

Testimony for VT House Education Committee, March 29, 2022 Stigma in School Cafeterias

My name is Scott Fay and I am the President of the School Nutrition Association of Vermont and the Senior Manager for Essex Westford School District's Child Nutrition Program.

I am here today to help the committee better understand the concept of the stigma in school cafeterias.

While cloaking mechanisms exist, students are excellent at understanding their surroundings and decoding what we have in place. I think the first thing we need to do is put ourselves in the mind of the student. It's easy enough to sit back at our desks or in our offices and think that the stigma isn't there. Student status is confidential and schools keep all of that information hidden so how could there be stigma? The reality is that we do our best, but students are always scanning their surroundings and are keenly aware of what or who they are and what's different between them and their peers. The idea that confidentiality and cloaking devices actually work, is flawed and only really works in theory.

Imagine being a F-R approved student and going through the lunch line with your friends, they're grabbing the extras, maybe a bag of chips and a gatorade. You can't because you don't have any money. How do you feel? What if a friend asks you why you're only getting the meal? What do you say? The sad reality is that many kids would rather skip lunch than deal with those situations.

Emma Renaud, a ninth grader from Essex High School testified two weeks ago that *"Before free meals, the familiar school lunch stigma had students feeling shy and judged about getting hot lunch. It dictated whether or not I fueled my body for the day and forgetting lunch money was embarrassing. But for many, embarrassment wasn't the biggest issue. Instead, it was the fear and reality of being hungry all day. Without food we have no energy to learn and think, so our best work isn't possible."* Grace Symula said "I had guilt from asking my parents if I could have money for the holiday hot lunch so I could be included with all of my friends".

When I heard you wanted to hear about and learn more about the stigma, the first thing I thought of was bringing to you, the voice of Vermont students. We sent a survey to high school students in our districts and I am going to share what they have to say about the stigma in their school cafeterias.

We asked, "What does the school lunch stigma mean to you?"

One Student said-

School lunch stigma to me is when people hurt others for getting a free lunch. I think that school lunch stigma also hurts the entire community because it creates divisiveness.

One student mentioned-

The stigma has always been an issue everywhere I've been. People think the kids who need free lunches are disgusting and poor when sometimes that isn't the case.

Another mentioned-

People just want food easily and conveniently, and for some people, it's a really important thing because they don't have the resources to pay for meals. Whichever category a person is in, having universal free meals would ease the pressure of being that kid who needs free lunches, give them that meal that they can eat without worrying about cost, and provide access for some who find it hard to bring their food.

We asked, “Has the free meal program over the past two years impacted the stigma?”

One student said-

I sincerely believe that the free meal program was helpful and equitable and led to a lack of school lunch stigma.

Another says-

The free meal plan has been incredible in ensuring that everyone eats. School lunch is cool again and people who depend on it don't feel isolated at all.

One mentioned-

I do believe that getting free meals has impacted the stigma. If everyone can get food then nobody is thinking about the background they may be coming from or being jealous of the fact that people are getting lunch everyday.

One student said-

I would say it makes it less clear who really needs the free lunches, so it provides anonymity, but it's hard to say it directly benefited or hurt any groups of people in the eyes of others. It did ease the lives of many who perhaps wouldn't originally qualify for free lunches. I think it's overlooked how many people needed the free lunches more than just in the case of money.

This student says-

I think that the food has improved in quality and variety.

Another says-

By making it so that anyone can get lunch for free, it's made it more accessible for everyone and diminished the stigma that people may have of others. Students who may not have otherwise been able to access a meal or were scared to do so no longer have to worry about being criticized for something they don't really have control over.

We asked, “Have you or a friend felt shame/stigma in the school cafeteria? ”

A total of 77 students replied and 27% percent of those respondents said yes.

We asked, “Can you share your experience?”

One student says-

I personally can't afford to pay for food so it's nice for me to have so many options. I think that if it goes back to "normal" then other students and I won't have as much to choose from.

Another student says-

Just feeling stared at. The judgment mostly comes from myself, a shame for myself, as if I need an excuse to take a school lunch, but I know those feelings came from seeing other kids around me being judged for taking school lunches.

This student says-

I have had friends who were eligible for free lunch and it was very embarrassing for them to admit because in my old school it meant you and your family were poor and you needed charity. I felt terrible for her and it makes this stigma that getting assistance or help isn't okay and they would rarely eat to avoid the stigma.

One mentions-

It felt shameful to be getting free lunch, even though I know it was wrong, and I didn't directly experience shame from peers, but I felt segregated in a passive way.

Finally, this student says-

Hmm. I don't think I've experienced any kind of stigma about getting school lunch. In fact, a lot of kids like me, who can get lunch from home just fine, often get school lunch. It's a bonding experience, I think, eating the same food from the cafeteria.

Over the past two years we have encouraged students to take free meals. We've done so to normalize the lines and ensure it's not just for those in need with the intention of breaking the stigma. As evidenced by the student voice above, by and large that has worked. I worry though, if we were to go back to “paid” meals, that we've created another sort of stigma. Since we've “made school lunch cool” and sort of the norm, what happens when parents have to tell their children that they aren't allowed to get school lunch because they can't afford it and don't qualify for free meals? Will there be more stigma now focused around those that can't access school meals?

In the Essex Westford School District, we have closed our a la carte service lines during the past year and we were able to focus all of our energy on the meal program. We have seen a drastic increase in participation in our meal program which has helped to normalize our serving lines. Universal meals have provided us with the opportunity to minimize the stigma around school meals and that has been the most valuable silver lining we have found in the past two years. At the same time we are beating back the stigma, we are focusing our resources on quality meal programs. Universal School Meals will allow us the opportunity to forget about fundraising and focus on good quality meals.

To wrap up, I think Universal School Meals is beating back the stigma and truly is our only way forward. Two years with these waivers and the whole culture around school nutrition is changing. Imagine what two years from now will look like and two years beyond then. As students graduate and more and more students have only experienced school nutrition as part of their school day, the stigma will eventually be gone and forgotten.

Thank you for including me in this important conversation. I really appreciate being here and sharing my perspective and experiences.

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