

Hello, My name is Rebecca McCray. I am the district lead school nurse in the Burlington School District and the President of the Vermont State School Nurses' Association. I am here to support S.100 and ask the committee to pass this bill with language that includes both breakfast and lunch at no cost to Vermont students, starting in the 2022-23 school year and paid for from the education fund.

As a school nurse caring for students who have missed breakfast, I can tell you from experience that before we had universal breakfast and lunch, there was a barrier to obtain food for students who clearly needed food but did not come in the time that free breakfast was served. Students would come to the nurses office with signs and symptoms of hunger, not having had breakfast. They needed food between meals and by law they should have been turned away. Luckily, the cafeteria workers in my school always helped me meet the students' needs whether it was providing whatever breakfast option might be left and adding them to the breakfast count (even though it was after hours) or by giving me a breakfast or two to keep in my office for the week. This was the reality we were working under. Now with universal meals, there is no question that the student who comes between meals will have their needs met in the cafeteria. They are simply added to the count for breakfast or added to the count for lunch. Before universal meals, if I had a student in my office who was missing lunch, I would have to know their code to go retrieve a lunch for them, but now I simply go to the cafeteria and they count the student lunch, no code necessary.

Kids who do not eat breakfast or lunch present in the school nurses' office with headache and stomach pain. They miss valuable class time trying to solve a problem that could have been prevented by supplying universal meals. The number of reasons a child does not eat range from not being hungry at the time, to having anxiety around a parent reaction if they eat a meal but their parents do not have the money to pay for the meal later, to the most commonly thought of reason "I didn't like what they were serving."

Universal meals take away stigma and the worry of social class. Universal meals provide a common joint human experience for our students around food. Universal meals encourage our students to try new foods that they might not try or be exposed to at home, which expands food choice. Kids who are eating universal meals together are also learning about the food they eat. In my school, when breakfast is served there is always a highlighted nutritional fact for teachers to share about the food, encouraging students to give it a try. Last week parsnips was the "food of the day" and students were served parsnip sticks while their teachers read the fact card. Today's food was raw green pepper strips and the fact sheet read, "Peppers. They're brightly colored, crunchy, delicious. They have more vitamin C than any other vegetable and they can be used in a variety of ways. Try them raw, grilled, tossed in soups, stews, and other dishes." This was followed by fun facts that outlined the family of foods peppers belong to, the different types of peppers in both taste and color, medical qualities of some peppers, and that New Mexico grows more chile peppers than any other state.

Universal meals also reduces the workload in accounting for cafeteria staff and the heart wrenching task of collecting funds from families for providing a basic human need of food for their child. Financial debt and strain has negative impacts on emotional and mental health. The financial debts accrued by charging for school meals places unnecessary strain on the school-family relationship. Universal meals lifts this burden and allows our food service staff to focus on what really matters - providing an all around healthy and happy nutritional experience for students that supports the whole health of students and our community.

A 2018 study (Hobbs and King, 2018) looked at food insecurity on cognitive and behavioral outcomes in urban 5 year olds. It found there was an association between household food insecurity and “greater externalizing and internalizing behavior problems for both boys and girls.” By providing both universal breakfast and lunch, we decrease hunger, which decreases behaviors, which in turn increasing students’ presence in class and provide more valuable educational opportunities.

Thank you.

Resources:

Hobbs, S. and King. C. “The Unequal Impact of Food Insecurity on Cognitive and Behavioral Outcomes Among 5-Year-Old Urban Children.” ***Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior***, Volume 50, Issue 7, 2018, Pages 687-694,ISSN 1499-4046,
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2018.04.003>
(<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1499404618301994>)