



To: Senate Committee on Education

From: Jay Nichols , Executive Director

Date: Feb 1, 2023

Subject: Universal School Meals

Good afternoon, for the record, Jay Nichols , Executive Director of the Vermont Principals' Association. My testimony on Universal School Meals is similar to my previous testimony both separately and in conjunction with the school boards and superintendents association last session.

We understand and support the merits of Universal School Meals and, in fact, have advocated at the National level with the U.S. Congress because we believe that school meals should be provided at the federal level as they were during the pandemic.

In Vermont, last year, we used surplus funds to allocate the economic resources necessary to provide universal meals to all of our students. At the time, we talked about the potential of a permanent funding source. What I have heard so far from advocates is the funding should come from the Education Fund. To be honest, I'm not thrilled about that approach. Students not having breakfast or lunch or being unable to pay for these meals is more of a societal issue than an educational issue. When we add new ongoing funding stress on the Education Fund we are essentially placing more burden on the taxpayers.

There has been an increase in the number of programs over the last couple of decades that impact the Education Fund. And, any of these programs or policies could be said to be connected to school. We can make the connection to nutritious meals at school supporting academic and social gains for students. However, we can do that for a lot of other things in society as well.

If we add school meals to the Education Fund we may force some schools to cut other programs if they are facing budgetary restrictions. This would be especially true if we simply forced local schools to pay these costs as part of their budget development; but even taking it “off the top” of the Education Fund can still have similar adverse impact.

Finally, we hear the narrative that Vermont spends too much money on public education K-12. We spend more per pupil for public education than virtually any other state; one of the reasons this is the case is because the things we use school budgets for in other states are not provided. Or if they are provided, are provided in some other way. Our public schools are transparent. Voters can see what they pay for unlike a private school business. Anything we add that will create stress to the system should be examined against the list of other priorities the General Assembly may have and that schools have to fulfill their mission.

In summation, we fully support Universal Meals for the myriad of reasons that others have articulated. Our one request is that a funding source other than the Education Fund be used for this important societal goal.