

### 3\_10\_22 Universal School Meals Testimony

Thank you Chair Webb and members of the House Education committee for allowing me to testify today.

My name is Mia Schultz and I am the Statewide Education Justice Organizer for Rights & Democracy in Vermont.

As part of my role I speak to parents, students, and community members from across Vermont and that is why I am here today asking you to **pass S100 and ensure all Vermont students get Universal breakfast and lunch.**

In Vermont it is a constant struggle for all students to get equal resources and to be treated in an equitable manner, providing nutritious and locally sourced breakfasts and lunches is an easy and crucial way to ensure that all students are able to focus on school itself and not let hunger be a dangerous distraction for any child in Vermont.

I'm sure you may already know these statistics, but they are worth repeating as we consider the seriousness and importance of this issue:

- Families with children are 5x more likely to experience hunger than those without
- BIPOC individuals are 10x more likely to face hunger, this is another example of how when our system has cracks, they are larger and more disastrous for people of color
- From March of 2020 to March 2021, individuals utilizing food assistance programs grew by 87%

The need is very real in Vermont and Universal School Meals ensures that all students, regardless of their families ability to pay, have access to the same resources at school; from teachers, textbooks, and school buses, to breakfast and lunch

Bennington experience – Bennington is a food desert. Meaning that in some areas it has limited access to affordable and nutritious food. In areas that have higher poverty rates, the nearest full service grocery store can be 5-10 miles away. While that may not be far if you have access to a car, it is a difficult feat for someone who doesn't who also have other issues for going to the store as well, like childcare issues, disability and other issues that make this journey to the store a difficult task.

Therefore many times the easiest options are to get food at the local minimart or bodega which only has options for prepackaged often unhealthy food. This food is also

much more expensive than at a larger grocery store. So even for families with food stamps this type of shopping takes a large chunk out of their food budget.

Over the summer, I met a family who was waiting to get the free meals that were being offered by the schools. They said to me that these meals provided the only opportunity for their kids to eat fruits and vegetables. School meals provide so much more than food they provide nutrition, they provide security for people who have so many additional barriers.

[Studies show that nutritional status can directly affect mental capacity among school-aged children.](#) Furthermore a balanced diet that also includes breakfast and lunch helps students prepare to learn. Healthier students lead to more presence in the classroom as well.

Studies show that malnutrition leads to behavior problems[6], and that sugar has a negative impact on child behavior.[7] However, these effects can be counteracted when children consume a balanced diet that includes protein, fat, complex carbohydrates, and fiber. Thus students will have more time in class, and students will have fewer interruptions in learning over the course of the school year.

At the end of the day, I know what we all want is for all students to have a learning environment that supports their needs. Food security is the most basic of needs and it is a responsibility to be able to provide that, and provide that to all students without assuming what they have or don't have at home.

What's more, we've already had universal school meals for 2 years now because of the federal response to the COVID pandemic. We did this because we were collectively experiencing a situation in which we were all impacted. Our schools are already prepared for a reality where the needs of all were addressed and we are ready to continue the practice. We can't go back to a time where some children were unsure if they'll have the lunch money they need for a meal. We can't go back to a system where a child's parents' ability to pay for lunch was a major factor in that child's education. And we can't go back to the old system of cash registers, stigmatizing cafeterias, and the "haves v have-nots" mentality.

Universal School Meals centers the needs of all students, regardless of where they come from and that seems like centering humanity and I know that is what everyone on this committee is trying to do. It increases equity in our schools, creates a better educational environment, and is the right thing to do.

Please pass S100 this year. Thank you and I'm happy to answer any questions.