

S.100 - An act relating to universal school breakfast and lunch for all public school students and to creating incentives for schools to purchase locally produced foods

Testimony to the Senate Education Committee

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Vermont's Public Schools are in the business of providing nutritional meals to school children. It is important work, it is necessary work, and for many educators and the advocacy organizations with which they collaborate in this work, it is a passion.

Vermont's Public Schools have displayed a commitment to providing healthy foods through partnership, creativity and dedication before the pandemic, throughout the pandemic, and will, undoubtedly, after the pandemic.

After the onset of the pandemic, ensuring that every child had access to healthy meals was the first big challenge Vermont school districts responded to. School districts and school personnel have performed admirably in this regard.

S.100 represents an effort to see Vermont's school nutrition programs serve every student through the universal provision of meals and to do so in a manner that will work better for students and families and for Vermont's farmers, for whom schools are an important market.

One shared goal of our Associations is to make sure that any new state requirements will both accomplish their intended purpose while also working well for schools.

With respect to S.100, we have one very important request for a critical improvement to the bill, and two recommendations for helpful improvements.

The critical improvement - please streamline the funding process and create a direct connection between this state initiative and a state funding source.

As currently written, the funding process for this new state initiative would require voters in each of Vermont's 115 public school districts to individually approve proportional expenditures which statewide will total an estimated \$24 to \$40 million in new annual costs.

The requirement to secure local voter approval for this investment adds an unnecessary step to funding this program and needlessly complicates the budgeting process for Vermont's school districts.

In fact, in districts under tremendous budget pressures already, it will put feeding all children in competition with important programs currently in place to serve children in an array of also useful ways.

This new state initiative should be funded at the state level through a state allocation of funds.

Please change the funding mechanism within this bill by appropriating the total amount of required funds at the State level, and removing the need for local districts to seek voter approval in order to expend the funds necessary to make universal school meals a reality.

This approach is more efficient, more transparent and more equitable.

This change can be accomplished by a simple adjustment to Section 2 of the bill (language at the top of page 3) as follows:

§ 1264. FOOD PROGRAM (new language in bold)

(C) To the extent that costs are not reimbursed through federal or State funds or other sources, the cost of making available school lunches and breakfasts shall be ~~borne by school districts~~ **paid for through a State appropriation.**

As far as recommendations for useful improvements to the bill, we support [Secretary French's testimony](#) that the bill should “simply provide additional funds to all schools on a per-plate basis, like we currently do with state-match funding” rather than establish a complicated reimbursement program that will add work for both school districts and for the Agency of Education. Legislative intent could indicate that the funds are to be used in support of using local food products.

Furthermore, we share Secretary French's observations and concerns about data currently generated through free and reduced meal applications and the fact that a universal meals program will remove an inducement for families to provide useful information. Any solution to this issue must balance the merits of a universal school meals program, the need for good data, and the administrative burdens placed on the Agency of Education and local districts from a process and workload standpoint.

School district business offices are already under tremendous burden, which has increased as the result of the pandemic. Presumably the bill can be improved in this regard as it progresses through the legislative process. Our Associations will assist to the best of our abilities.

Thank you.