

April 1, 2023

Dear Legislators,

I am writing to you because I would like you to make Universal School Meals permanent as written in H.165 *An act relating to school food programs and universal school meals*. There are many reasons why Universal School Meals should be permanent. One reason is that kids need the nutrition to learn. Also, for the 33,900 Vermont kids who are food insecure, many or all of their meals are at school and they rely on these meals. Lastly, the Universal School Meals program eliminates the stigma of kids having to say they're part of the free or reduced food program.

Kids need food to learn. If they don't have the nutrition they need, they won't have the energy to pay attention and won't learn. If kids aren't getting enough healthy food, they will be sick more often and might miss school. Then they will miss out on learning and it is an ongoing cycle. Also, kids who aren't getting enough food might zone out because they are thinking about how hungry they are, or thinking about the food they don't have. According to Hunger Free Vermont, Universal School Meals improve student's grades by up to ten weeks worth of learning. Universal School Meals give kids what they need to learn.

According to the Vermont Agency of Education, 34.85% of Vermont kids rely on meals at school. These kids come to school hungry and without breakfast and lunch. Many of these kids are embarrassed to be in the 'free or reduced' lunch line every day. If you make Universal School Meals permanent, that won't happen. Between 2019 and 2022 lunch participation has risen about 10% because of Universal School Meals. School lunch should be free to all students no matter their family's income. In the memoir "Free Lunch" by Rex Ogle, Rex, the main character is really embarrassed because he is part of

the free or reduced lunch program and all of the other kids pay quickly and leave. But Rex has to shout at the cashier because she is hard of hearing. All the other kids hear and tell him to hurry up and then he is even more embarrassed. I feel like that shouldn't have to happen to other kids.

Universal School Meals are really helpful to many kids who are from low income families and are on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Also known as 3SquaresVT. The extra money from the pandemic ended March 31st, so it is even more important that Universal School Meals are permanent. The SNAP Challenge is where you get \$4.20 a day per person for food. I am doing the challenge for a week. My family had \$147 for our food. This challenge was created so other people would know how it feels to live off of SNAP. It was very stressful because I didn't know if I was going to run out of food. On the second day of the project there was only half a gallon of milk left and only half of our bread left. I was hungry a lot. I learned it can be really hard to pay attention in class if your stomach is hurting. Also, many healthier foods are more expensive. So people who are low income can't buy things like salads. Universal School Meals were very helpful. Without these, my family and I wouldn't have had enough food to eat. School breakfast and lunch meant we could afford healthier food.

To recap, kids need these nutritious meals to pay attention and focus. Many children rely on Universal School Meals as their main food source. Finally, Universal School Meals eliminates stigma for low-income kids. I hope you will make Universal School Meals permanent.

Sincerely,

Cady Baker-Rouse

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