everyone and make sure everyone is lifted and not to provide resources to some and NOT to others.

When school meals are universal we can change the system, change the culture, that exists behind that curtain that separates kids into haves and have nots, marginalizes them in our cafeterias and denies many students the comfort and experience of eating as a community – everyone at the table, everyone together in the pursuit of knowledge and everyone nourished equally. When everyone can send in their income information together, without shame, or judgement for some for not being able to feed their own kids, we will have changed the culture, created a new and more dignified system of educating all students equally.