

As members of the committee with jurisdiction over food issues, we all know how important the school lunch program is to the well being of Vermont children and youth.

We know there are some schools already doing a great job cooking meals from scratch in Vermont, often with ingredients grown on farms or gardens close to them, and yet other schools face constraints that make it more challenging to transition to cooking more from scratch, using whole foods.

The quality of food available to kids in school cafeterias across Vermont is sometimes excellent and sometimes not. Our Farm to School programs are doing great work bringing locally grown Vermont produce into our schools and I've heard from teachers how much the students enjoy eating vegetables they have grown. We can get kids to like healthy food, but we need to remove or at least reduce the tempting fast and ultra processed foods that are not the best nutritional option and can actually cause our kids harm.

I worked in a Vermont public high school last year and watched many students carrying trays filled with tater tots and chicken nuggets day after day. Rarely did I see a fruit or vegetable, unless you count the tater tots. Kids can build better eating habits if we provide them with tempting healthy options. I visited the cafeteria in my hometown of Westminster a couple years ago and was impressed with the abundance of tasty items such as hearty salads, and the kids seemed eager to eat everything..

The food we feed our kids impacts how they grow.
Vermont's kids like those across America are facing an obesity crisis.

According to the Vermont Department of Health, 60% of Vermonters are obese or overweight, which leads to many chronic diseases: 40,000 new cases of Type 2 Diabetes and 42,000 of cardiovascular disease develop in Vermonters every year.

About 1 in 4 Vermont youth aged 12-19 is overweight or obese, and even among very young children, ages 2-5, enrolled in the WIC program, 13.5% are already obese.

There are several factors contributing to the excess weight issues and chronic disease in Vermont's children. Increased consumption of empty calorie, low- nutrient dense food and reduced physical activity both greatly contribute to rising obesity rates in Vermont's children.

With many children in Vermont consuming at least 1-2 meals a day at schools, we have an opportunity to have a positive impact on the health of children here in Vermont.

California was the first state to make a law setting a timeline for the elimination of ultra processed foods, with their Real Food, Healthy Kids Act that passed last year, but 30 other states are considering it too. We all want the best for our kids and that means real food, not chemicals and highly processed foods.

The intention of H 868 is to help Vermont move towards elimination of ultra processed foods in Vermont School Lunches and move towards a day where lunches will be made almost entirely from whole foods, and are minimally processed without high salt, high fat, or excessive sugar.

Transitioning Vermont's School lunches will be more challenging for some schools than for others. This will not be a quick process, nor an easy one, but I believe we all agree that serving kids wholesome, real food, instead of highly processed, less nutritious offerings is a goal worth pursuing, for Vermont's kids.

California's law to eliminate ultra processed foods focused on a list of chemicals and when those chemicals would no longer be allowed to be served in their school lunch program. West Virginia passed a bill which eliminated some food dyes and preservatives. Our bill is not going to look like that, at least not the version I hope we will move forward this session. This is partly because we don't have time to learn about all the chemicals that go into packaged, highly processed food and determine whether they should be banned before Crossover. More importantly, we want the process of helping move all Vermont schools towards a healthier set of offerings to be decided on by a variety of stakeholders, including the Nutrition Directors who would be making the changes. These changes should be determined by a bigger team that includes a lot more members who work on school meals everyday and a lot fewer legislators.

So, what do I envision for this bill, this year? There are two major features that I would like to see in this bill.

Firstly,

I would like to see H 868 establish a Vermont School Meals Task Force that would include school nutrition directors, teachers, legislators, parents and advocates involved in food policy.

The group would answer questions like

- What are the challenges facing schools that use more ultra processed foods?
- What are the strategies that the schools utilizing the most local produce have embraced to make from-scratch cooking workable?
- What foods or chemicals do we want to phase out?
- Are there other factors (such as school schedule and how long students are available to eat breakfast and lunch) that we need to factor in when making plans for all Vermont Schools?

I spoke with a School Nutrition Director yesterday and he told me if we passed the bill and started Vermont School Meals Task Force after the session adjourned in May, we could convene the Task Force and come up with guidelines to submit to the House and Senate Agriculture Committees and the Department of Education by December 15. These recommendations

should consider the full day at school and how the food available to students can be as healthy as possible, with ultra processed foods minimized or faded out over perhaps a 5-6 year period. The recommendations of the Task Force would be sent to members of this Committee as well as to the Senate Agriculture Committee and the future of the elimination of ultra processed foods would be in the hands of the next legislative body.

The second element I would want to include in the bill would be to set a **timeline to accomplish the goals of transitioning to healthier school lunches**: when do we need lunches to start changing by? When do we want the transition to the new guidelines to be complete? These issues will be determined by this Committee.

So my vision for this year is to have H868 set up a Task Force to develop guidelines to help improve the delivery of meals without harmful chemicals and additives and with more whole foods and to give the Task Force a timeline of when we want transitions to happen by. I look forward to working on this important goal with our Committee.

Definitions from California bill below

The only foods/snacks/entrees that can be sold in elementary/middle/high school are fruit, vegetable, dairy, protein, or whole grain rich food items;
foods with a fruit, vegetable, dairy, protein, or whole grain item as its first ingredient;
or combination foods containing at least one-quarter cup of fruit or vegetable that meets the following standards:

Not more than 35 percent of its total calories from fat.

Less than 10 percent of its total calories from saturated fat.

Not more than 35 percent of its total weight composed of sugar, including naturally occurring and added sugar.

Contains less than 0.5 grams of trans fat per serving.

Contains no more than 200 milligrams of sodium per item, package, or container sold

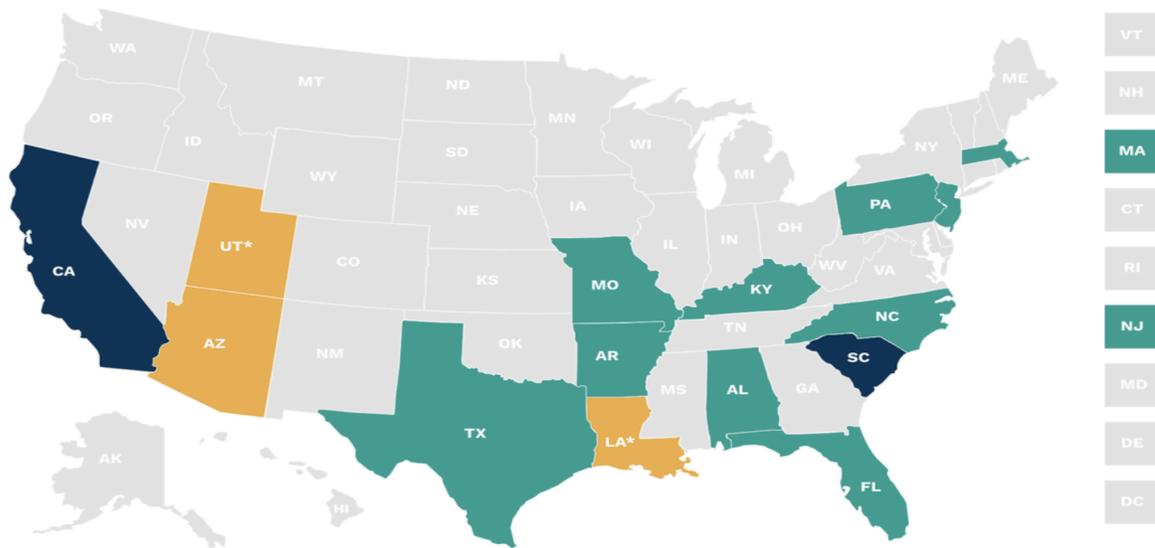
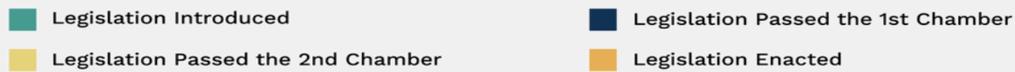
Contains not more than 200 calories per individual food item

Ultra-processed foods (UPFs)

- **Foods made from refined ingredients and additives, bearing little resemblance to whole foods, and are characterized by long ingredient lists with items not found in home kitchens, like preservatives, artificial flavors, sweeteners, and emulsifiers, designed for convenience, taste, and shelf-stability.**
- **Foods made from ingredients that have undergone a series of industrial processes and have added sugars and additives.**

- Foods with multiple ingredients that wouldn't be found in a kitchen - such as chemical-based preservatives, emulsifiers like hydrogenated oils, sweeteners like high fructose corn syrup, and artificial colors and flavors
- UPFs undergo processing like pre-frying, molding, extrusion, fractioning, and chemical alterations that lead to the final product having no resemblance to its original ingredients
- They are designed to be convenient and appealing to our palate
 - Examples include sodas, packaged snacks (chips, cookies, crackers, candy, boxed mac and cheese), frozen and ready-to-eat meals, hotdogs
- They are typically high in saturated fat, sodium, and sugar, and lower in water and fiber content, and more calorie-dense per gram compared to whole foods.

Which states considered legislation defining ultra-processed foods in 2025?



Source: MultiState. Data as of 7/29/2025. Note: * indicates that the original version of a bill defined ultra-processed foods; however, the provision was removed through an amendment prior to passage.

