

Testimony for VT Senate Education Committee, April 29, 2022 Recommendation to Pass S.100

My name is Scott Fay and I am the President of the School Nutrition Association of Vermont and the Director of Child Nutrition for the Essex Westford School District.

I am here today to ask the committee to pass S.100, and include both breakfast and lunch at no cost to all Vermont students, starting with the 2022-23 school year, and paid for from the education fund.

Universal School Meals are allowing us to focus our energy and resources where it belongs, on top-quality meal programs. We are creating and serving high-quality, healthy meals that appeal to students and provide the nourishment they need to learn. In other words, rather than running cash registers, and chasing money, my team is cooking and serving food. In my district, Essex Westford, we've closed our snack bars and eliminated a la carte foods from our cafeterias. Every student has equal access to the same nutritious foods. With that shift, our serving lines have changed and 67% more students are choosing school meals. Higher participation, closing a la carte lines, and a focus on a strong meal program normalize the serving lines to the point where students feel comfortable and the school lunch stigma is broken. By reducing the school lunch stigma, we are FINALLY able to feed ALL students with dignity, dignity that has eluded us prior to Universal Meals.

When I think about what it would be like to go back to the paid system, I have an incredible sense of anxiety. For two years, we've been doing Universal Meals and the thought of rebuilding those systems is incredibly stressful. When I think about having conversations with my teams about pivoting back to these incredibly complicated systems, I cringe. It's expensive, it's an increased workload, it's shifting our focus back to money, not kids and nutrition, and it's morally defeating.

By far, the worst part of administering school nutrition programs is calling families to collect on delinquent accounts. I spoke with a principal recently who said that this system builds barriers between schools and our most vulnerable students and families. When a family knows they have negative balance, all of a sudden, they become difficult to get ahold of. It's worth noting that these "most vulnerable" students don't qualify for the F-R meal program. Charging for school meals puts barriers between students and the nutrition they need to support their academic success and their social-emotional well-being.

In my experience, there are many reasons why "paid" category students come to school without food or money to pay for the food. It goes way beyond household income. Lives are complicated, people are stressed, jobs aren't stable, and no matter what your household income is, it can be hard to make ends meet. Not all parents have it together enough to make sure their kids have the means to get food at school. While the thought that the school lunch program feeds the kids that really need it is nice, it's not reality, and it's often not about family income. Things like single parenthood, divorce, cohabitation, and repartnering contribute to complexities that impact food security but not household income.

Universal Meals create a better learning environment in classrooms. Classrooms are less stressed, students are ready to learn and our teachers have a better chance to bring about desired outcomes. The School Nutrition Association of VT surveyed teachers on the impacts of Universal School Meals in their classrooms. Every single one of the ninety teachers responded in favor. We asked the following-

What impact has the opportunity to provide school meals at no charge to students or their families had on your classroom?

This is what some of our Vermont teachers had to say:

- *This program has had a huge impact. I know that all of my students are fed every day! It is the first year in 24 years that I don't have to keep a full snack shelf in my room. Kids are fed twice a day and if they don't finish everything at the meal, they save it for later in the day. This has been an AMAZING change, Thank you for feeding our future.*
- *When students are hungry they do not learn well. With hunger comes difficulty focusing, and with difficulty focusing inherently comes the distraction of others. Having the opportunity to provide meals to students at no charge has meant that classrooms as a whole are able to stay more focused. More learning is happening as a direct result of students not going hungry.*
- *Aside from the fact that well fed students feel more supported, less stressed and ready to learn, meals have been a crucial connector for student relationship building. These factors all serve to mitigate the rise of undesirable behaviors, while also increasing focus and engagement.*
- *Students access these meals without any worry of stigma or condescension from others. Every student seems to feel equal and have opportunity, which is healthier for them mentally and emotionally. It is a wonderful way to "level the playing field" and provide much needed food security for students in our community.*
- *I notice students being more alert and engaged and less tired and distracted. When students are nourished their brains are more prepared for learning.*
- *It has been AWESOME to know that every kid in class had lunch to eat no matter what. There was no shame in receiving a lunch, kids were more eager and likely to eat a hot lunch from school (more kids were doing it so I think they felt comfortable).*

For those of you who don't understand WHY it needs to be universal and WHY it doesn't work when it's only for those in need; it's about providing nourishment with dignity, it's about investing in the foundation of learning and ensuring students are ready to learn so that we get absolute most out of all resources we are already investing, it's about providing every student with equal access to the same things while they're at school, it's about recognizing school nutrition as an integral part of our educational systems, and it's about KNOWING that every Vermont student has access to a healthy breakfast and lunch while they're at school.

I wanted to briefly address what we're hearing in terms of competing interests with PCBs, etc. This is from an email string between several board members this morning. "There will always be something and there will always be competing priorities. OUR first priority should be addressing the injustice of childhood hunger in our schools. We have a once in a lifetime opportunity to end hunger and stigma in VT schools. Feed our kids first."

Universal School Meals are an investment that is IMPACTING the education system in many critical ways. Once again, I am asking the committee to pass S.100, and include both breakfast and lunch at no cost to all Vermont students, starting with the 2022-23 school year, and paid for from the education fund. Now is the time to make Universal School Meals permanent in Vermont. Every Student, Every Meal, Every School.

Thank you for including me in this important conversation. I really appreciate being here and sharing my perspective and experiences.

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