

To: Vermont Senate Committee on Education

From: Don Tinney, Vermont-NEA President

Date: February 1, 2023

Good afternoon. For the record, my name is Don Tinney, a 31-year veteran English teacher from South Hero, currently serving as president of Vermont-NEA. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today as you consider legislation to make Universal School Meals permanent in all Vermont schools. This important program has not only improved the health and nutrition of Vermont's children and youth but has sent a clear message to every student—we care about you.

Children's healthy development depends upon proper nutrition throughout their growing years. We know that pre-natal nutrition is critical for the healthy development of babies, and we also know that the need for healthy nourishment never ends. Nourishing meals must be an integral part of every student's school day to support adequate brain development and functioning for academic learning. Nutritious meals are an essential part of the school day.

Vermont educators work hard each day to create safe, compassionate learning environments, where all students grow intellectually and socially. When students are hungry, they simply cannot concentrate on class activities or lessons. Making sure our students are well-nourished contributes not just to the quality of their lives but to the quality of their learning. Children distracted by their hunger simply cannot learn because they cannot focus on their lessons, and when students can't focus, they tend to distract their peers, thereby disrupting other students' learning opportunities.

As you all know, everyone involved with public education went above and beyond the call of duty to keep our students physically in school during the pandemic, because we all know that school is much, much more than just a place to deliver instruction. Students need to be in school for their mental health, their social and emotional well-being, and their connection to the greater community.

Vermont educators are committed to making sure that every school in Vermont is a sanctuary for every student. All students must feel welcomed, safe, and nurtured. Providing healthy, universal breakfast and lunch for all students is one of the most effective ways for achieving this goal. Our schools have been doing this since the start of the pandemic, so not only do we know how important it is, but we also know how doable it is. It has been working.

As a third-grade teacher in her 23rd year of teaching said to me just this week, "Universal school meals are a godsend." At our fall district meetings around the state this year, the consensus was clear that Vermont educators want to see universal school meals become permanent. Removing the stigma attached to the "free and reduced" system has made a world of difference for many of our students. Why would we go backward? The universal school meals program is working—our educators see the direct benefits in assuring that their students are not going hungry.

We know, just like healthy play at recess and quiet moments of silent reading, school meals are an integral part of the school day. Nourishing our students--satisfying their hunger and quenching their thirst--is as important as delivering academic instruction. We also know that breaking bread with one another is one way in which we build community, since dining together allows students an opportunity to get to know each other a little better and have authentic conversations, in the same way we adults get together over coffee or participate in luncheon meetings. Universal school meals contribute to a student's sense of belonging to the greater school community.

Vermont-NEA stands in full support of universal breakfast and lunch programs in our schools. Because this nutrition program is as essential to the operation of a school as books, electricity, adequate staffing, up-to-date technology, and well-maintained buildings, we believe the cost of Universal School Meals needs to come out of the State Education Fund without attribution to any specific district, then spread across the full ed fund for tax purposes.

Thank you. I'm happy to answer any further questions.