

Testimony regarding S.100 for the Senate Education Committee

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Molly Betournay
Director of Social Research and Advocacy
Clean Yield Asset Management
Norwich, VT
molly@cleanyield.com
(802) 526-2525

My name is Molly Betournay. I am the Director of Social Research and Advocacy at Clean Yield Asset Management, a registered investment advisory firm and Vermont Benefit Corp based in Norwich. Clean Yield manages socially and environmentally screened investment portfolios for individuals and families, nearly half of whom are Vermont residents. We also manage individual private investments in small and growing Vermont businesses, with a focus on businesses in the sustainable food and agriculture system.

I write today to testify in support of S.100. We believe that for Vermont to recover stronger and more equitably, we must adopt the whole package of universal lunch, universal breakfast, and local food purchasing support – for every student, every meal, at every school!

A few years ago, Clean Yield started supporting a multiyear campaign to bring universal school meals to Vermont. We saw it as an opportunity to connect our investments in the local food system and our commitment to equity with our philanthropy. We also saw real benefits in schools and the potential for systems change. Universal school meals have been linked to improved test scores, reduced sick days, decreased bullying incidents, and increased student and parental engagement in schools. They also contribute to a strong local food system and, according to the U.N. World Food Program, can help families out of poverty, end the “hunger cycle,” and narrow the gender gap. And while these reasons were compelling to us at the outset, we have found more reasons to support full universal school meals over the last few years:

1. *Universal school meals help build a more inclusive economy by equalizing the opportunities offered in schools, instead of reinforcing the economic status quo in which income disparity grows.* According to a 2017 study, students at schools with free lunches for all had an average of 3% greater lifetime earnings than children at schools without lunch programs.^[i] The study found even greater benefits for children from poor households – which improves equity. Research from the Brookings Institution has shown that areas with higher equality of opportunity experience faster economic growth.^[ii] The nonprofit Businesses for Social Responsibility sheds light on why this may be: “... inclusion drives innovation and expands market opportunity, mitigates risks, improves operating environments, and promotes long-term growth and a strong middle class.”^[iii] Moving to a universal school meals model presents an opportunity to support economic inclusion and drive sustainable growth in Vermont.

2. *Universal school meals can help support local farmers and strengthen local food systems.* According to data collected by Hunger Free Vermont, 64⁰% of the schools currently providing universal school meals report that they have increased their purchasing of local food. This is because most schools that move to a universal school meals model see an improvement in their school meal program finances, which allows them to spend more money on local food. According to the Farm to School Network, “Each dollar invested in farm to school [programs] stimulates \$0.60 to \$2.16 of local economic activity.”^[iv] This increased local purchasing represents an “average 5% increase in income” for farmers and a new long-term revenue stream.^[v] Universal school meals can increase the economic resilience of Vermont farmers and the state’s food system.
3. *Universal school meals can promote workforce development by creating school nutrition jobs, strengthening Vermont’s future workforce and helping to attract and retain workers from afar.* Research shows that universal school meals improve academic achievement – which will result in a stronger, better prepared workforce for Vermont businesses. In addition, universal school meals improve academic outcomes, which strengthens schools overall – making them more attractive to workers considering a move to Vermont.

We ask you to please consider supporting S.100.

^[i] <http://ftp.iza.org/dp11234.pdf>

^[ii] <https://www.brookings.edu/research/opportunity-for-growth-how-reducing-barriers-to-economic-inclusion-can-benefit-workers-firms-and-local-economies/>

^[iii] <https://www.bsr.org/en/expertise/inclusive-economy>

^[iv] <http://www.farmtoschool.org/resources/BenefitsFactSheet.pdf>

^[v] Ibid.