

Testimony for the House Agriculture Committee
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February 12, 2025

Thank you for the opportunity to address the importance of farm to school and the Vermont Universal School Meal program to our state. For the record, my name is Bob Hildebrand, I am a resident of Montpelier, Vermont and am a Food Service Director with the Abbey Group. I currently manage the Central Vermont Supervisory Union schools and three schools in Orange East Supervisory Union, as well as the cafeteria in this building. We're asking today that you continue to support the Farm to School & Early Childhood program with level funding base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2026. Also, support the Local Food Incentive program for schools at \$500,000 level funding base appropriation.

The Universal School Meal (USM) program in Vermont has been an unqualified success story since its inception in 2020. The USM program has supported Vermont children with the fuel that they need to be successful learners, has fostered an atmosphere of inclusion around shared mealtime and has been a vital component of our ability to support Vermont farmers and food producers through increased purchases of local food. It has done so in a very fiscally efficient manner, costing much less than originally planned.

Those of us in the child nutrition field have long known that students have unequal access to nutritious food outside of the school day. Prior to the availability of the USM in Vermont this inequality also extended to the school day.

Many families did not qualify for free meals under the prior means tested program, but were struggling to make ends meet. These children often did not have an adequate meal from home and either just did not eat while at school, or did eat and built up enormous school meal debt for their families. This school meal debt resulted in significant waste of administrative resources attempting to collect the outstanding debt and typically ended up being borne by the school districts when written off as uncollectable. Make no mistake, Vermont was already paying for many school meals for families that did not qualify under the USDA Free/Reduced program, but we were doing so in a way that both stigmatized students and was incredibly inefficient.

The current administration says that USM pays for meals that go to families that can afford to pay. This is true. But that slice of Vermont families is a small minority compared to the large number of families who benefit from USM that really need the help. Besides the low income households who would qualify for Free or Reduced price meals under the USDA School Meal program, there is a large cohort of families who make too much to qualify, but are struggling to meet the high cost of living. The income cutoff to qualify is very low - around \$41,000 for a family of 4 - leaving many families who are very much struggling without access. Can a family of 4 making the Vermont median household income of about \$78,000 really afford the \$2,700 or so it would cost to buy school lunch and breakfast for their children each year?

I have seen the results of USM at Vermont schools going back over 10 years in some cases. I have witnessed first hand the change in the school's culture and environment, as the need to worry if children have the fuel they need to learn is mitigated. It makes the cafeteria a place where everyone is equal and kids can just eat a meal - no hoops to jump through, no questions asked. The cafeteria no longer is a place that further stratifies our society into the haves and have nots. I also work in schools in NH and have seen those programs go right back to the bad old days as soon as that state reverted back to the means tested model.

If a school meal program struggles with participation because of affordability then the program loses money. Any deficit in the school meal program is paid for out of the school district's general funds. We were already paying these bills, just in a hidden, inefficient way that denied children meals and burdened families.

Just as importantly, the USM has allowed school meal programs to greatly increase their spending on local Vermont produced foods. In the schools I manage for CVSU, we increased our purchases of Vermont foods to over \$52,000 last year - translating to over 18% of our total spending on food. We focus on product categories that will make a big impact on our purchasing - beef, yogurt, apples, maple syrup. We have developed strong relationships with our local producers, like Rep Burtt for apples and John Buck, who is with me today, for maple syrup. Last year we supported Buck Family Maple with over \$4,100 in syrup purchases.

Here's how it works for us. When we have USM, more children eat school meals. This increased participation gives us much greater labor production efficiency, allowing us to increase the percentage of the program's revenue that we can spend on food. This affords us the flexibility to pay a little more for local foods vs vegetables from California, beef from Iowa, apples from Washington and fake maple syrup. Farmers know that they can count on this income and adjust their production and sales plans accordingly. It is the definition of a virtuous cycle.

USM meals have been a big success in Vermont. We are feeding many more children than under the old system. We are buying much more locally produced Vermont food. Vermont families who are struggling to meet the high cost of living can be assured that their children are at least getting nutritious meals while at school. Children can just eat a meal that they need without worrying about how it makes them look, or if it is putting their family into debt. This is all happening at a pretty minimal cost to Vermont taxpayers. Please don't allow Vermont to go back to a system that fails our families and our local economy.