

Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont

Nourishing people, land, and justice through organic agriculture.



-Memorandum-

To: House Committee on Agriculture
Fr: Kayla Strom: Farm to School Manager, NOFA-VT
Re: Universal School Meals
Da: January 30, 2025

References: [Farm Fresh Meals for All](#)

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. For the record, my name is Kayla Strom, and I'm a resident of Richmond, Vermont. I serve as the Farm to School Program Manager at the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont, or NOFA-VT. My work focuses on increasing local food in schools and early childhood programs while ensuring these institutional markets work for Vermont farmers.

I'm here today to share how Universal School Meals and Farm to School work together to create a win-win—supporting Vermont families, strengthening our agricultural economy, and ensuring that no child in our state is distracted at school by hunger. **I urge you to continue funding Universal School Meals through the Education Fund. And to NOT support the governor's proposed repeal of this important commitment to our students, families, teachers and school administrators.** Feeding kids must be part of how we fund education.

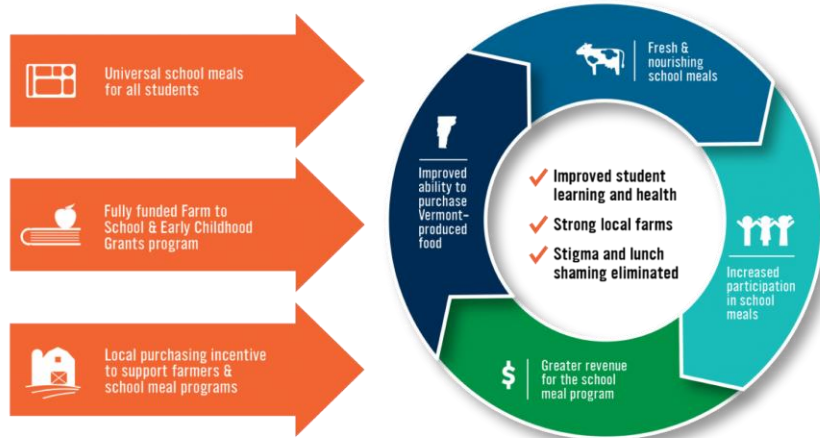
As a representative of the Vermont Farm to School and Early Childhood Network, I wanted to share that I'll be back in the State House on February 12th for Farm to School Awareness Day, and at that time I can share more about the Network and our two main programs (the VT FTSEC Grants Program and the Local Foods Incentive), but today will focus in on the importance that Universal School Meals plays in supporting Farm to School in Vermont.

We know that for many students, school meals provide nearly half of their daily nutrition. In Vermont, Farm to School connects food access, education, and local purchasing so that while children receive essential nutrition, they also learn about the impact of food on their health, communities, and local farms. Universal School Meals strengthens this system by increasing meal participation, bringing in more federal

dollars, and allowing schools to buy more high-quality, local food—**supporting over 100 Vermont farms and keeping more money in our local economy.**

We call this graphic the “Virtuous cycle” of farm to school: Farm to School and Universal Meals increases participation in school meals, which improves revenues in the program which allows more local purchasing, leading to more participation.

The impact of Universal School Meals on Vermont’s farmers is real. When all students have the opportunity to eat, school nutrition programs thrive. More meals served means bigger food budgets, largely supported with federal dollars through the universal school meals program, which allows schools to shift their purchasing power toward Vermont producers. **Every dollar spent on local food generates an additional \$1.60 in economic activity for Vermont**—we should be doing everything we can to keep those dollars in our state and put them in the hands of local farmers. That money ripples out—not just to farms but to local processors, distributors, and rural communities.



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Last year, **schools that reported their local spending to the Agency of Education through the Vermont Local Foods Incentive Grant, reported \$1.2 million spent on Vermont foods.**

With universal meals in place, school nutrition programs have been able to shift their focus—moving away from burdensome administrative tasks and instead putting time and resources into what really matters: serving high-quality, locally sourced meals to all students, every day.

Harley Sterling, Food Service Director at Windham Northeast Supervisory Union, puts it best:

“The amount of time that we *were* spending on free and reduced applications and various other administrative tasks that we no longer have to do has allowed us to focus more on the core of our program, which is making tasty, nutritious food for kids. And when meals weren’t universal, there was this moral dilemma—knowing that some kids couldn’t afford the food, but weren’t eligible for free meals. That moral injury was real. Now, our focus is exactly where it should be—on making the best food possible for all students.”

This shift in focus has directly impacted local purchasing. With increased participation and more stable budgets, schools are buying more Vermont-grown food than ever before. Schools typically purchase local foods in a couple ways. Many have direct purchasing relationships, where schools are working directly with farmers to bring their products into the cafeteria, but we have also seen the need for more

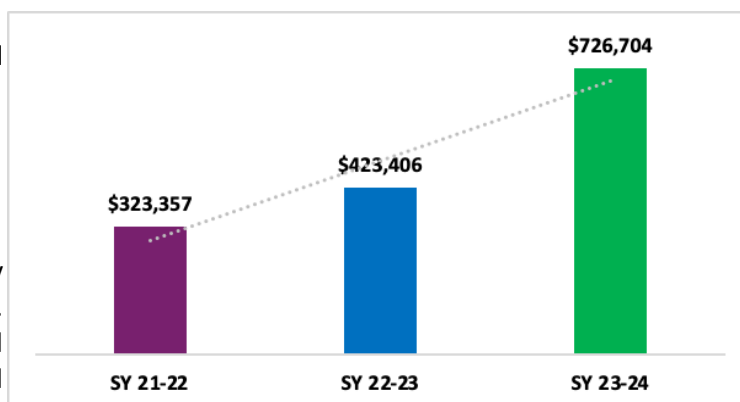
aggregation of local products and Food hubs have stepped up to meet this demand, growing in number and capacity, helping to strengthen local food supply chains and build a more resilient food system.

This chart shows the steady increase in school sales over the last few years, specifically through four key food hubs in Vermont - Food Connects, Green Mountain Farm Direct, ACORN and the Vermont Farmers Food Center. While other food hubs and distributors also play an essential role, these four have worked together to ensure that every school in the state has access to locally grown and produced foods.

Programs like the Vermont Local Foods Incentive and the federally funded Local Food for Schools initiative have been instrumental in this growth. **However, it is the stability and predictability of Universal School Meals that allow these programs to have the greatest impact.** When all students have the opportunity to eat, schools serve more meals, creating a stronger financial foundation for food service programs. This, in turn, enables them to take full advantage of funding opportunities, invest in high-quality ingredients, and build lasting partnerships with Vermont farmers and food hubs.

Total school sales through these four food hubs:

- SY 2021-22: \$323,357
- SY 2022-23: \$423,406
- SY 2023-24: \$726,704



One area where this impact is especially evident is in the sourcing of Vermont beef. Before Universal School Meals and the Local Foods Incentive, Food Connects reported that selling Vermont-raised proteins to public schools was extremely challenging, primarily due to budget constraints. Now that schools have both the financial means and an incentive to prioritize local sourcing, this barrier has been significantly reduced. In fact, one of the most effective ways for schools to increase their local purchasing percentage is by incorporating Vermont “center-of-the-plate” proteins like ground beef and beef patties.

Boyden Farm in Cambridge, VT, is Food Connects’ primary beef supplier. Mark Boyden, a fifth-generation family farmer, is deeply committed to serving Vermont’s public schools. As he puts it:

"The big thing is getting kids to expect local food, and they keep that when they grow up. That’s more important than sales."

The numbers back this up. During the 2021-22 school year, Food Connects sold approximately \$35,000 worth of Boyden Farm beef to Vermont public schools. The following year, that number rose to \$48,000, a 37% increase. Last school year, sales continued to climb, reaching \$110,000. That is a 129% increase — demonstrating not just growth, but the increasing integration of Vermont-raised proteins into school meal programs. So far, this school year sales are already at \$98,000, with 5 months left to go.

This is a clear example of how Universal School Meals and farm to school initiatives work hand in hand— not only ensuring that students have access to fresh, nourishing food but also strengthening Vermont’s agricultural economy in the process.

Jen Hutchinson, Food Service Director at Barre Unified Union School District, shares how this has transformed her program: “The fact that we have consistent high participation because of Universal School Meals means that I can do all this cool stuff—have hydroponic units, do Harvest of the Month events, and bring in fresh, local ingredients. I get to spend my time on what really benefits students— getting them excited about healthy food—instead of processing paperwork to determine which kids get to eat for free and which don’t. That shift has been everything.”

These moments—when a student learns that the eggs on their plate came from a farm down the road, or sees that the beef in their burger was raised in their own community—create meaningful connections. As Jen says: “When we highlighted eggs, we worked with a local farm, and the kids were mesmerized by all the different colored eggs. And when we told them, ‘This is from your buddy’s farm, right here in town,’ their faces just lit up. That connection, that magic, is what makes local food so powerful.”

Scott Fay, another Vermont food service director, underscores the financial impact: “Universal meals have allowed our budget to grow, and we’re able to think more about supporting local producers now than we were a few years ago. I have seen my program turned on its head, for the better. More kids are eating, we are scratch-cooking with whole foods. We’re processing local foods - we are actually processing local beef into meatballs for all Essex Westford schools each month. We’re purchasing better foods - more fresh fruit and vegetables. The stigma around school meals is gone. We are focusing entirely on high quality meals.”

Yet despite all this progress, school meals continue to be mischaracterized as a driver of education costs. The reality? Vermont will spend \$2.3 billion on education this year. The state’s cost of Universal School Meals is just \$17.5 million—LESS THAN 1% of the overall education fund. To even suggest that we should lower property taxes by taking food away from kids is *not* the Vermont way. As my colleague Karyl Kent, the Food Service Director of Mount Mansfield says, **‘Universal School Meals is not competing with education—it is fueling education.’**

The State of Vermont made a commitment to families, students, teachers, and school administrators when Act 64 of 2023 was passed. The Governor is now proposing to repeal this law and universal school meals in his proposed budget for FY2026. **If accepted, this proposal would mean that school districts would lose one of the most critical programs providing the funding and support needed to prioritize local purchasing, undermining the progress made in strengthening Vermont’s farm to school supply chains.** Losing the Universal School Meals program would create financial uncertainty for school nutrition programs, making it harder for them to commit to purchasing from Vermont farmers and food producers. This could lead to a decline in farm viability, disrupt established relationships between schools and local suppliers, and reduce access to fresh, nutritious, locally sourced meals for students— completely contradicting the state’s investment in a values-driven food system.

At its core, Universal School Meals is a cornerstone of equity in Vermont schools. Offering meals to all students, regardless of income, removes barriers that stand in the way of learning. It eliminates stigma, ensures that no child is left out due to bureaucratic hurdles, and creates a more inclusive school environment. When every student has access to nutritious meals, we level the playing field. School meals become part of the school day—just like textbooks, teachers, and technology—ensuring that all children have the nutrition they need to thrive.

When we invest in school meal programs, we invest in our students, our farmers, and our local economies. USM is a policy that works—for food security, for Vermont farms, and for the success of our students. I will be back at the State House on February 12th for Farm to School Awareness Day, where you'll have the opportunity to hear directly from farmers, school nutrition professionals, and students about the impact of these programs.

In the meantime, I am happy to be a resource. Please don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions about how Farm to School and Universal School Meals go hand in hand.

Thank you,

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