

Testimony of Jeanne Collins, Superintendent
Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union

Senate Agriculture Committee - S100

March 30, 2021

Hi my name is Jeanne Collins, and I am superintendent of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union and immediate past president of the Vermont Superintendents Association, for whom I am also speaking today.

As you may know, this bill is of considerable interest to Vermont superintendents, because as superintendents believe in proper nutrition and feeding children, they also must maintain a constant eye on competing priorities and program costs.

S100 is laudable in intent. In my former district, Burlington, we had schools that were able to feed all kids and over this past year, in RNESU, with federal waivers we were also able to feed all kids.

Feeding all students is clearly beneficial in having them ready to learn and able to focus on schoolwork. It relieves the burden from parents from providing lunch or funds and removes any stigma from students who access FRL.

My own kids, when they moved from a high poverty school to a wealthier school at age 9 & 10, asked why I had to send money in for their lunch, why shouldn't kids just get fed. Out of the mouths of babes!

However, I do need to bring to your attention my concerns with the funding of this program, in order for you and your senate colleagues to have a full and thoughtful discussion.

First, if the current bill were approved, it would mandate feeding all kids, regardless of ability to pay, at a local expense that may mean other programs cannot happen.

This program adds \$24 -\$40 million in new costs. If those costs were to be covered in local budgets, then when a budget was reduced either through the budget making process or as the result of a budget defeat, the district would have to cut another program such as reading coaches or social emotional learning to pay for this unfunded mandate.

For that reason, VSA asks that if S.100 is to be approved by the Senate, a statewide source of funds be provided. If that source of funds is the general fund, there would not be any increase in property taxes. If the source of funds is the Education Fund, there will be a property tax increase.

As I understand it, the Committee is considering funding this program from the top of the Education Fund. While this approach addresses our concerns about the unfunded mandate and local budget dynamics, it is important to note that using the Ed Fund does come with a cost.

At the estimated total cost of \$24 to \$40 million in new expenses statewide, education property taxes would increase from 2.7 cents to 4.4 cents simply to cover the cost of this new program. (According to the joint fiscal office, \$9 million in new costs adds one cent to the education property tax rates statewide). It is also important to note that the tax rate increase to raise the total new money needed statewide would affect all districts, whether they were already providing universal meals or not.

Speaking for myself, I believe that the discussion about the benefits of universal school meals and how to pay for it needs to continue.

We should feed kids AND we need to be thoughtful about how we fund it and how we raise and spend \$24 -\$40 million annually. I look forward to having that opportunity for further consideration.

Thank you.