

## Testimony on S100 – March 10, 2022 – Kathy Alexander, School Nutrition Director

Hello, my name is Kathy Alexander. I am the Director of the MAUSD and ANWSD School Nutrition Cooperative. I work with a fantastic group of 30 school nutrition professionals in both the Mt. Abraham Unified School District and the Addison Northwest School District. I support their tireless efforts and work to feed students each day with the goal of supporting student learning and growth and setting all students up for success within the school environment **and** in their lives outside of school. I am honored to be here on their behalf and on behalf of all the other school staff all over Vermont who are preparing meals as we speak.

I like to think of our staff and our kitchens as the hearts of the 9 schools in our districts, where work starts often at 5:00 a.m., with peeling, chopping, baking, simmering, and cooking food. As you smell the food cooking throughout the school, you know that there is a team of people getting ready to make sure no one goes hungry, and everyone has a good breakfast and lunch. These aromas convey a sense of comfort in the knowledge that the meal is being prepared, everyone will be taken care of, there is nothing to worry about. The message is, “Rest assured, as you sit in your class learning, maybe struggling with history or some other subject, you will get fed, it will be OK”

Without Universal Meals, however, there may be a very different message. The meal is still being prepared BUT it may not be for you to enjoy if .....

- you don't have enough money in your account and your parents make slightly too much to qualify for the free meals program but not enough to keep adequate food in the cupboards at home, or
- your parents did not want to apply for the free meal program because they were too embarrassed, or
- your parents can't read English well enough to fill out the form, or
- your parents just did not have time to fill out the application, or
- maybe they gave you the completed application and you mistakenly lost it, or
- your family **does** have enough money, but your parents want you to make lunch for yourself because they are saving up for your college, you try to make lunch but forget every day to get up early enough, or
- your mom makes you lunch but you get too hungry on the bus and eat it on the way to school, or
- you **will** get lunch at school because your parents did get that application filled out and you notice that everyone else who lives in your neighborhood gets lunch too but not all the kids who live in town get lunch. You wonder, “what's up with that”, you wonder if you **should** get lunch.

Overall, you learn – lunch is complicated and stressful and unequal.

I began my career as a Lunch Lady in 2000 when I took a job as Manager of the Ferrisburgh Central School Lunch program. I left behind another wonderful career in favor of feeding kids in school, the most important job I have ever had.

It is hard for me to adequately describe what it feels like to serve a tray of hearty homemade delicious food to children on the lunch line and to know that you are contributing to their lives with good nourishment as well as a warm smile. To also know that for some students the fruits and vegetables you

offer are few and far between in the evening meal or on weekends, that the homemade dishes being served are possibly unlike other meals they have at home and that the simple act of putting the day's menu on a tray which will help a student learn better for the rest of the day and perhaps learn one new thing about food and healthy habits for their whole life.

I can't describe how good it feels to know that you are cooking a meal while teachers are teaching and that your work in that community actually gives everyone a chance to pause, to nourish, to unwind and experience something "yummy in their tummy" so they can get back at it after the meal and do amazing things. It is very, very rewarding work and an honor to be a part of educating the whole child, body, mind and spirit as well as being a part of our amazing educational communities in this significant way.

As long as I have been a lunch lady there has been one thing though that just did not fit, one thing that has never made sense to me, one thing that not only made the work nearly impossible, but also tainted and soured the entire process of having the great responsibility and honor to nourish children so they could learn. That one thing was the grim reality that I ran a business, that I needed to make money, to make the bottom line, to bring in revenue, to sell the meals the best way I could so families (children) would pay. For many years I embraced this, I educated myself to do the best that I could to run my business impeccably – to make the numbers work (they never do) no matter what it took, fundraisers, grants, promotions, a la carte, adult meals, weekend meals, takeout meals – I have done it ALL, every possible opportunity to raise more money. Well, I am here today to tell you that this is insane! It is just downright crazy to run a business in a school. Our school nutrition programs must manage resources well and wisely and employ strategies and efficiencies to do so responsibly but this is very different from constantly looking for ways to make the bottom like work and selling what is a basic need to small and big children who spend their days in our school communities.

I never really dreamed of owning a restaurant or having kindergarteners and eighth graders as my customers, or thinking about menu items to entice parents to want to pay for meals, or developing systems for trying to get those same parents to pay up front so their children did not incur debt through charges to their account. But all this has actually consumed the last 23 years of my career more and more each year. And each year it seems to be harder to make it work and harder to make sense of this reality. So I am finally willing to say it – we are not school restaurants, we are not running a business. I am a teacher; I teach through food and nourishment that are essential to wellness and success. I and my entire staff are the heart of the school, they are there to make sure everyone has what they need to succeed, and it is the same for everyone whether they have money or not. Everyone gets to try broccoli salad, to enjoy Cabot Macaroni and Cheese with Butternut Squash, to have Tacos on Taco Tuesday and sometimes pizza. Our School Meals Programs provides comfort and nourishment for the whole child every day.

We have a global pandemic to thank for the revelation that we should not be running mini businesses in schools, we should be feeding kids, that is what we were meant to do all along. We have a global pandemic to thank for being able to explore the reality of Universal Meals and see how it benefits everyone. Universal Meals and the passage of S100 is how we can emerge from this Pandemic better. It will cost money, of course, but feeding kids already costs money. Schools pay, families pay, sometimes kids pay. But students in school (and all other human beings) have to eat – this is unavoidable and no matter where the food comes from, what it is, or how it is prepared, it costs money and takes time. We are already paying for this expense in ways that make no sense and are certainly not equitable. But we

have this opportunity now to say STOP being crazy. School meals programs are not restaurants, School meals programs are part of our educational community – let's take money from the top so everyone gets an equal share of the cost, let's invest in our students and in our educational process to bring all the benefits that our school kitchens can offer to those communities – including two meals in the learning day as foundation building.

Let's build the capacity of our school communities with nourishment and see how far they can go with this relatively small investment at the front. I believe they will go very, very far. I believe we can then stop selling and shaming and squeezing money from a stone and start working together to help kids learn, be strong and thrive. I believe that if we make the investment now, we build strong, efficient programs in schools, build healthy school cultures around food, and nourish our children and learning communities fully.

I leave you with a great deal of gratitude that you are considering this Bill and considering it seriously and a pledge to continue to work for School Meals as a foundation for success in education.