

Testimony in Support of Universal School Meals Funding, January 25, 2023 Recommendation - Permanent Funding off the Top of the Education Fund

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

Thank you for Universal School Meals! I am so happy to be here today to be able to thank you for the work you did last year and give you some information about how things are going in my schools. Universal Meals has completely and forever changed school nutrition programs. I couldn't be more proud to be part of that change and to be doing it alongside my amazing colleagues.

Over the past two and a half years of Universal School Meals, I have seen my program turned on its head, for the better. More kids are eating, we are scratch-cooking with whole foods. We hired a baker who bakes fresh sandwich loaves, muffins, and breakfast bread daily. We're processing local foods - we are actually processing local beef into meatballs for all EWSD students each month. We're purchasing better foods - more fresh fruit and vegetables. The stigma around school meals is gone. We are focusing entirely on high quality meals and have eliminated snacks from school cafeterias.

I wanted to show you all a photo of one of the things that I am most proud of. It's Essex High School's cafeteria each morning. Prior to Universal School Meals, this was literally a ghost town. Just over ten percent of the building was participating in breakfast service. Fast forward to today, and you can see the room is bursting with kids sharing a meal together. It's a happy, beaming community where almost 50 percent of students choose school breakfast. This is what equity looks like...this is a prime example of what supporting students' social and emotional well-being looks like.

Ahead of today's meeting, I spoke with several stakeholders across my learning community. Everyone I connected with loves Universal Meals and was excited for the opportunity to share their thoughts.

Sam, who's a ninth grader from Essex High School says - "Personally, I think the school community and vibe is much more positive than before. It is important everyone feels welcome and safe in school, and I believe the Universal School Meals has only made this better. Another thing is, it may have lowered the chances for bullying because no one can be picked on for not eating since the cost is eliminated. I don't know that for sure, but I think it makes sense".

Principal Briggs from Essex Middle School says - "There is no longer a stigma to eating meals provided by the school and certainly not for any child whose circumstances lead towards F/R meals. With the rise recently of food costs, I've heard from families how appreciative they are of the program. And, according to students, the overall taste of the food has improved as well".

Principal Grykien from Hiawatha Elementary School wanted me to share - "We have more kids eating breakfast and lunch than ever before. Our students eat a variety of foods and are trying new healthy options. This year I have heard students complimenting our food, "This is the recipe my mom should use!" and "I love our taco day!".

Sara, Founder's Memorial School Principal says, "One positive difference I have noticed is that more students are accessing breakfast which helps them get through their morning with healthy food in their bodies. Many students come to school hungry".

I spoke with Carmel Osborne, a fourth-grade teacher at Thomas Fleming school, who says - "With access to food for all my students, I have seen an increase in healthy eating habits. In the past, some students brought in snacks and lunch from home that had minimal nutritional value. They often had ingredients that were more detrimental to a student's ability to focus and be an alert, attentive learner. Now so many of my students access school-provided food and I can see the benefits in how it impacts their day in a positive way. In addition, this year I don't have children complaining that they are hungry simply because they have access to nutritious food in the morning and again in the afternoon".

Nurse Morris from Essex Elementary School says - "I have seen a profound effect on student's mental health with free lunches where students are excited to eat at school and do not have to worry about having enough food while learning. The physical benefits of having access to meals at school is present and expected but it has been wonderful to see the social and mental health benefits as well. I am noticing students having more energy and being excited about meal times, it has brought the EES community together".

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.

Universal School Meals are an investment that is IMPACTING the education system in many critical ways. We just need to make this permanent with funding from the top of 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.

Scott Fay

Essex Westford School District, Director of Child Nutrition
School Nutrition Association of Vermont, Board President