

Dear Members of the Senate Education Committee:

I am reaching out today to urge you to please vote yes on S.100 in its entirety to be able to provide school meals (breakfast, lunch, and supper) free of charge to all of Vermont's students. As a board member of Hunger Free Vermont and as a single working mother of a daughter who attends a universal meal school, passing this act will be the greatest investment Vermont can make in its children.

I wanted to share a story. When I first was forced to leave my home after separating from my now ex-husband, I was also forced into the workforce after being the primary caregiver to my three year old daughter for her entire life. I found myself a wonderful job at an agricultural non-profit organization here but still was struggling to make ends meet.

My job, which was highly technical, paid about \$20/hour, not nearly enough to afford rent in Chittenden County, costs for childcare while I was at work, and to pay my student loans from undergraduate and graduate school (in VT). I found myself in this weird bracket of people, however, making just above the cut off line to qualify for subsidized child care and SNAP benefits. I felt helpless. I tried to defer my student loans, I started racking up credit card debt, and I generally just went without a lot of basic necessities.

I then had to make the very difficult decision to leave my job at the mission driven non-profit and find a job that paid higher, in order to survive and be able to stay in Vermont. This was extremely difficult to find this opportunity in Vermont and luckily I found a job at an milk cooperative that is based in Kansas City, but lets me work remotely from Vermont.

When I enrolled my daughter for Kindergarten and learned that she would be fed three free meals a day I didn't know how profound the effects would be. Not only did I not have to worry or budget for her meals while she was at school, it also saved me time in the mornings getting her ready and in the evenings when she brings a meal home from the afterschool program, giving me more time to engage with her rather than cooking and preparing the meals, which can be difficult for a single parent.

I have also witnessed first hand how different the dynamics are in a universal school meal cafeteria. All children have access to the same food which reduces stigma and gives dignity to those kids who rely on the school meals to feed them. Children need to be well fed in order to thrive in school. We can guarantee this to all children in Vermont by passing S.100.

Please, I urge you and your fellow committee members to support the passage of S.100, so working parents can feel rest assured that not only their children are being fed in school, but they are receiving adequate nutrition in a dignified and inclusive way.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

Thank you,

Stephanie Walsh