

Testimony regarding S.100 for the Vermont House Education Committee

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My name is Molly Betournay. I am the Director of Social Research and Advocacy at Clean Yield Asset Management, a registered investment advisory firm and Vermont Benefit Corp based in Norwich. Clean Yield manages socially and environmentally screened investment portfolios for individuals and families, nearly half of whom are Vermont residents. We also manage individual private investments in small and growing Vermont businesses – many of these businesses are employers in Vermont.

I am here today to ask 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.

I would like to share with you why providing both breakfast and lunch at no cost to all Vermont students is important to Clean Yield.

A few years ago, Clean Yield started supporting a multiyear campaign to bring universal school meals to Vermont. We saw it as an opportunity to connect our commitment to equity and inclusion with our investments in the local food systems. We also saw real benefits in schools and the potential for systems change - according to the U.N. World Food Program, school meals can help families out of poverty, end the “hunger cycle,” and narrow the gender gap. And while these reasons were compelling to us at the outset, we have found more reasons to support full universal school meals over the last few years. I would like to share four of them with you:

1. *Getting cash registers out of the cafeteria increases equity in schools, instead of reinforcing the economic status quo in which income disparity grows.* According to a 2017 study, students at schools with free lunches for all had an average of 3% greater lifetime earnings than children at schools without lunch programs.^[1] Those benefits were even greater for children from lower income households – which improves equity. We believe that committing to full universal school meals is an opportunity to support economic inclusion and drive sustainable growth in Vermont.
2. *Universal school meals can promote workforce development by strengthening Vermont’s future workforce and helping to attract and retain workers from afar.* Research shows that universal school meals

improve academic achievement – which will result in a stronger, better prepared workforce for Vermont businesses. In addition, universal school meals improve academic outcomes, which strengthens schools overall – making them more attractive to workers considering a move to Vermont. At a minimum, universal school meals takes one more stress off the table for Vermont’s parents – a benefit to Vermont’s families and employers.

3. *As a mother of three young children, universal school meals has had many benefits for my family.* For my children, meals have become an integral part of the school day. They try and often enjoy foods they wouldn’t try at home – and are more flexible about eating what’s served. For my husband and I, we save time by not needing to make meals and clean containers/lunch boxes – and our food waste has decreased too. Most importantly though, meals have become a communal activity at school that our kids now look forward to – it helps make school a place where they are well-equipped to learn, grow, and thrive.

I hope you will consider supporting *S.100* and include both *breakfast and lunch at no cost to all Vermont students*. Thank you very much for listening.

[i] <http://ftp.iza.org/dp11234.pdf>

[ii] <https://www.brookings.edu/research/opportunity-for-growth-how-reducing-barriers-to-economic-inclusion-can-benefit-workers-firms-and-local-economies/>

[iii] <https://www.bsr.org/en/expertise/inclusive-economy>

[iv] <http://www.farmentoschool.org/resources/BenefitsFactSheet.pdf>

[v] Ibid.