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Success of Act 64, Vermont's Permanent Universal School Meals Program in Vermont

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Thank you for inviting me here today to share the tremendous success of Act 64, Vermont's permanent Universal School Meals law. I would like to begin by sharing some statements about how Act 64 is working from the people who are implementing it in schools, and I hope that each of you hears in their words a loud and profound expression of gratitude to this Committee for all of your hard work over three sessions to pass this game-changing law for students, families, and schools.

"Universal Meals in Vermont has helped so many families. This program has not only improved access to nutrition for children but also helped to ensure that families can allocate funds to other important expenses, such as housing and healthcare. Universal School Meals has created a more inclusive and supportive environment where children feel accepted and can focus on their education without worrying about where their next meal will come from. By giving our students access to healthy and satisfying breakfast and lunch options, we can set them up for success in the classroom! My family has certainly benefited from the program and I know many folks in our community feel the same way."
—*Kelly White, Site Coordinator, Essex Westford School District*

"The students' expressions of gratitude serve as validation for the effort invested in enacting Universal School Meals into legislation. USM has promoted inclusivity among students, alleviated financial worries about school meals for families, and delivered substantial advantages to our community."
—*Stephanie Gates, SNS, Food Services Director, Bennington Rutland Supervisory Union*

"Universal School Meals has changed the culture of school meals at Lamoille North SU. In our middle and high school meal times are far less stressful for students. They come through our lines with healthy, delicious food choices. They interact with our cashiers with friendliness, lively banter and gratitude where, in the past, there had been some trepidation, fear and shame. My 40yr old daughter was at a gathering with other Moms and the talk was all about how great it was that they do not have to rush their kids in the morning to get breakfast into them, knowing that they can have breakfast with their friends at school. For families it has relieved some stress from the morning rush. It is a joy everyday to see children just enjoying meal times together regardless of income levels, they all have the same choices."
—*Karyl Kent, Food Services Director, Lamoille North Supervisory Union*

"With Vermont's Universal School Meals Program, schools are able to focus on producing quality meals and providing excellent service to students. Cash collection and the process of collecting on bad debt associated with paid meal programs has historically put wedges between schools and families in need of support. With universal school meals we don't create barriers between families in need and schools, we build bridges."
—*Scott Fay, Food Services Director, Essex Westford School District*

“Universal School Meals has helped make our cafeterias a place where students feel safe and welcome; they come to school everyday knowing their basic needs will be taken care of. For our younger students, they live in a world that has never shamed and stigmatized them for not having lunch money. Some of the most sincere gratitude comes from our teachers and staff who see the sea change in school culture. As a border community, many of our teachers live in New Hampshire, and send their children to schools without Universal School Meals—for them the contrast could not be more stark. Not only is USM money back in the pockets of VT working families, who no longer have to pack meals or worry about lunch money, their kids get to go to schools where meals are enjoyed by everyone who wants them, stress-free.”
—Harley Sterling, Nutrition Director, Windham Northeast Supervisory Union

Act 64, Vermont’s permanent Universal School Meals law, is working in tandem with the Local Food Purchasing Incentive, the improved Household Income Form, the Medicaid Direct Certification Pilot, and USDA rule changes to the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), as the Legislature intended when you passed it last session:

- Student participation in school meals continues to increase, and the greatest increase continues to be among students living in the lowest-income households that are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals.
- Although student participation has increased, the cost to the State was \$4.5 million (15%) lower than projected last school year, and the Agency of Education expresses confidence that costs will be lower again this school year.
- Act 64 is proving to be an effective and economical investment in improving student mental health and learning outcomes. Vermont-NEA has shared with us that teachers are telling them that universal school meals are a “game-changer” for student behavior and learning.
- Thanks to the expansion of CEP to 130+ additional schools during this current school year, along with the implementation of the Medicaid Direct Certification Pilot by Vermont’s Agency of Education, the vast majority of families with school-age children will never again have to fill out intrusive and complicated school meal applications, while at the same time, more students are being accurately identified as low income. Not only does this lower the State cost for Act 64 and increase the federal dollars for school meal programs, but it also is ensuring a more accurate and equitable distribution of State education funds and Federal Title I funds to Vermont’s school districts.
- The implementation of Act 64 has contributed to a dramatic expansion of the number of Vermont towns that are eligible to operate summer and afterschool meal programs fully funded by the Federal Child Nutrition Programs. About 80 mostly small and rural towns that were never before eligible may now offer these universal programs, which provide up to two free meals per day for children of all ages during the summer, and which add free meals and snacks to afterschool programs.

Let me pause here to add an acknowledgement of Vermont’s Agency of Education Child Nutrition Programs team. Their recommendations last session significantly improved the bill that became Act 64, and their skillful implementation efforts have made Vermont’s Universal School Meals Program the most cost-effective and comprehensive one in the country.

In closing, what the stories and data that have been shared with you today show is that food security is a policy choice, and when the State of Vermont steps into leadership for food security, our collective action is successful.

Imagine the future possibilities for Vermont now that no student in our public schools will ever again be trying to learn while hungry!