



38 Eastwood Drive, Suite 100
South Burlington, VT 05403

P: (802) 865-0255
F: (802) 865-0266
HungerFreeVT.org

Anore Horton, Executive Director, Hunger Free Vermont
ahorton@hungerfreevt.org / (802) 231-1293

4/28/2022

Questions From the Hearing

Members of the Committee asked several questions during this hearing for which I would like to offer answers. My formal testimony follows this section.

Have other states enacted legislation to provide state support for universal school meals?

Yes. Maine and California have passed legislation enacting permanent statewide universal school meals. Massachusetts has legislation pending now that would provide one year of funding to continue universal school meals next school year, similar to what we are doing in S.100 and H.737. Quite a few other states have universal school meal legislation in the works.

Is there evidence about the benefits of universal school meals? Was there any analysis done of the impact of universal school meals on the Vermont schools using this program prior to the pandemic?

Yes and yes. University of Vermont researchers have studied the effects of universal school meals in the 63 Vermont schools that adopted universal school meals prior to 2017 and found wide-ranging benefits beyond increased participation in the school meals programs. These benefits included improved student focus and readiness to learn, decreased stress and anxiety, an overall improved social climate, and an increase in the ability to purchase local foods, among others. A study of middle schools in New York providing universal meals found improved math and English language arts test scores. I have included the UVM study, and a summary of other research studies along with this testimony.

If the State subsidizes the cost of universal school meals, does Vermont give up the federal subsidy for school meals?

No. S.100 requires all schools to maximize the federal per-meal reimbursements for their breakfast and lunch programs by using one of the two federal provisions that allow schools to provide universal meals (the Community Eligibility Provision, for which only some schools meet the requirements, or Provision 2). Each of these provisions ensures that schools received federal funds for every meal they serve to students. It is also important to note that the federal reimbursement rates do increase each year to account for inflation. The state will fill in the gap in subsidy, but the vast majority of the funding for school meal programs will continue to come from the federal government. With universal school meals, the amount of federal funding coming into Vermont school meal programs is projected to increase by about \$5 million next year, because more meals will be served to more students, including many more meals served to students eligible for reimbursement at the full "free" rate.

Testimony Regarding Funding in H.737 for S.100, the Universal School Meals Act

Let me begin by thanking you, as members of the Vermont Senate, for passing S.100 last year. Your bill last year started the important conversation that has taken place over the summer and fall and throughout this session. As you know, S.100 has now been amended and passed by the House to include both breakfast and lunch for next school year, as well as including an opt-in for independent schools. H.737, which is before you now, contains the funding for S.100—although it is important to note that while \$36 million was set aside in H.737 by House Ways and Means, a more careful study of the estimated cost by both JFO and Hunger Free Vermont led the House Education Committee to lower the amount needed for next year to \$29 million.

By including the Universal School Meals Task Force in the Senate version of S.100, and then ensuring that the Task Force was able to proceed by including it in the Community Schools Act which passed last year, the legislature created the space to have the conversation this year about how to move forward with two meals, and also to see another year of universal meals being served in our schools at this time of continuing mental, emotional, and economic crisis for so many of our students and their families.

Most of the Universal School Meals Task Force's recommendations were either incorporated by the House Education Committee in the current version of S.100, or were incorporated into S.287. Hunger Free Vermont applauds the very thorough and careful work of the Task Force, which was comprised of staff from the Agencies of Education, Human Services, and Agriculture, Food and Markets, and we support the recommendations from the Task Force that are now included in S.100 and S.287.

As you know, for the past nearly 2 ½ years, all Vermont schools have been providing universal breakfast and lunch using waivers approved by Congress, and the USDA has been reimbursing schools for every meal they have served to students at the "free" reimbursement rate. Universal school meals have been a critical component of limiting the dramatic rise of hunger and food insecurity in Vermont, where families with children have been 5 times more likely than families without children to have faced food insecurity during the pandemic. As more and more of the pandemic economic and food supports have come to an end, universal school meals is one of the few that remains.

But these federal waivers will end on June 30th, despite widespread support for universal school meals across the country; a growing body of research that documents the educational, behavioral, and mental and physical health benefits for all children; and strong support from teachers, parents, students, and school staff for the relief they have experienced because universal school meals have been in place. At this point, there is no indication that the federal government is going to renew these waivers, and so at this critical moment, as the cost of food and other basic needs is soaring, and as hunger is again spiking in Vermont—especially in more rural areas, it is up to us to make sure that students do not have to relearn what hunger feels like at school this coming fall.

Vermont schools have also been under tremendous pressure—and will continue to be, as they face the challenge of how to get back to what we all hope will be some semblance of a more "normal" 22-23 school year, while grappling with the learning loss, loss of social skills, and mental health issues left behind by these past 2-plus years. Universal school meals is a proven intervention that is already in place, that has been shown to ease all of these challenges, that is already working well, and that hundreds of students, parents, and teachers are telling us they want and need to have continue next school year. School nutrition directors across the state have told us that dismantling the program and returning to the old, broken system of categorizing students by their family income in the cafeteria will be very difficult for them to do before the start of next school year—and have also told us that shifting from two universal meals down to one would create significant difficulties ("All of the hassle with none of the benefits" as one school nutrition director put it), and the Agency of Education agrees.

Retaining universal school meals for another full school year under the terms of S.100 will allow all schools to continue drawing down the maximum possible in federal funds. It will also allow us time to gather real data about the true cost of a statewide universal school meals system, and to learn more about universal school meals' benefits for meal program participation, for classroom learning, for reducing the anxiety of students and families by not reimposing the dual weights of social stigma and financial stress, for increased local food purchasing by schools, and for administrative ease.

Under S.100, most schools in Vermont would collect school meal applications from all families while providing universal meals—establishing their "base year" to operate Provision 2, while continuing to provide a way to collect the income information from families needed to distribute state and federal education funding among Vermont schools. The timing works well in conjunction with S.287, which creates a new Universal Income Declaration Form that will be ready in

school year 23-24 to collect the minimal family income information required to continue allocating state and federal education funding once school meal applications are no longer needed should the legislature, or individual school districts, choose to continue universal school meals beyond next school year.

Universal school meals is a highly effective tool for improving equity in our education system. By “equity,” I mean designing programs and interventions with the people who are most in need and least able to access the program or intervention in mind. Sometimes that means designing special, separate programs for specific groups. But, when you do not have any way to accurately identify who all of those most in need are and get them enrolled in your intervention, only a universal program will actually reach everyone most in need. Along the way, the universal intervention will also end up helping other people—in this case children and their families—who you never would have thought needed the help. Food insecurity and family instability is so often kept secret.

This is exactly the situation we face with the way the traditional federal school meal programs are structured - the eligibility cut-off is so low that it excludes many, many children who are food insecure (and therefore most in need) from accessing school breakfast and lunch. The Urban Institute estimated in 2019 that as many as 42% of food insecure children in Vermont live in households that are ineligible for free or reduced-price school meals because they are over the federal income cut-off. Given the rapid inflation in the cost of food, rent, and other basic necessities, that number is likely even higher today.

In Vermont, these kids and their families are the “missing middle.” In other legislation being passed this year, you all are working on housing solutions for this “missing middle,” and universal school meals is a nutrition solution for their children. These are the families who earn more than the 185% of the Federal Poverty Level that is the cut-off for free or reduced-price school meals (this year, that is just \$33,873 for a single parent with one child). The Joint Fiscal Office’s basic needs budget for a single parent with one child in a more urban part of our state is \$67,759 – almost 400% of the Federal Poverty Level. For larger families, the gap is even greater.

Of course, the other group of children most in need of free school meals are those growing up in Vermont’s lowest income families—those falling below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level. These children are eligible for free school meals, but that does not mean they all access them under the traditional free-reduced-paid school meals system. Because getting in the “hot lunch” line—or even just knowing yourself that your family can’t afford for you to buy your lunch at school—causes so much shame and embarrassment for a significant number of eligible students in every school, children regularly choose not to eat even though they are signed up, and thus effectively bar themselves from the healthy school meals they need. In other cases, it is parents who are too ashamed to apply, or who find the application too confusing or intimidating, or who can’t read English—again preventing children who are most in need from accessing food at school. This is why research shows that after the implementation of universal school meals, the participation of free-eligible students increases substantially.

Other children and families in need simply fall through the gaping holes in this system. For example, we know that the opioid epidemic has led to many Vermont kids being raised by their grandparents or other kin. Most of these arrangements, while they may be known to DCF, are not formal state-funded foster care placements. Yet, only children formally placed by the state in foster care are automatically eligible for free school meals. In the more common, less “official” kin-placement arrangements, household income may make these children ineligible for free school meals, even though these family members are struggling with the many unanticipated stresses and expenses of taking in children they weren’t planning on needing to raise.

Universal school meals eliminates all of these barriers to access immediately, and lays a foundation of equity, simplicity, and community at the heart of every school, every day, for every meal. I am asking you to keep the funding for universal school meals in H.737, and to please not end this critical support for Vermont’s children while this hunger and health crisis rages on.

Thank you for your time.