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March 11, 2021

Testimony respectfully submitted to the Senate Education Committee

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## **Hunger in Vermont**

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an urgent and unprecedented hunger crisis in Vermont. Lack of affordable housing, low wages, high unemployment, a decrease in the number of local, affordable grocery stores, and lack of public transportation were all already contributing to hunger and food insecurity in Vermont, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these inequities. Prior to the pandemic, food insecurity rates had been declining steadily since spiking during the Great Recession and had been holding steady at 1 in 10 Vermonters for several years. While food insecurity rates were relatively static, there were still too many people in Vermont struggling to put food on the table. 10% is an unacceptable level of hunger in our state.

Food insecurity in Vermont rose dramatically during the pandemic, from 1 in 10 before the pandemic to 1 in 3 in March. State and federal supports helped lower hunger to 1 in 4 in June. **According to recent studies released by the University of Vermont, 1 in 3 Vermont households have struggled with food insecurity at some point during the pandemic and households with children are two times more likely to face hunger. These rates of hunger are higher than at any point in over 20 years and are not letting up.**

What's more, Vermont is experiencing one of the most dramatic increases in hunger in the country. Weekly survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau and an annual study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture show that hunger is rising, particularly in rural states, after a decade of decline. By late September, Vermont, West Virginia, and North Dakota topped the Bureau's list, with a more than 50% increase in respondents saying they lacked enough to eat.

**As we look ahead to recovering from the pandemic, our goal cannot be to return to where we were; we must do better.**

## **How School Meals Work Today**

Thanks to temporary waivers from the USDA, school meals and summer meals have been available to all children for free, regardless of their family's income, since mid-March 2020. These waivers have been approved this school year and summer, but have not been extended for the 2021-22 school year as of yet.

Schools have gone above and beyond to ensure children have access to nutritious meals during the pandemic, including through school closures last spring, and hybrid and remote learning this school year. Schools are reporting that stigma around the school meal program has been eliminated, more students are eating at school, and students are more attentive and ready to learn because they are not hungry and worrying about when they will eat next.

Prior to the pandemic, about 25% of Vermont public schools were already providing universal school breakfast and/or lunch (see attached for list of schools). They do so by enrolling in federal provisions within the USDA that allow them to serve meals at no charge to students or their families. Any school has the option to enroll in

one of the provisions, called Provision 2, and provide universal school meals. In fact, the Agency of Education and Hunger Free Vermont have heard from a number of schools that they want to continue to provide universal school meals when the temporary waivers end, so we expect a number of schools to newly enroll in the provision this fall.

In all schools without universal school meals, shame, stigma, and cost keep students who need meals for eating them - even students eligible for free meals. Additionally, **42% of food insecure students in Vermont are not eligible for free or reduced-price meals, and are likely not able to afford the full price for school meals.** A family of four in Vermont could be over-income for free school meals but still make \$30,000 less than they need to cover their basic needs according to the 2019 Basic Needs Budget from the Joint Fiscal Office.

There have been numerous studies in Vermont and across the country about the impact that universal school meals have on student health and learning, food insecurity, school climate, relationships between caregivers and administrators and more. Attached to this testimony are some of the results.

### **How School Meals are Paid For**

School nutrition programs are paid for through a combination of federal reimbursements, other federal funding sources, some state funding from the General Fund, fees from families paying for meals, and other sources of revenue from activities like catering and selling meals to adults. Most of the time, these funding sources do not meet the full cost of school nutrition programs. The remainder of the school nutrition program budget is incorporated into the school budget, and ultimately borne in the Education Fund.

Schools do not report uniformly on the total cost of the school breakfast and lunch program, or how much of their nutrition program budgets are paid for through their school budget. \$23.923 million in federal funds supported the school breakfast and lunch programs in 2019.

### **Universal School Meals in S.100**

S.100 establishes a five-year phase-in period after which all public schools in Vermont will be required to participate in a federal option to make available school breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge to their families. As is current practice, the cost of school meals that is not reimbursed through federal funds, current state funding, or other funding sources would be borne by school districts, and therefore ultimately borne by the Education Fund. The cost of school meals would be excluded from the excess spending limit. Schools are required to maximize federal reimbursements, and the Agency of Education will establish best practices and work with schools to ensure important data about the student population needed for eligibility for other federal funds that support education and other child nutrition programs is collected annually.

The bill also provides additional supports for schools that are not available to those making the transition to universal school meals now. The legislation includes \$1 million in one-time funding that schools can access to help offset additional expenses like investments in the kitchen, administrative support for enrolling in the federal provisions, or other costs incurred with making the transition. This could also be an opportunity to utilize federal COVID-19-related funds to support schools. Additionally, the bill includes a new position within the Agency of Education to support schools moving to universal school meals. This position is critical to the success of the programs; AOE has indicated that they need this position in order to provide schools with support.

The bill establishes a five-year transition period so that schools have the time they need to implement universal school meals. **A bill summary with more details is attached in this testimony.**

**S.100 would assure Vermont families that the State has enacted a pathway to permanently ending the inequities in our school meal program, so that all students are able to eat school breakfast and lunch and focus on learning while at school.**

### **Universal School Meals has a high return on investment**

The investment each school will need to make to implement universal school meals will vary. It is dependent on a number of factors including school size, socio-economic status of students, if the district includes the salaries and benefits of the nutrition program staff in the nutrition program budget or in the overall school district budget, and more.

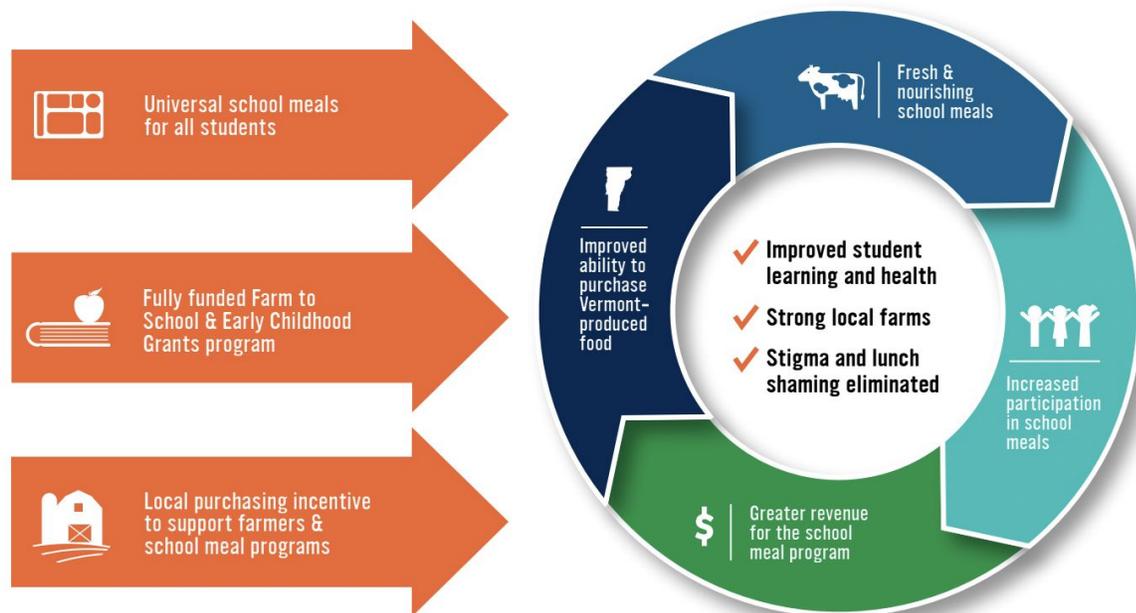
Using individual school data from the Agency of Education, Hunger Free Vermont has calculated that after the five-year phase in period, the total increased cost associated with all public schools in Vermont providing universal school meals will be \$20-25 million annually. Our calculations are based on the higher end of what schools already providing universal school meals are experiencing in terms of student participation in the program, the weighted average cost of school breakfast and lunch, and the weighted average participation rates for students who do not qualify for free or reduced price meals. Our goal is to offer a conservative, but realistic, estimate.

This increased investment has far reaching benefits for both individual students, whole schools, and our broader Vermont community:

- Equity – improved learning, health, behavior, social climate available to all school-aged kids in VT
- \$10 million more in annual federal reimbursements will flow to VT school meal programs and farmers
- 65% more school meals will be served each year
- 23,000 more students would be eating school breakfast on a given day – a 102% increase
- 18,000 more students would be eating school lunch on a given day – a 45% increase
- No more families in debt to their school meal programs (costs families and schools about \$1million annually)
- No more children learning what hunger feels like at school

## **S.100 supports the Virtuous Cycle of strong, equitable school meal programs with high-quality, local food:**

When schools adopt universal school meals more students eat meals, which means more federal dollars flowing into the school meal programs. This, coupled with the local purchasing incentive program, helps schools invest in meal quality, especially by purchasing more food from Vermont farms and producers. Strong Farm to School and Early Childhood programs not only support schools in increasing local purchasing and transitioning to universal school meals, but they also help children build a connection to farms in their communities and familiarity with nutritious, local ingredients. Students are then ready and eager to eat fresh and nourishing meals while in school, which supports continued strong participation in school meal programs.



## **How Schools Can Collect Income Information Without School Meal Applications**

**Using alternative collection methods instead of school meal applications to collect family income data is an opportunity for higher return rates and decreased stigma around school meals & sharing income information**

Schools are required to capture household income information from students and their families each year. This information is used by the federal government to determine school and community eligibility for a number of nutrition and education programs and funding sources, including Title 1 funding and summer and afterschool meal programs. Schools that are not already providing universal school meals gather this information using school meal applications. Schools providing universal school meals gather this information using an alternative form, called the Household Income Form in Vermont. As schools transition to providing universal school meals the transition to using a Household Income Form or other method to collect income data is an exciting opportunity to transform the way that schools are requesting this information from families into a more inclusive, transparent, and equitable process that has the potential to improve return rates.

## **What's Happening Now?**

- Schools that do not provide universal school meals collect school meal applications and use the income information provided in the applications. Getting a free school meal is dependent on caregivers' filling out and returning the application.
- Schools that provide universal school meals collect household income information using a Household Income Form. Getting a free school meal is not dependent on caregivers' filling out and returning the form.

## **Challenges with the School Meal Application as a tool for collecting income information**

- The school meal application must meet strict federal guidelines, leading to a complicated form that is not user friendly. Schools are not able to add messages to the form itself explaining why schools need to collect the information and how filling out the form helps the caregivers' students and the entire school.
- Schools are not able to make this form mandatory, meaning that primarily only families who think they qualify for free school meals and whose children want the meals, fill out the form.
  - Families who do qualify for free school meals may not think that they do, or their children may not want meals because of the stigma attached to them, and so they do not fill out the form. This can lead to undercounting the true percentage of low-income students, and schools missing out on federal education funding.
- For many students, access to free school meals is dependent on their caregiver filling out and returning this form. Students and their families must divulge highly personal information in order to make sure the student does not go hungry during the school day.
- Filling out the form is stigmatized, as it is connected to a program that is associated with being low-income.

## **Benefits of the Household Income Form or other data collection method**

- This form is far more flexible than the school meal application because it does not need to meet federal requirements. Schools are able to design a form that is simple and welcoming, and that only asks for the basic information needed. It can contain messaging explaining why schools need to collect income information and how filling out the form helps the caregivers' students and the entire school.
- The Agency of Education is able to design a template form meeting best practices that schools can adopt or model.
- Schools are able to make this form mandatory if they wish, ensuring greater rates of completion from caregivers in all income groups.
- Access to free school meals is not dependent on their caregiver filling out and returning this form. Students who want and/or need school meals are able to get them and won't go hungry during the school day because their families did not return an income form.
- By decoupling the need for a school to collect income information from eligibility for school meals, the school has the opportunity to destigmatize the form and invite all families to fill it out as an activity to support the school's access to federal funding, rather than as an application for school meals.

## **How S.100 supports collecting income information**

- The bill supports the Agency of Education and Vermont schools in collecting important income information. It provides AOE with the flexibility to identify best practices in data collection and requires schools to work with AOE to collect that information. AOE is currently working to identify best practices, and the language in the bill allows the best practices to evolve as AOE continues its work.
- The Farm to School and Early Childhood Grant Program helps connect schools with support from organizations like Hunger Free Vermont that can help them implement best practices for collecting

income data along with funding to implement strategies like mailings and robocalls. Hunger Free Vermont also provides this kind of technical assistance and support to schools across the state annually at no charge.

### **Will families submit their income information if they don't need to in order to get school meals?**

- In short, yes. 25% of VT's public schools are already using the Household Income Form instead of school meals and have not reported widespread decline in form return rates.
- Schools across the country have also been using Alternative Income Forms for many years. All schools in New York City have been providing universal school meals since 2017. They have reported no decline in return rates since switching from school meal applications to Alternative Income Forms.
- There is no need to make a child's access to nutritious food contingent on their caregivers' ability to fill out a form not needed for those meals.

### **How does the transition away from school meal applications work?**

- Some schools will provide universal school meals using the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). School meal applications will be eliminated in year one and will not be required for as long as the school uses CEP. Schools will transition to collecting income information using best practices in year one.
- Other schools will provide universal school meals using Provision 2 (P2). For these schools, the school meal application is used in year one. Hunger Free Vermont and other organizations support these schools in implementing a major School Meal Application Campaign in that year, as strong return rates are crucial for federal funding for the program. VT schools who are using P2 have had great success with this.
  - In year two, the school meal application is eliminated, and schools will begin to collect income information using best practices. Schools will not need to use the school meal application again unless required to recertify. This happens, at most, every 4-5 years.

### **Supplemental materials included in this testimony**

1. S.100 Bill Summary
2. Schools providing universal school meals in 2019-2020 school year
3. Research on the impact of universal school meals

# UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS SERVE UP MANY BENEFITS

The results of multiple studies confirm that a universal school meals model is one specific feasible intervention that improves multiple student, school, and community outcomes. These studies show that when all students receive breakfast and lunch at no charge, and when no student is singled out either for needing "free school lunch" or for having school meal debt, students and schools experience extraordinary benefits. Student learning improves. Student behavior and health improve. Relationships between school administrators and families improve.

Since 2014, Hunger Free Vermont, along with the Vermont Agency of Education, has helped nearly 25% of Vermont public schools, serving over 16,000 students, take the money out of school meals. Now, it's time for every student, in every Vermont public school, to have the same opportunity to thrive with Universal School Meals!



**83%**

of staff at participating schools agree that universal school meals

**MAKE STUDENTS MORE READY TO LEARN.**



**42%** of Vermont children in food-insecure households are not eligible for free school meals or 3Squares VT.

Universal School Meals improve performance in Math and English Language Arts by up to

**10 WEEKS OF LEARNING.**

**81%**

of staff agree that with the universal school meals program,

**DIFFERENCES IN FAMILY INCOME ARE LESS VISIBLE.** And as a result 72% agree that it has produced an improved social climate.



## “Evidence-Based Strategies to End Childhood Food Insecurity & Hunger in Vermont” —The Urban Institute, 2019

In a 2019 study, The Urban Institute found that traditional school meal programs have a limited reach and do not serve many eligible and food insecure students. *Findings from the report include:*

- 1 in 4 eligible students does not participate in the school lunch program, and fewer than half receive free breakfast.
- adopting a universal school meals model would allow all students access to the same healthy meals and remove the application process, which could minimize stigma around accessing school meal programs.

## “Let Them Eat Lunch: The Impact of Universal Free Meals on Student Performance” —Center for Policy Research, 2019

This study of New York City middle schools shows that universal school meals is an effective tool to improve student learning and health outcomes. *Universal School meals:*

- improve performance in two subjects - math and (English Language Arts) - rather than one, while targeted educational interventions typically improve performance in only one subject"
- improve performance in math and English Language Arts by up to 10 weeks of learning.
- Has no negative effects on student weight outcomes, and decreases the probability of obesity for students who were not previously eligible for free school meals.

## “Universal Free School Meal Programs in Vermont Show Multi-Domain Benefits” —University of Vermont, 2020

For two years, researchers from the Department of Education at UVM conducted surveys and in-depth site visits with 240 staff at 57 Vermont public schools providing universal school meals. They found that a universal school meals model is one specific intervention that improves multiple school-wide and community outcomes.

*The surveys and interviews showed that:*

- Financial anxiety and overall stress declines. 98% of staff say that universal school meals have reduced financial stress on students and families. 52% of school nurses agree student stress levels have declined. 83% of staff say that universal school meals have reduced stress on administrators related to family financing.
- Universal school meals supports local agriculture. 64% of the schools were able to purchase more local food as a result of using a universal school meals model.

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updated  
January 2020



“Students know they have meals at school and parents become aware of attendance because the meals are available. With students in school, teachers are able to teach. Students become better academically and also learn to adjust to social situations better.”  
—Vermont School Principal



Every student. Every meal. Every school.

[universalschoolmealsvt.org](http://universalschoolmealsvt.org)



Every student. Every meal. Every school.

# 78 Vermont schools provided universal school meals to over 17,000 students in the 2019–2020 school year.

## **Barre City Supervisory Union**

Barre City Elementary & Middle School

## **Bennington–Rutland Supervisory Union**

Currier Memorial School

## **Burlington School District**

C.P. Smith Elementary  
Essential Early Education Center  
Hunt Middle School  
Integrated Arts Academy  
J.J. Flynn Elementary  
ONTOP/Horizon School  
Sustainability Academy

## **Caledonia Central Supervisory Union**

Cabot School (P2)  
Twinfield Union School (P2)

## **Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union**

Bakersfield (P2)  
Berkshire Elementary (P2)  
Enosburg Elementary  
Enosburg Middle/High (P2)  
Richford Elementary  
Richford Junior-Senior High School  
Montgomery (P2)

## **Grand Isle Supervisory Union**

Alburgh Community Education Center  
Isle La Motte School

## **Maple Run Unified School District**

SOAR Learning Center  
St. Albans City Elementary

## **North Country Supervisory Union**

Coventry Village School (P2)  
Newport City Elementary

## **Orange East Supervisory Union**

Waits River Valley Union School (P2)

## **Orleans Central Supervisory Union**

Albany Community School  
Barton Graded School  
Brownington Central School  
COFEC Head Start  
Glover Community School  
Irasburg Village School  
Orleans Elementary

## **Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union**

Lakeview Union School

## **Rutland City School District**

Northeast Elementary School  
Northwest Elementary School  
Rutland Intermediate/ Middle School  
Success School- Allen Street Campus  
Pierpont Primary Learning Center  
AEP on Grove Street

## **Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union**

Bennington Elementary  
Early Education Program  
Molly Stark School  
Monument Elementary  
Mt. Anthony Middle School  
Mt. Anthony Union High School  
On Point Elementary  
Pownal Elementary  
Shaftsbury Elementary  
Woodford Hollow School

## **Slate Valley Union School District**

Benson Village School (P2)  
Castleton Elementary School (P2)  
Castleton Village School (P2)  
Fair Haven Grade School (P2)  
Fair Haven Union High School (P2)  
Orwell Village School (P2)

## **St. Johnsbury Town School District**

St. Johnsbury School

## **Windham Central Supervisory Union**

Jamaica Village School (P2)  
Leland & Gray High School (P2)  
Newbrook Elementary (P2)  
Townshend Elementary School (P2)

## **Windham Southeast Supervisory Union**

Academy School  
Brattleboro UHS #6 (P2)  
Green Street School  
Oak Grove School

## **Winooski School District**

The Family Center  
John F. Kennedy School  
Winooski Middle School  
Winooski High School

## **Independent/Private Schools & Education Programs**

Baird School (Burlington, VT)  
Centerpoint School (Winooski, VT)  
Choice Academy (Barre, VT)  
King Street Youth Center (Burlington, VT)  
Laraway School (Johnson, VT)  
Sacred Heart School (Bennington, VT)  
Vermont Achievement Center (Rutland, VT)  
Turning Points School (Morgan, VT)  
YouthBuild (Burlington, VT)

## 21 Schools Served Universal School Breakfast Only

### **Burlington School District**

Burlington High School  
Champlain Elementary  
Edmunds Elementary  
Edmunds Middle School

### **Franklin Northeast SU**

Sheldon Elementary School

### **Greater Rutland County Supervisory Union**

Poultney Elementary School

### **Milton Town School District**

Milton Elementary School

### **Missisquoi Valley School District**

Franklin Elementary School  
Highgate Elementary School  
Missisquoi Valley Union High School  
Swanton Elementary School

### **Mt. Abraham Unified School District**

Bristol Elementary School  
Robinson Elementary School

### **North Country SU**

Charleston Elementary School  
Troy Elementary School

### **Orange Southwest Unified Union School District**

Braintree School  
Randolph Elementary School  
Randolph Union High School

### **Orleans Southwest SU**

Craftsbury Academy  
Craftsbury Elementary  
Hardwick Elementary School

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# S.100: Farm Fresh School Meals for All

## Bill Summary

3/4/21

The Farm Fresh School Meals for All bill would ensure that no child has to learn what hunger feels like while at school, our children get critical nutrition, and our farmers get direct support through school purchasing by:

- Mandating that within five years of bill enactment, all public schools participate in federal options that allow them to provide school breakfast and lunch at no charge to students or their families.
- Supporting school purchasing of Vermont food by establishing a state-funded local purchasing incentive program.
- Fully funding the Vermont Farm to School and Early Childhood program to ensure schools receive the assistance they need in developing robust and sustainable local purchasing and Farm to School programs, while also supporting early childhood providers across the state in strengthening nutrition and community partnerships through Farm to Early Childhood programs.

### Specifically, the bill would:

#### *Universal School Meals:*

- Provide a five-year transition period after which all public schools in Vermont would be required to make available school breakfast and lunch to all students at no charge to the individual student or family.
- Increase federal dollars supporting the school meals programs by requiring schools to maximize reimbursement for meals at all schools by participating in one of the federal options for providing universal school meals and also by incorporating best practices in serving meals.
- Require that costs of providing school meals that are not reimbursed through federal funds, current state funding, and other revenue sources continue to be born by the school districts, and therefore ultimately borne by the Education Fund - as they are now.
- Provide \$1 million in one-time funding, available over the five year transition period, to provide grants for schools who might need equipment or training to successfully provide universal school meals. The grants may also help with the initial expenses of implementing a meal program or the process of getting into the federal options for providing universal school meals.
  - These grants would be administered through the Farm to School and Early Childhood Grant Program, but the funding would be kept separate and used only

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*Last updated: March 4, 2021*

for this purpose. After the five year transition period, any unused funds would revert to the regular Farm to School and Early Childhood Grant Program.

- Ensure that schools use best practices determined by the Agency of Education (AOE) to collect important student income data annually. This information is needed to qualify for some sources of federal funding that support education and nutrition programs. The information is currently collected through school meal applications, which would no longer be required annually.
- Ensure that AOE Child Nutrition Programs has the capacity needed to support schools transitioning to provide universal school meals by creating one full-time, classified position specializing in the administration of school meal programs.

*Local Purchasing Incentive Program:*

- Set the following goal for Vermont: *By 2023, at least 20% of all foods purchased by supervisory unions and supervisory districts will be locally produced foods.*
- Create an incentive for Vermont schools to purchase locally produced food for use in their school meal programs, based on the percentage of local food purchased:
  - 15¢/reimbursable school lunch if the supervisory union purchases at least 15% locally produced food through the school meal program.
  - 20¢/reimbursable school lunch if the supervisory union purchases at least 20% locally produced food
  - 25¢/reimbursable school lunch if the supervisory union purchases at least 25% locally produced food
    - If the school grows its own food for use in the school meals program, it could assess the fair market value of the food used and count it toward the above percentages.
- In order to qualify for the incentive, the supervisory union must:
  - Develop a locally produced foods purchasing plan
  - Designate a person to be the food coordinator for locally produced foods
  - Develop a process for tracking the purchase of locally produced food
  - Comply with the annual reporting requirement (below)
- Require an annual report from each school board estimating the percentage of locally produced food purchased for its school meal program.
- Require the Agency of Education to report to the legislature each year on the results of the incentive.
- “Locally produced foods” is defined by the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets (VAAFMM) in [Act 129](#), excepting fluid milk. Milk already comprises over 15% of food costs on average, so to incentivize new purchasing of Vermont products fluid milk has been excluded.

### *Farm to School and Early Childhood Grant Program:*

- Bring the base funding for the Farm to School and Early Childhood Grants Program to \$500,000 in annual appropriations. This is the amount identified by the Vermont Farm to School Network as needed to meet demand and reach its goal of a robust Farm to School program in 75% of Vermont schools by 2025, establishing Farm to Early Childhood programs with more providers across the state, and supporting schools in their efforts to increase local purchasing from Vermont farms.

### **Funding for Farm Fresh School Meals for All:**

- Appropriate \$1 million in one-time funding to VAAFM to be available as grants to schools over the five year universal school meals transition period to support their transition. These grants would be administered through the Farm to School and Early Childhood Grant Program, but the funding would be kept separate and used only for this purpose. After the five year transition period, any unused funds would revert to the regular Farm to School and Early Childhood Grant Program.
- Appropriate \$100,000 in base funding to AOE for an additional position within the Child Nutrition Program staff to support schools transitioning into universal school meals.
- The costs of providing school meals that are not reimbursed through federal funds, current state funding in the General Fund, and other sources of revenue will be borne by school districts, and therefore ultimately borne by the Education Fund. This is how school meals are currently funded; Hunger Free Vermont estimates that providing universal school meals will increase the investment through the Education Fund by an estimated \$20-25 million annually after the five year transition period.
- Appropriate \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2022 to AOE for the local purchasing incentive, with up to \$60,000 of this total being available for AOE to hire a contractor to help with setting up the program. The bill also states an intention for an annual base appropriation of \$500k for this local incentive program.
  - If more schools qualify for the incentive than the funds appropriated, AOE will prorate the reimbursements to match the amount available.
- Bring the base funding of the Farm to School and Early Childhood Grants Program within VAAFM to a \$500,000 annual appropriation (currently \$171,000).



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Last updated: March 4, 2021