

I am writing to you today to submit testimony to the Senate Education and Agriculture committees on S.100 and express why Universal Schools Meals is deeply important to me, and to all Vermont children.

When I was a young child, I often struggled to finish my lunch in the allotted lunch period because I was a very slow eater. I was fortunate because my elementary school custodian, Orlando, noticed that I was not able to finish my meals on time, and he would allow me to sit and eat while he cleaned tables for the next grade's lunch period. Once I had finished working through my carrot sticks and apple slices, he walked me back to my classroom every day. Because of Orlando's generosity and patience, I went back to class for the afternoon with a full belly and enough fuel to keep me going for the rest of the day. I was dependent on being noticed--on someone seeing that I was still hungry and making sure that I had access to food I needed to stay alert and participate actively in school. Not every child is so fortunate.

Universal School Meals is about affording every child that opportunity-- to have the tools to engage in class all day without feeling hungry, distracted, or tired. Adopting a statewide program for Universal lunch and breakfast ensures that every child in Vermont will have access to the nutritious foods served in our school cafeterias. Vermont schools have long been a leader in ensuring access to meals. According to the Food Research and Action Center, Vermont ranks near the very top among US states in participation in school breakfast, summer meals, and afterschool meals, yet we still reach only 1/3 of Vermont children with a school breakfast and 1/2 of Vermont children with a school lunch each day. We could do so much better.

Breaking down the barriers for children to participate in school meals is essential to ensure they have the tools they need to succeed in school. Taking money out of the equation for families and offering breakfast and lunch free to every child can break down cultural and social barriers to participation in school meals for children. No child has to worry about whether other kids will know that they are the "poor kid" because they took a school meal. According to numerous studies, even when school food service staff do everything right to protect children and their financial status, low income children often feel pressure not to take a school meal. Additionally, when we fund farm to school initiatives and local purchasing, our schools can bring in more local foods, offer more fresh fruit and vegetable choices, and work with local farmers to introduce children to new foods and connect them to where they come from and how they are grown or raised. Just last week, a new study was released that found that school meals are the single best--and most equal--source for quality food and healthy diets available to children today, and supporting Universal School Meals and Farm-to-School will only make that more true. Feeding our children is feeding our future, supporting Vermont farms and families, and giving every child a chance to succeed.

S.100 is not just good policy, it is a moral imperative. We must not fail our children, especially after one of the most difficult years they could ever experience in their growth and development. Our kids need us more than ever, and this is one impactful and valuable way that we can ensure we aren't failing any of our children.

Thank you for your time and your consideration of this important bill.

Tim Morgan, Williston