

Keep Vermont's Commitment to Universal School Meals

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The State of Vermont made a commitment to families, students, educators, school administrators, and communities when Act 64 of 2023 passed with strong support from all of Vermont's political parties:

- **Breakfast and lunch for every student on every school day at no charge to students.**
- **Governor Scott allowed this bill to become law without his signature on June 14, 2023.**
- **A one-year pilot passed with strong support in 2022 had already tested and proven the value of a universal approach to feeding students during the school day, and so Vermont made a permanent commitment to universal school meals.**

**Governor Scott is now proposing to *repeal* this law
and end this commitment
in his proposed budget for FY 2026.**

This would mean...



Governor Scott's Proposed Repeal of Vermont's Universal School Meals Program would cost Vermont Kids, Families, Schools, and Farmers:

- **2.5 million fewer healthy school meals** served to Vermont kids each year.
- 27,000 children in families in the “missing middle” would have to pay for school meals or pack meals from home, **costing families \$1,500 per child per year.**
 - **This would cost families \$24 million a year** in school meals or packed lunches from home at the average cost of a meal in Vermont (\$4.34/meal)
- **Vermont schools and farms lose millions in federal funds.**
 - \$7-10 million less for Vermont's school meal programs and farms.



Governor Scott's Proposed Repeal of Vermont's Universal School Meals Program would stick schools with the bill:

- School districts would have to cover millions in unpaid meal debt, which is skyrocketing in states without Universal School Meals. School principals would return to being bill collectors.
 - In Concord, NH, families' unpaid debt to their school meal programs has increased 620% since the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - In school year 2018-19, Hunger Free Vermont documented about \$1.5 million in unpaid school meal program debt in Vermont schools.
 - Just a 300% increase = \$4.5 million in unbudgeted school district general funds each year.
- School districts would have to shore up their school meal program finances with school budget general fund transfers each year—as most of them did every year before Act 64. Likely \$5 million more each year.



Governor Scott's Proposed Repeal of Vermont's Universal School Meals Program would cost Vermont Kids, Families, Schools, and Farmers—all year round:

- Dozens of communities rendered *ineligible* to operate the federal summer or afterschool meal programs.
- Thousands of Vermont kids miss out on summer meals served each year—with the burden falling back on families.
- More children would experience summer hunger, and the documented months of learning loss that accompany it.
- *Additional millions in federal funding for summer and afterschool meals left on the table in DC.*

REPEALING ACT 64 means:

Vermont school meal programs and farms lose \$7-10 million a year in federal funds

Participation in school breakfast and lunch drops by 20-40%.

Cash registers are required in the cafeteria; staff time shifts from scratch cooking to managing paperwork and entering student codes on computer screens.

Each meal costs schools more to make as they lose economies of scale.

School meal program debt and debt collection returns; administrative burden increases



Vermont's Universal School Meals Program is a Stunning Success!

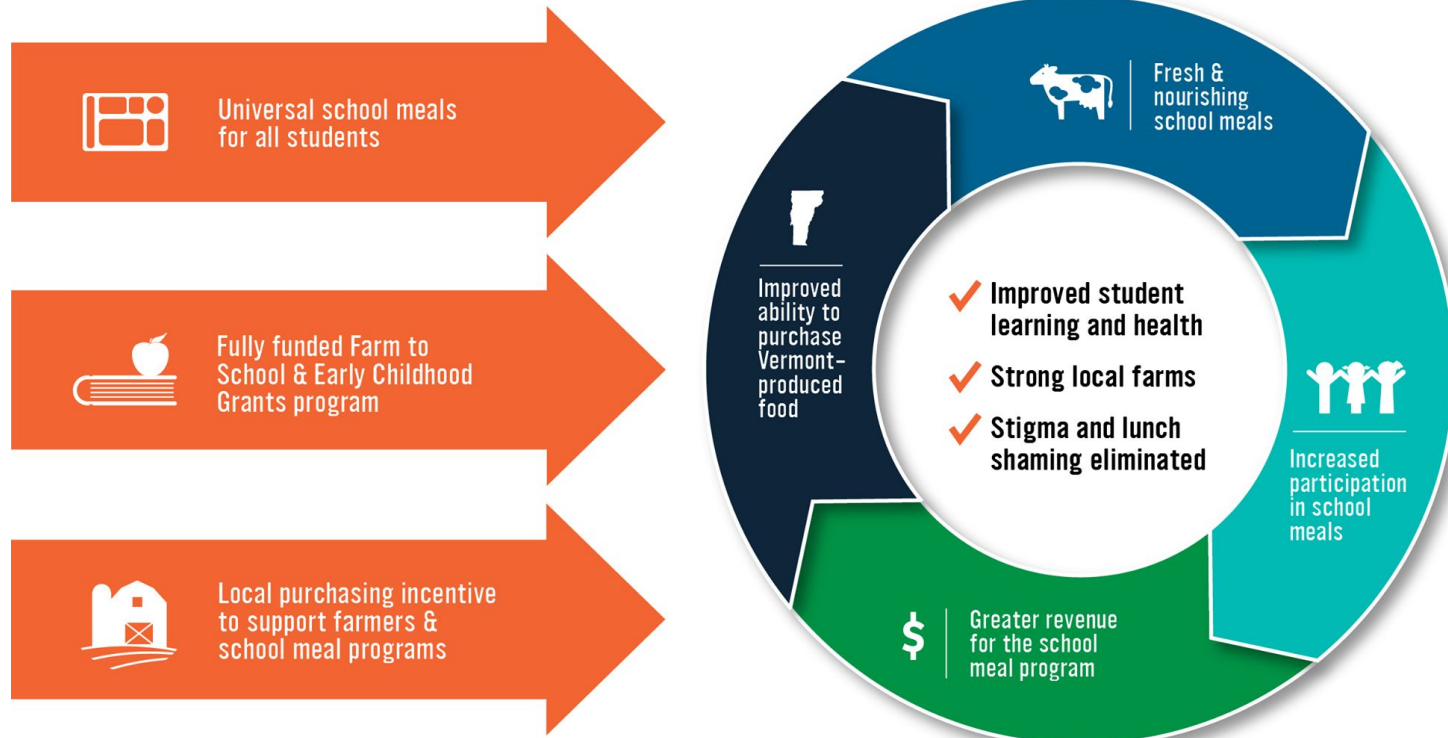
- **No student has had to learn what hunger feels like in any Vermont public school.**
- **More students are eating nutritious school meals than ever before**
 - 1.4 million more breakfasts (a 36% participation increase)
 - 1.1 million more lunches (a 20% participation increase) were served last school year, compared to the 2018-2019 school year (the last full school year before the COVID-19 pandemic).
 - That's *2.5 million additional meals* eaten by students in public and independent schools as a direct result of Vermont's Universal School Meals Program.
- As a direct result of this dramatic increase in student participation, **federal funding for Vermont school meal programs has increased 44% from 2019, to \$34.5 million in [fiscal year 2024](#).**




Vermont's Universal School Meals Program is a Stunning Success:

- **Universal School Meals has helped more communities in the state qualify for summer and afterschool meal programs that are *fully reimbursed by the federal government.***
 - 1 million meals served in summer 2024– our most ever!
 - \$3.8 million in federal funding for summer meals in 2024
 - Vermont [leads the nation](#) in summer meals participation
- **Universal School Meals eases the burden on local school budgets**
 - School general fund transfers for meal programs have decreased by 37% since 2019, despite ~30% food inflation in that time.
- **Families save money**– buying school meals or packing lunch costs \$1,500 per child per year.
 - Under the provisions of Act 64, the average Ed Fund taxpayer pays approximately \$30 per year toward Universal School Meals.



Universal school meals feeds the local economy – Schools are buying more food from Vermont farms and producers in a powerful virtuous cycle:





The 1/8/25 Summary Report of Key Themes from the Vermont Agency of Education’s Listen and Learn Tour documents the strong support for Vermont’s Universal School Meals Program among education leaders, teachers, and the Vermont public.

For example:

- “Important to keep universal school meals” (p. 67)
 - “Universal meals support student success” (p. 91)
 - “Universal school meals is vitally important—keep it!” (p. 105)
 - “Universal school meals meet basic needs for participation” (p. 119)
 - “Universal school meals” is a key student opportunity (p. 124)
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What students, parents, and teachers want to tell you about Vermont's Universal School Meal Program:

“I am so grateful for free school lunches. You saved us!!”
(student)

“Every student feels respected at school.” (student)

“I love school lunch it fuels your brain so you can do better in school.” (student)

“Two promised meals a day! It's a huge deal.” (parent)


“Thank you for helping get my kiddos free meals!” (parent)

“Equality for everyone. No one turned away.” (parent)

“Food is a basic human need and kids deserve the meals that keep them going.” (teacher)

“My students are ready to learn!” (teacher)

“All kids have an equal chance at learning.” (para-educator)



Children and youth are at risk of food insecurity and hunger when they live in households that don't make enough income to meet basic needs, unless their basic needs are met through other means.



One way to look at the relationship between eligibility for school meals and families who can't afford to pay for school meals is by comparing the JFO's basic needs budget calculations to the federal income cutoffs for free and reduced price school meals:

The income eligibility threshold for Free & Reduced Price Meals is half the income needed to meet basic needs in Vermont, according to JFO. (These are the Vermont Joint Fiscal Office's most recent basic needs budget calculations for families living in more urban areas of VT.)

	<u>JFO basic needs budget</u>	<u>USDA cut-off for free or reduced-price school meals</u>	<u>% of JFO Basic Needs Threshold</u>
<u>2 parent, 2 child household</u>	\$104,344	\$57,720	55.3%
<u>1 parent, 2 child household</u>	\$89,573	\$47,767	53.3%



What is the relationship between eligibility for school meals and families who can't afford to pay for school meals?

The Medicaid income threshold for children is 317% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), and 68,000 children in Vermont are enrolled in Medicaid.

DVHA's Medicaid Direct Certification estimate tells us that more than **23,000 students** are living in the income gap between eligibility for Medicaid and Free and Reduced Price Meals.

JFO's basic needs budget shows that the income needed to afford basic needs is even higher than eligibility for Medicaid for many families.



<u>Students in the Eligibility Gap</u>	23,000+
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“The Missing Middle”

How many students are ineligible for free and reduced price meals, but struggle to meet all their basic needs at home?

This is data from the U.S. Census Bureau. These income brackets show how many students live in lower-income households, compared to the number of students living in higher-income households.

Vermont School Age Children by Household Income Group		
Household Income Bracket	Number of School Age Children	Percentage of School-Age Children
\$0-\$50,000	22,305	23.7%
\$50,000-\$100,000	30,730	32.7%
\$100,000-\$150,000	22,465	23.9%
\$150,000-\$200,000	9,232	9.8%
\$200,000-\$250,000	4,438	4.7%
\$250,000-\$300,000	1,405	1.5%
\$300,000+	3,750	4.0%
Total	94,325	

*Data from 2022 Vermont ACS 5-Year Estimates

“The Missing Middle”



Total students
prorated to 81,000
students enrolled in
VT public schools

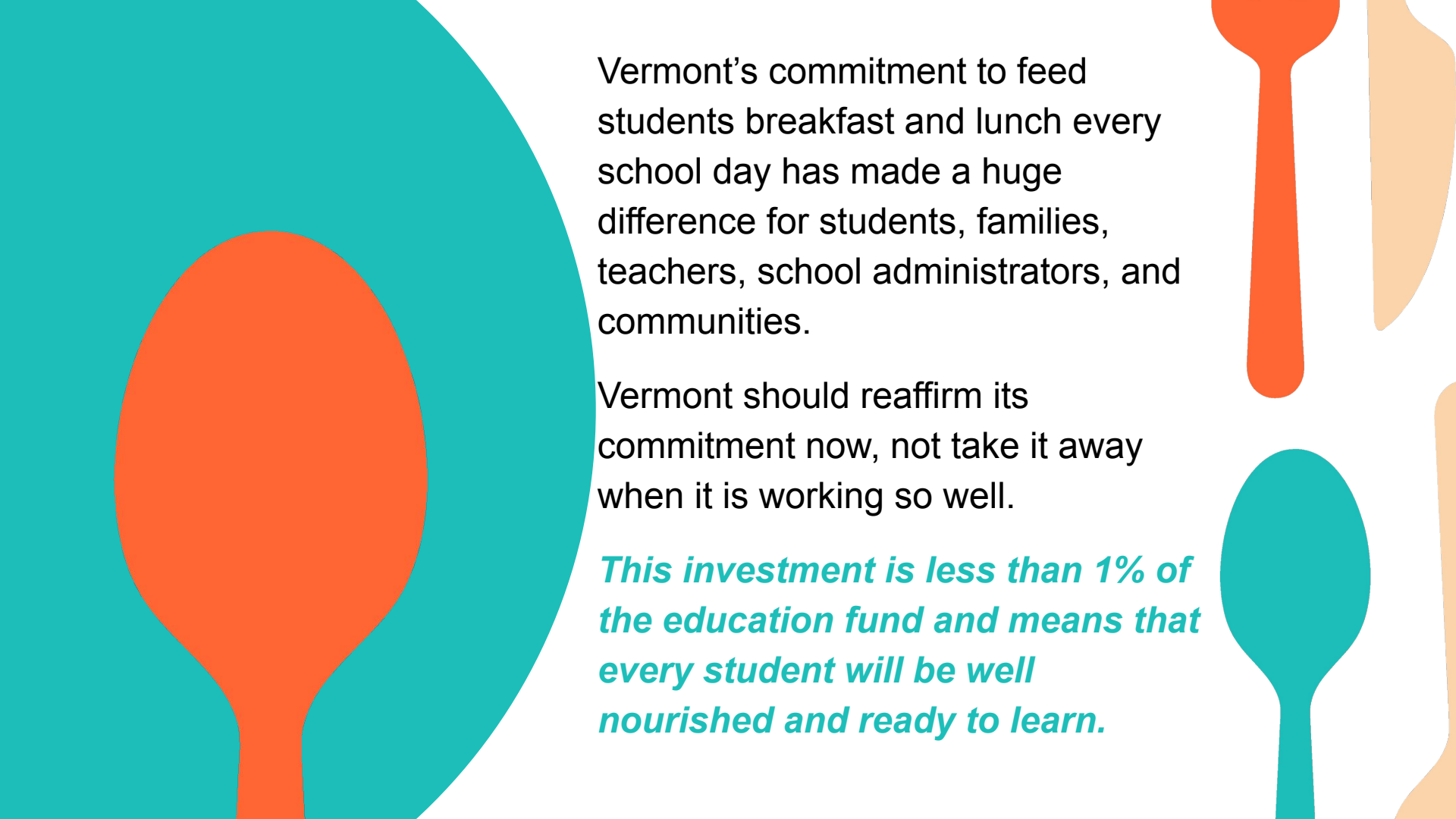
80%

Of all students in Vermont are living in households whose income is below \$150,000.



Only Universal School Meals can:

- ★ Reach all food insecure students
- ★ Take cash registers out of the cafeteria
- ★ Eliminate stigma for low income students
- ★ Eliminate unpaid meal debt
- ★ Reduce paperwork & costs
- ★ Allow staff to focus on preparing scratch meals and offering attention to students
- ★ Ensure all students are well fed and ready to learn



Vermont's commitment to feed students breakfast and lunch every school day has made a huge difference for students, families, teachers, school administrators, and communities.

Vermont should reaffirm its commitment now, not take it away when it is working so well.

This investment is less than 1% of the education fund and means that every student will be well nourished and ready to learn.