

For the record, my name is Teddy Waszazak, and I am the Universal School Meals Campaign Manager at Hunger Free Vermont.

I want to thank the committee for hearing my and others testimony, and all the work that you have done on S.100 this year. I encourage you to pass a bill, as soon as possible, that ensures Vermont students will have access to a nutritious breakfast and lunch, at no cost to themselves or their families, every day, paid for off-the-top of the education fund.

You have heard a lot of numbers over the past few weeks, and I understand the need to understand the numbers. As a City Councilor, I am very familiar with budget constraints, the evolving need to identify new revenue sources, and wanting to have solid data to make responsible decisions with taxpayers money.

But today, I just want to tell you all the story about why I work on this campaign and for Hunger Free Vermont, and why it is so important to me for you to pass S.100.

When I was 15 years old, my mother kicked me out of our house, and, but for packing and collecting some of my belongings, I never went back. I walked to my best friend's house, who luckily lived about a mile away. His mother went to my house to gather some of my clothes and my backpack, and that was it. There were about 6 weeks left of my sophomore year in high school. The next day, like every other kid, I went to school.

For the following 3 years, my life was a tornado of custody battles, couch surfing with friends who would let me move in for a week, a month, or in the case of one wonderful family, my entire senior year. I got a job at a Dunkin Donuts, was working as many hours as I could, earning minimum wage (which was then around \$9), all of my money going to phone and car bills. The families I lived with would never have dreamed of asking for rent, but I felt an obligation to pay them whatever I could afford. I had to figure all of this out in the summer following my sophomore year, at 15 years old.

The one constant place in my life was the High School. I was still attending classes, my grades slipped but I was still passing. I was very active in our theatre program, and would stay after school most days, and arrive early most morning's to paint sets or sweep the stage. To this day, my high school theatre teacher is one of my best friends. I basically lived there, and was often at the school for 12 hours a day (7am-7pm). However, I was also constantly starving.

My money was tight, my mental health declined rapidly, and after my mom had kicked me out, my stubborn 15-year-old self promised not to ask for help from anyone.

Due to the ongoing custody dispute, I didn't have access to a parent or guardian that could fill out a lot of the necessary paperwork for school, including the free/reduced meal applications. For the entirety of my junior and senior year, I almost never ate breakfast or lunch at school, and therefore didn't eat at all, because I couldn't afford it. I couldn't qualify for free/reduced because I didn't have a parent around to fill it out, and I was far too proud to tell the school I didn't have steady housing, nevermind asking them for help getting food. So I just went without.

I do not know how many other kids like me are going through something similar today. I don't know how many kids are working more than they should, aren't getting enough food at home, don't have a steady home, or feel like they don't deserve the support that is offered to them. I was one of the kids who fell through the cracks that a non-Universal model allows to continue in schools. I was a kid who was doing everything they could, who worked as hard as they could, and in the end it just wasn't enough to cover the cost of breakfast and lunch in school most days.

If I didn't have to pay for those meals, I could have known that I could eat at least twice a day. I wouldn't have had to choose between paying my car insurance bill or paying for school meals for a few weeks. I wouldn't have been as hungry in the 3 years following my mom kicking me out.

And it's not just kids that are in an extremely complicated situation like mine was. Take a kid whose single-parent works two jobs, afternoons and evenings, to make things work, and doesn't see their child as much due to how much they're working. Or the child whose parent is suffering from substance use disorder, and whose relative is taking care of them, but does not have the authority to fill out the forms. There are so many cracks that kids much more fortunate than I was can fall into - and instead of letting those cracks re-open, we can close them forever, this year.

I'll wrap up by saying this; when you as a child are rejected by a parent in such a public and life altering way, it is embarrassing, and it's painful, and it stays with you for the rest of your life. Every day in school, not having access to school meals was a small, but poignant reminder that other kids had more "normal" lives than me. I'm not asking you today to fix all the societal ills that lead to situations like mine, I'm just asking you to permanently make the school cafeteria a place where kids can get a meal to eat, regardless of what is happening at home. They're worth the investment.

Thank you, and I would be happy to answer any questions.