



Bill S.100 Farm Fresh School Meals for All

Submitted by:

Nina Hansen, SNS

Vice President of Operations

Abbey Food Service Group

I respectfully submit this letter of support for Bill S.100, Farm Fresh School Meals for All. From my position as the vice president of operations for The Abbey Food Service Group, I believe this bill will be of great benefit to all Vermonters. In my work overseeing school food service programs in every corner of Vermont, I can attest that many, critical problems in the current school meal system would be greatly alleviated by offering universal (free) breakfast and lunch to all students.

The benefits of universal meals are numerous. At the top of my list is removing the stigma associated with eating school breakfast and lunch. Being stigmatized for eating school meals starts at an early age. I experienced this first hand when moving to Vermont from Canada and my four elementary school aged children were told by their classmates that "only poor kids ate school breakfast". I was really saddened children could be branded so quickly and disgraced if they ate school meals. The Abbey Group serves thousands of meals a day in Vermont and it is a common experience to see entire groups of students who won't eat. This seems to happen more often in middle school where school meals aren't cool. Those who don't have food to bring from home would rather sit at the group table and tell their friends they aren't hungry than be mocked for getting school lunch. It is disheartening to witness. We all know how hard it is to pay attention or concentrate on our work when our stomachs are growling from hunger.

Second on my list of benefits is the elimination of school meal debt. Through no fault of their own, children are often shamed because their adult caregivers have not or cannot pay for their school meals. While the USDA has recently set policy to prevent overt identification of students with meal debt, it happens nonetheless. Alternate meals are allowed to be served to students who have debt. How though, does one do this and maintain a child's privacy? Again, I know from experience that one of my high-schoolers suffered great anxiety in the lunch line not knowing if their meal account had funds in it.

My daughter had food to come home to if she decided to opt out but what of other children who don't? They may find themselves in the embarrassing situation of receiving an alternate meal in front of their peers. Again, many will not take the chance and go hungry instead.

It's easy to appreciate the administrative burden and cost of communicating about meal debt with adult caregivers. In large schools there may be 50 plus families to call, write, print, mail and email notices to on a weekly basis. This is a considerable drain on resources.

The next benefit on my list ties into the Local Purchasing Incentive and the Farm to School and Early Childhood Grant Program. Universal school meals increase student participation in the food service program which brings in more federal funds. This enables program managers to purchase more locally produced food and that in turn delivers more dollars to our local economies. Local farm to school initiatives connect kids to their food and promote life-long healthy eating habits. A safe and secure Vermont food supply is a big takeaway lesson learned from the anxiety we experienced at the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic. There is no doubt increased local purchasing is good for Vermont.

A fourth benefit to universal meals is they promote a culture of healthy eating and learning about food for all students. The cafeteria is often the biggest classroom in the school. There is no better way to encourage our students to try new and healthy food choices. A small, bite sized taste test served on the lunch line can even promote healthy eating at home. I've heard from parents their kids come home from school asking for kale chips! There is less worry and more enjoyment at meal time when food is a shared experience.

Last on my list is school meals are healthier. Kids are offered a nutritionally balanced variety of meals daily and most schools include a diverse salad bar (pre-pandemic). Every meal includes milk, fresh fruit and veggies, whole grains, and lower fat protein. In fact, a parent confided she followed our school menu at home, lost 70 pounds and rebuilt her health. Nine years later, we enjoy her contribution as one of our school food professionals.

Universal school breakfast and lunch will have so many positive benefits for Vermont children. As our children learn, grow and become contributors to their local communities, they will have had a solid foundation of good nutrition served and consumed in a stress-free environment. The additional funding to purchase goods produced in Vermont supports our local economies and helps build a strong, productive, self-reliant food supply which is good for all Vermonters.

Thank you.