

Testimony for VT House Education Committee, March 10, 2022 Recommendation to Pass S.100

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 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.

Universal School Meals are allowing us to focus our energy and resources where it belongs, on top-quality meal programs. We are creating and serving high-quality, healthy meals that appeal to students and provide the nourishment they need to learn. In my district, Essex Westford, we've closed our snack bars and eliminated a la carte foods from our cafeterias. Every student has equal access to the same nutritious foods. With that shift, our serving lines have changed and 67% more students are choosing school meals. Higher participation, closing a la carte lines, and a focus on a strong meal program normalize the serving lines to the point where students feel comfortable and the school lunch stigma is broken. By reducing the school lunch stigma, we are FINALLY able to feed ALL students with dignity, dignity that has eluded us prior to Universal Meals.

In just eight days we'll celebrate our two year anniversary of serving Universal School Meals, thanks to USDA's waivers. We haven't been running cash registers or point of sale software, we aren't checking family's income, we aren't making calls to families trying to collect on delinquent lunch accounts, we're feeding kids and we're doing it well. Under these waivers, we know that every Vermont student has access to a healthy breakfast and lunch every day while they're at school.

When I think back to March 18, 2020, the day after schools shut down because they were deemed unsafe for others to work at or attend school in-person, I do so with great pride. The one thing that students NEEDED from schools was food, a healthy breakfast and lunch. It couldn't wait a week or two for school nutrition teams to figure it out, it had to be in place the following day. My team and my program and programs across the state and country were able to figure it out and provide that much needed support and like so many school nutrition professionals, I was and am so proud to be part of it. School nutrition programs have historically been sort of an outcast as an enterprise fund that should fend for themselves. One of the things that really stuck with me during that time was the feeling that school nutrition was seen as being part of the school community.

I was recently in a meeting advocating for this bill and I was asked "Can school food service bring back a la carte, so they can make more money?". The answer is yes, and there never was a "rule" that said we needed to stop serving a la carte items. We made the decision to do so because of equity and because of the school lunch stigma. I turned the question around though and I'd like to do that for you again today. Would you ever look at a facilities director and ask them to take a look at classroom seating charts-maybe we can sell the front two rows to

wealthy students so we can make more money? Would you ask an athletics director to sell bigger, better lockers at a profit to the wealthy kids so we can make more money? What about Chromebooks, would you ask IT directors to sell upgraded models at a profit, so we can make some money? No, you would never do that because that would be absurd. My point is, it's time to value school nutrition the same way we value everything else inside our school buildings. It's time to see school nutrition as a fundamental part of the learning process. Without it, we aren't getting the full potential of the resources we are already investing.

When I think about what it would be like to go back to the paid system, I don't think there's anything to go back to. It's been history for two years and since that no longer exists, it'll need to be rebuilt. Families will struggle to figure out the online payment systems, students will need to relearn their PIN numbers, Kindergarteners, first, and second graders have never had to pay for their lunch so they'll need to be taught. Before COVID, EWSD incurred roughly eighteen to twenty thousand dollars in uncollectable meal debt and I wonder what that number would look like if we had to go back to a paid system. Most importantly, if we go back, we can no longer say and know that every Vermont student has access to breakfast and lunch while they're at school. The free and reduced lunch program will, more than likely, cover our most needy students. What about those students who don't qualify and don't have access to money or nutritious food to bring to school? Can we assume that students from more well off households are receiving money or food from home? I'm not sure and I would argue that in many cases, students from more affluent backgrounds are marginalized, for all sorts of reasons, in terms of nutrition.

For those of you who don't understand WHY it needs to be universal and WHY it doesn't work when it's only for those in need; it's about providing nourishment with dignity, it's about investing in the foundation of learning and ensuring students are ready to learn so that we get absolute most out of all resources we are already investing, it's about providing every student with equal access to the same things while they're at school, it's about recognizing school nutrition as an integral part of our educational systems, and it's about KNOWING that every Vermont student has access to a healthy breakfast and lunch while they're at school. Universal meals ARE working, it's no longer a theory, I live it and I see it every single day. If you want to see what it looks like, join me for lunch, I would love to show you.

Universal School Meals are an investment that is IMPACTING the education system, it's making a real and MEANINGFUL difference. Once again, I am asking 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. Now is the time to make Universal School Meals permanent in Vermont. Every Student, Every Meal, Every School.

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

Scott Fay

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