

**To:** Chair Durfee and House Agriculture Committee Members  
**From:** Tina Zuk, Government Relations Director, American Heart Association  
**Date:** February 16, 2023  
**Re:** Support for H.165 Universal School Meals

The American Heart Association is the nation's oldest and largest voluntary organization dedicated to fighting heart disease and stroke, whose mission is to be a relentless force for a world of longer, healthier lives. We are writing in support of **H.165**.

The American Heart Association along with other health and food security partners, including and especially the tireless and dedicated efforts of Hunger Free Vermont, have advocated to improve the school meals program at both the Federal and State level because we know that proper nutrition is critical to children's short- and long-term health outcomes.

Food insecurity can lead to a variety of negative health conditions, including diet-related disease, and has severe consequences on a child's future health. School meals are a vital source of nutrition and are a bulwark against chronic food insecurity.

As we've already seen in Vermont due to the wise move of the Vermont legislature this past session to fund breakfast and lunch for Vermont students, universal free school meals benefit thousands of kids each day and is a major step forward to eliminating health inequities. It has an incredible, positive ripple effect.

The committee need only look at the comments from school food service directors in Vermont to determine whether continuing to fund universal school meals makes sense:

"Youth come to school ready to eat and ready to learn."  
"There is better learning, less bullying."  
"It's the best slam-dunk investment we can make in our kids' education."  
"Feed kids well and prepare them for life."  
"You have changed the system and culture of school nutrition in Vermont."  
"You were able to address that empty belly in Vermont schools."  
"You have made education truly equitable to all students."

Please help us continue on this successful path. **H.165, enables a long-term solution to eliminate both hunger and stigma in Vermont schools. It carries on the commitment made by the legislature last year and allows Vermont youth to thrive.**

For students and families, healthy school meals for all: ensures that all students receive two free, healthy meals every school day; reduces the burden on families to complete the eligibility paperwork; helps the family budget; ensures that students whose families may move in and out of eligibility or are in the foster care system always receive healthy meals; and mitigates stigma and lunch shaming.

For the school food service program, healthy school meals for all: reduces administrative burden; provides a steady budget; eliminates unpaid meal balances; helps the lunch line move faster; and takes pressure off of school food service programs to increase revenue by serving foods that may be lower in nutritional quality.

We should not go back to the way we used to feed kids at school because it was not working and too many children were going hungry. Students who participate in school meals, particularly those who are experiencing food insecurity, have better health outcomes, have improved test scores, and are better able to concentrate in school. **Let's pay for good nutrition now instead of poor outcomes later.**

Thank you very much for your time and your consideration of H.165.

Tina Zuk

American Heart Association/ Stroke Association  
Government Relations Director