

Tatiana Abatemarco

Visiting faculty of food studies at Bennington College
Resident of North Bennington

Universal School Meals Testimony

Hello. My name is Tatiana Abatemarco. I am a visiting professor at Bennington College and I live in North Bennington, Vermont. I teach and research on the topic of Food Studies, so school meals are an especially important topic to me, but I am here today as a single mom to two kids who are 8 and 10.

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.

I moved to Vermont in 2019, just a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020. Prior to the pandemic, my kids were attending the Village School of North Bennington, and I was carefully budgeting our money in order to allow my children to buy school lunch one or two days a week.

These days, school meals are one less stress in my life. My children can go to school and receive breakfast and lunch, and I don't have to worry about paying a bill to the school because it is all free. It's hard to explain what a huge difference this makes in my life. I make enough money for us to be food secure, but I am very stressed by life in general. Caring for two children on my own is a lot of work, and knowing that they have a free healthy breakfast and lunch available makes my life a lot less stressful.

My family is lucky to be financially secure, but many families in Vermont do not have the privilege of having enough money to buy food. Universal school meals makes it so that food is a simple right for all children at school, and there is no division between those who can pay and those who can't. When kids all sit and eat the same meal together, they experience community and equity that supasses the class divisions that might exist in the larger world.

I firmly believe that cash registers do not belong in the cafeteria. Schools are a place where kids receive equal access to education, and nutrition is essential to that. Students should receive equal access to nutrition too. When kids eat the same meals together, there is an opportunity to teach kids about the importance of healthy meals. In our nation, where diet related disease is a huge problem, this kind of education is incredibly valuable.

Universal school meals, both breakfast and lunch, are important as well to a strong local food system. Act 67- the local food purchasing incentive, helps schools purchase more local food for school meals. Local food should be accessible to all children, because it benefits the health and well being of all children.

In my own life, I try to cook healthy meals for my children, but I often miss the mark because of lack of time at the end of the day. Time poverty is something many Vermont families face, as well as the temptation of inexpensive and time saving processed foods. For our family's health and our community's health we all should be eating more food cooked from scratch. For our food system, our farmers, and also for our health, we should be eating lots of local fruits and vegetables at every meal. School cafeterias have the ability to bring home-cooked, healthy meals to children for breakfast and lunch, 10 meals a week, which can have a huge impact on childrens' health.

The S.100, The Universal School Meals program, with breakfast and lunch, combined with Act 67 makes that possible. I look forward to a future in Vermont that includes vibrant farms and healthy families. Children spend a lot of their time at school, so getting healthy and free breakfast and lunch is an essential piece of that future.

Thank you.