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## TESTIMONY

**Testimony To:** Senate Committee on Appropriations

**Respectfully Submitted by:** Heather A. Bouchey, Ph.D., Interim Secretary of Education

**Subject:** **H.165 – An act relating to school food programs and universal school meals**

**Date:** May 3, 2023

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the subject of H.165 – proposing to continue Vermont’s Universal Meals program in Vermont.

I appreciate the opportunity to clarify that the Administration does not support creating a permanent universal meals program this year. While we share the belief of many that access to good, healthy, and nutritious meals is an important element of success in learning, growth, and development, we have concerns about the costs of the program and the fact that all Vermonters will be asked to subsidize the meals of affluent Vermonters.

It is important to be clear that the Administration is in favor of providing free school meals to all Vermont children and families who need the extra support. However, we still have the same concerns shared last year about paying for affluent students’ lunches with taxes that impact lower-income families.

While the bill uses Education Fund surplus this year to pay for the initiative, in the out years should we not have surplus (economic forecasts show clouds on the horizon), it could result in up to 3-cents of property tax pressure.

There are many critical needs in education. From career technical education, to mental health, to school construction, many essential elements of our school system that impact student learning and wellbeing demand our attention. It is our job collectively, yours as the General Assembly, and ours as the administration and the oversight and support body for Vermont’s education system, to determine the highest need given our finite resources.

Our opposition to funding universal meals this year is respectfully grounded in the knowledge that our current resources should be devoted to the highest need, and we must ensure that our education system remains sustainable into the future. Our Education Fund surpluses will not continue unbounded into the future. We should invest our surpluses now, thoughtfully, in the interest of serving students.



I want to highlight AOE's engagement on this bill to date and going forward. Our State Director of Child Nutrition Programs, Rosie Krueger, who is a leader in this area not only in Vermont, but nationally, has worked with each committee that has taken up the bill in the interest of ensuring that should you pass the proposal, the policy you enact will meet three important and key tests:

1. That any program that does pass allows Vermont to draw down the maximum federal money for universal meals, thereby reducing overall cost of the program to Vermont citizens.
2. That any program that does pass does not violate federal law or regulation on school meals, so that Vermont students can continue to access school lunch, whether free or paid.
3. That any program that does pass is implementable by both the state and by school food authorities, so that Vermont students can continue to access school lunch, whether free or paid.

I want to close by saying that this is an important policy to get right. Despite our concerns about funding, we want to ensure that any program that ultimately results is efficient, effective, and in the end, works well for Vermont students. In that spirit, I appreciate the opportunity to join you this afternoon, and am happy to work with you on this proposal.