

Testimony Before the House and Senate Appropriations Committees
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Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee to discuss the proposed legislation to provide Universal School Meals in Vermont.

I am a school Food Service Director who has had the opportunity to work in a number of schools, including one that has offered Universal Meals for several years now under existing USDA programs. I have seen first hand the transformative effect feeding all kids has on a school community over a period of time.

In addition to better learning and behavioral outcomes, a Universal Meal program allows all children to be at the same level, to bond over a shared meal and to avoid the societal stratification about who can afford what. Instead of becoming another chance to divide and to stigmatize poverty, meals become a way of sharing community.

Given our experience since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the USDA expanded Universal Meal Programs to all schools nationally, I am even more convinced that Vermont must continue to make access to nutritious meals an integral part of the educational experience.

Most schools have a policy to feed all children a meal, regardless of their account balance, and already experience high, and ever increasing, levels of unpaid school meal debt. This expense just gets rolled into the property tax bill - it can't even be covered by surplus funds a meal program might generate. Then there is the additional expense, resource waste and stress on both families and school staff of trying to collect unpaid school meal debt. It is high time we fund this honestly.

One important step in this process is to fund a position at the Vermont Agency of Education to facilitate the transition of our school meal program to a Universal Meal model. The dedicated staff at Child Nutrition must be given the resources to support this effort.

I believe that any program Vermont pursues should contain strong incentives to support our local agricultural economy through increased purchases of local foods in our school meal programs.

Perhaps the federal government will continue to provide Universal School Meals, even after the end of the Covid pandemic, but Vermont must be a leader now, to better serve all Vermont children now and in coming years.