



Testimony for VT Senate Agriculture Committee, March 30, 2021

Universal Meals Funding Recommendation

My name is Scott Fay and I manage the Child Nutrition Program for the Essex Westford School District. I am also President-Elect of the School Nutrition Association of Vermont.

Thank you for inviting me today, I appreciate the opportunity to be here to share my thoughts and perspectives on bill S.100. It's so exciting that Vermont is on the cusp of permanently moving to universal meals. This will change school food programs in the best possible way and support students with the nutrition they need to succeed at school. I am here to recommend that you amend the bill to shift the funding for the increased cost of universal meals to come off the top of the Education Fund rather than individual school districts.

The funding source will have a major impact on where districts focus the energy and resources of their nutrition programs. In particular, the quality and equality of school nutrition programs across the state will be in jeopardy if the funding is left to individual school districts.

Funded locally, school districts with low free and reduced rates like Essex Westford, South Burlington, and CVU will receive minimal federal funding and be faced with higher overall costs. These districts will be under pressure to keep meal costs low and will be forced to raise offsetting revenues that will reduce the financial impact of universal meals on the school district. Districts with high free and reduced rates will receive more federal funds and less financial stress on the program.

Districts will look to robust a la carte programs like snack bars and vending machines that generate revenues by selling snacks, drinks, and meal components. Students with cash on hand could purchase snacks and, in effect, opt out of the meal program. A la carte items are not reimbursable and therefore only available to students with access to money. In other words, the school lunch stigma remains and by forcing schools into these strategies, the separation of those that have and those that have not, still exists.

Funded off the top of the education fund, using a per-plate reimbursement, would allow districts to focus on producing and promoting top quality meal programs. In this scenario, we're focused on serving high quality, complete meals that appeal to students and provide the nourishment they need to learn. This is our end goal, at least it should be, providing high quality, nutritious meals that help students succeed in school. Our success is based on the district's ability to budget within the reimbursement rate, maintain high participation, maximize federal funds, and leverage the local purchasing incentive. And on top of that, USDA's COVID waivers are currently utilizing a per plate reimbursement, it's a method that districts are familiar with and has worked well for the past year.

At the Essex Westford school district, we have closed a la carte lines and snack bars and focused all of our energy on the meal program. With that posturing, our serving lines have changed, more students are participating in the meal program and no one is purchasing snacks. Higher participation and a focus on a

strong meal program helps to normalize the serving lines to the point where everyone feels comfortable and there is no stigma around the meal program. With S.100 funding coming off the top of the Education Fund through a per plate reimbursement, we'll keep our snack bars closed and convert those spaces into meal service lines. Our students will be eating healthy, well balanced, complete meals. We will be purchasing more local products, and we'll be fully focused on providing and promoting the best possible meal program that we can to our students.

In closing, I ask that you please amend bill S.100 so that the funding comes off the top of the education fund and reimburses districts on a per plate basis. It puts Vermont's districts on a level playing field and rather than worry about generating offsetting revenues, districts can focus on providing quality meal programs that encourage participation, ensure good fiscal stewardship, and then we stand the best chance at equality in meal programs across the state. By doing so, our collective energy and financial resources can be directed where they should be, in providing the best possible meal service to Vermont's students and finally removing the school lunch stigma.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today.

Sincerely,

Scott Fay
Essex Westford School District
School Nutrition Association of Vermont