



Feeding Bodies. Fueling Minds.™

Testimony for VT Senate Agriculture Committee, Jan. 20th, 2021

School Nutrition Association of Vermont

Karyl Kent, President

Universal School Meals

On March 18th, 2020, School Food service was reinvented. School Nutrition professionals around the State redesigned service models to provide uninterrupted delivery of meals to students safely learning from home. The keys to these successful models of service were the unwavering dedication of school nutrition staff and the ability to use the Summer Food Service Program waiver allowed by the USDA and our VT AOE Child Nutrition Agency. We began the year long pilot of Universal School Meals in Vermont.

Throughout the pandemic, Vermont has led the nation by our example of how we take care of our communities and neighbors in need. “Vermonters helping Vermonters”, “Vermont lights the way”, these sentiments of our State administration have guided our progress through the Covid crisis and will continue to lead us to recovery. A national [report from FRAC](#) compared the numbers of school meals served by state in April 2019 to April 2020. During those early stages of the pandemic, Vermont saw the second largest increase in breakfasts served, and the biggest increase in lunches served of all the states. In fact, Vermont **was the only state that increased the total number of lunches served in April 2020 from April 2019**. Vermont school nutrition programs stepped up to meet the needs of our families. However, the economic devastation to our families will continue to have effects into the next few years. We have the model in practice now to alleviate some of that financial burden to help families recover with dignity and to keep students on their paths to success.

A colleague relayed a story from an elementary school she was working at: A kindergarten child came up to get milk to go with his lunch from home. When told that milk had to be paid for he looked up sadly and said, “I thought milk came with school?” This story gives us pause to understand the simple consideration that school should include daily access to the nutrition that fuels education.

This year has proven that with Universal School Meals for all children, students can access food with dignity, they can relax and focus on their academics, teachers can teach without concern for the lapsing blood sugar levels of students going hungry. Children do not feel the stigma of being different from their peers at meal times. School health offices have seen far fewer referrals to their offices because of hunger. Families have not had to make a choice between paying for food for kids in school and other essential bills and feeling the guilt of inadequacy when their children say “I’m hungry”.

School officials have not had to make phone calls to parents to try to collect money to pay the delinquent balance on their student’s account, (by far one of the worst duties of the position). Nutrition programs have had a year of respite from sinking into debt from unpaid meal accounts. Universal School Meals have given Nutrition Directors across the state more time to focus on the production and delivery of nutritious meals, on the wellness of their teams as they work through these trying times and on innovative products and services that help achieve the nutrition and education goals of their districts.

In all publications posted and distributed, we are instructed to include the USDA statement “This Institution is an Equal Opportunity Provider”. Until now, that statement has made many of us shrink from the inaccuracy we witness in our cafeterias. So many children on the cusp of qualifying for free meals go without every day. Children who do not qualify, yet whose parents do not have the means to pay for meals, spend unnecessary worry and stress thinking about how and when they will eat during the school day. This distracts from their ability to focus on their studies. We have also witnessed the strategies that have been born of this struggle: the buddy system of tagging along with another friend who pays for your food, teachers silently paying for student meals, slipping small food items into pockets or backpacks without paying and concealing this from cashiers. Our system of tiered payment has led to needless dishonesty and shame. To create a climate of inclusivity, to remove the stigma of economic disparity, we must provide nourishment to all children at no cost to families.

Local Purchasing Incentive Bill / “VT Food for VT Kids”

As the pandemic began to unfold in our state, school nutrition programs in Vermont became caught up in the national problem of product supply shortages. When produce like carrots became hard to purchase through our national purveyors, many Vermont schools relied on their local farm connections for sustainable sources of products. Throughout the summer months and into the fall, local farmers and schools worked together to feed our families. The extra reimbursement, provided through the Summer Food Service Program model we were operating under, made it more economically feasible to purchase locally, and paired with USDA commodities, schools we were able to balance expenses effectively.

We ask for support of the Local Purchasing Incentive to keep it feasible for schools to incorporate local foods in their menus and support local farms. When schools return to the regular rate of reimbursement, local food purchases will become harder to justify. The local purchasing incentive is the key to assuring that Vermont schools can serve Vermont foods. When we can have assurance of local food funding from this initiative, we can plan purchasing with our farm partners and they can in turn know they have a reliable market and income stream. Local food on the menu and at the salad bar can be a staple and not a special. Farm to School day can be every day and not just one week in October when we highlight local food.

Farm to School Funding

Farm to School and Early Childhood Funding is critical to the success of our school nutrition programs by providing the means to incorporate food education into classrooms and expose children to the wonders of fresh, local, nutrient dense foods. Because of funding received through Farm to School grants, children are experiencing working farms, growing food in school gardens, learning about food systems and local economy, and introducing their own families to the new foods they have learned about in school. During the pandemic we have seen Farm to School programs continue to provide farm and food education through innovative virtual programming that reaches kids remotely and keeps the normalcy of school routine at home and shares it with the whole family. Through remote meal kits some families are trying new ingredients such as Kale and Leeks for the first time. This is a survey response received from a Burlington Mom:

“... I figured out the kale and leeks, and now we like them. Never ate them before, but googled them for recipes. Used kidney beans, peppers, onions and leftover turkey to make chili last week. We made baked apples too. I am learning to be a better, healthier cook. Always could afford convenience food and take out before job loss. This week will learn to cook rice :). Thank you all so much for this support. It has helped stretch our food budget and given me a new skill. You can tell your staff take great care putting the kits together and giving them out in a dignified way. Thank you.”

In closing, these past 10 months have proven, without question, the benefits and power that come from Universal School Meals. This pandemic has had the unintentional effect of demonstrating to us a more equitable system of child nutrition that better sustains our goals of educating the whole child and preparing them for future success despite economic obstacles not of their own making. Universal School Meals is the manifestation of “Vermonters helping Vermonters”, “Vermont lights the way”, and being an “Equal Opportunity Provider.”

Statements from Educators:

Diane Reilly, Principal, Hyde Park Elementary School

“Universal School Meals create an environment of "Nutrition" in our building. Most of our students enjoy these meals together in the classroom both morning and at lunch. There is no longer a "stigma" around who can and cannot have school breakfast and lunch, and everyone has an opportunity to have a nutritious meal. Poverty and fiscal stability may or may not determine if a child has food security. Many Families who do not "qualify" as in the past may not provide an adequate breakfast or lunch for their children. Now everybody eats.”

Danielle Peveril

“As an educator, I have seen a transformation in the morning attitude of my middle school students as they come into the classroom every day, with breakfast in their hands and ready to order lunch. Even without knowing all of the circumstances that they are going through at home, I know that several of them would have spent the day hungry, without a support system to sign them up for lunches and without food at home to pack for the day. Now they are engaged, smiling behind their masks, and awake. It makes a measurable difference in their learning and school experience.

As a working parent of five, the winter food box program has been a huge benefit. My children have been able to eat a variety of fresh, healthy food every single day and we have not yet resorted to spaghetti months, as we had done in years past when money was tight. This program is so appreciated, as are the helpers who stand in the cold every week to load up cars with food. Thank you for all that you do.”

Erin Paquette, 5/6 Teacher, Waterville Elementary School

“I have had the majority of my class now choosing to eat breakfast and lunch this year because it is free. Usually when they get to 5th and 6th grade they stop taking breakfast. This year I've had many kids come in and ask if the meals are still free! Once I reassure them that they are indeed still free they head out to pick up breakfast. This has been amazing to see because I then know they've had something nutritious before starting their day. I also haven't seen the struggle to make it to snack time this year, like I have in the past. The kids are able to sustain their focus longer because they have had that meal.”

Sara Reed

“I have 10th graders in our high-poverty school. When I told them, on the first day, that school lunches would be free, I saw the relief on many faces. They didn't have to think about hunting through the fridge and cabinets at home, trying to scrounge up something to bring in for lunch. Some of them laughed out loud, telling me that was great news, because they hadn't brought anything in for lunch and were just going to go without.

Every other week or so, one of my students would check in with me again on this: are school lunches still free? There was a fear that the program had ended, and that they wouldn't know, and that their families would wind up with a bill they couldn't afford. As winter break approached, and the end of 2020, I fielded that question again and again as students wanted reassurance the program would continue throughout the New Year.

So, these free lunches were more than just fuel. More than nutrition. They were about our reassurance that they wouldn't go hungry, that adults would take care of them, that their school was a safe place, that the pandemic wouldn't win, that it was all going to be okay. Those free lunches meant family, and community, and hope!”

Patrick LaClair, High School Latin Teacher

"It is a super stressful time to work in education -- Teachers are stressed, parents are stressed, kids are stressed and scared and overwhelmed. Meals are one piece of the puzzle of how schools operate, but to have that one thing taken care of is amazing. Amongst all the turmoil and anxiety, knowing that students have access to nutritious meals every day is a bright-spot of the pandemic. The efforts of the cafeteria staff and all of the other folks who have stepped up to make the universal meals possible, and to get them to students on the weekends and over breaks, are astonishing and inspiring. Without those efforts, and without that access to meals, our students' lives would be filled with more uncertainty and more anxiety than they are now. I hope the program continues! "

Statements from Parents

"As a family of 5 with 1 income, although we are able to provide what we need, it is hard to stay on our food budget each week. The free food each week and free meals at the school have helped us stay on budget so much easier! The food is fresh and healthy and I was shocked by the abundance of food in each food box! I can't thank you enough for offering this opportunity to all students, even those who normally wouldn't meet the typical income qualifications to receive assistance."

"My children have a regular menu of healthy, wholesome foods like whole grain bread, milk, cheese and yogurt and fruits each week. If there is ever a surplus of these products for our home, we share with others in the neighborhood who are happy to have an extra item or two during the pandemic. Finally, what I like best is that the program has implemented locally produced food items, using businesses like Kingdom Creamery or Cabot to help provide for Vermont families. It gives me hope that we will all survive and that we live in a community that is willing to work together to do so, even in today's uncertain political climate."

"Our children never come home from school hungry, they always enjoy the wholesome meals that are being provided, it is also great for them to see communities coming together during this difficult time.

We are very grateful for the food provided to our children during these difficult and uncertain times. We know our children will get nutritious foods throughout the week, it has put money back in our pockets, we use that money to pay for utilities. Even though the cost of lunch and breakfast for our children would only be about \$12 a day, the extra \$60+ a week is helpful. It is great to see how everyone has come together to make sure children in our community are well fed and do not go home on an empty stomach. I was very fearful for some children, often the only meals they receive are those they get at school. The food boxes that have been being handed out the last couple of months are very helpful to those of us who live paycheck to paycheck."

"My family does not qualify for state assistance besides health insurance therefore with me having less money coming in that's less food being able to be bought. My husband is luckily still able to work but one full income isn't enough for a family of 5...We are very fortunate to be a part of this program during these difficult times. The people that have been helping with this food program through the schools have been very friendly and they don't judge. I haven't ever wanted to have to be a part of a program like this because I am worried about being judged or my kids being judged but we are lucky to not have had to deal with any of that...Thank you very much for coming up with this program and helping families through these difficult times. I along with many others are hopeful this COVID-19 will end soon enough so we can all get back to work and live a normal life. It takes a lot to be able to say "unfortunately I need help" when there's nothing more you can do. Again thank you all, we appreciate all your help and for not judging."