



S. 100 Testimony Points
Senate Committee on Education
Universal Meals
5/3/22

Testimony Notes:

1. VPA fully understands the importance of school meals and the positive impact these meals have on students physical, social, emotional, and academic well-being. There is a wealth of research that supports the benefits and it is clear it really helps to reduce social stigmas of an economic nature in our schools.
2. VPA signed on to a letter with our two principal national affiliate groups asking the U.S. Congress to provide free universal meals for breakfast and lunch to all students in schools receiving public funds.
 - a. Unfortunately, this provision did not make it through the appropriations process so the federal relief that we have had the last couple of years appears to be disappearing.
 - b. Recently, there has been some talk at the federal level of trying to revive a plan to provide universal free meals to students; we have also supported this plan
3. We noticed in the testimony earlier this session in House Education from witnesses in Maine that Maine has enacted a law providing free breakfast and lunch. We also noted that the funds necessary for this in Maine come from their General Fund. Additionally, we noticed that advocates in Vermont for adding free meals for all at the beginning of the next school year almost to a person have requested that come from the Education Fund. When we increase the education fund absent a non-property tax revenue source, we are increasing property taxes for Vermonters. We are also opening ourselves up to the same old rhetoric that Vermont spends too much money per pupil on public education; and if this is true, perhaps it is because we keep adding items to the Education Fund that are of greater societal interest and should be paid for out of the General Fund. People seem to see the Education Fund as this great nebulous fund to just keep adding things to. The problem with that is that schools are then beat up with comments of spending too much, by way of example but not limited to:
 - a. Need mental health counselors in schools, hire them as employees and pay for it out of the Ed. Fund.

- b. Concerned about Lead in schools, let local school districts pay for it ... again a draw on the Ed. fund.
 - c. PCB's with the potential of tens and perhaps hundreds of millions of dollars that will be needed for mitigation ... right now there is no final financial plan approved but it is looking more and more like this is an going to be an Ed. Fund issue
 - d. Early childhood care not in schools, require the daycare to have rules not nearly as stringent as public schools, give each parent a stipend for early childhood education of 10 hours a week paid for out of the Ed. Fund – for parents without resources great idea ... but we also pay for those hours for parents that are financially well resourced, another drag on the Ed. Fund.
4. Several years ago a previous Secretary of Education, Rebecca Holcombe, when she was Commissioner of Education and allowed latitude as a Commissioner not directly working for the Administration, estimated, if I remember correctly, that about 77% of education funds could legitimately be categorized as the responsibility of school districts; while the other 23% were at least questionable. This doesn't mean these things are not important, just that they come at a cost and we should at least be mindful that perhaps that cost is more aligned with state responsibility as opposed to school district responsibility.
5. I realize the plan is to continue this program, that has been federally funded throughout the pandemic, at Vermont's expense with a surplus in the education fund this year. The VPA doesn't have a major problem with that other than to say we are always a little skeptical when it comes to one time funds being used to support an ongoing obligation which we assume this will become. Unfortunately, school administrators and school boards often don't have that luxury. They often have to make hard choices. Any recurring cost to the Ed. Fund will mean additional strain on that fund that will be felt in schools and will, at least in some cases, take decision-making authority away from school boards and school administrators unless we take steps to make sure that doesn't happen.
6. Thus, If we are going to do this after next year, we should look at some additional funding revenue source to support the education fund specifically for this purpose or look at the general fund since this is a general societal concern at least as much as it is an education concern.

Respectfully submitted,
Jay Nichols