

VERMONT UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS

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**This brief was created as part of a Food Systems and Policy graduate class at the University of Vermont. These views do not necessarily represent those of the University of Vermont.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief explores the potential benefits, costs, and alternatives to the Universal School Meal Program (USMP) in Vermont. Through a literature review and key informant interviews, the information provided aids legislators’ decision-making surrounding the Universal School Meals budget for FY2025 and beyond.

The widely accepted knowledge that nutritious food is critical for young Vermonters has been well documented in past testimonies to the House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resilience, and Forestry, so this report will examine the impacts of the USMP as implemented so far and compare it to similar legislation in other states.

BENEFITS

- Estimated \$1,500 meal savings per child for Vermont families [19]
- Increased participation in meals [3]
- Reduced shame regarding debt and economic status
- Students try different cuisines

COSTS

Universal School Meals in Vermont cost ~\$30 million per year, with about \$18 million coming mainly from state property taxes.

OTHER PROGRAMS

- Eight states have variations of the Universal School Meals Program.
- This report outlines key differences between the programs.

INTERVIEWS WITH SCHOOL NUTRITION DIRECTORS



To supplement findings from academic and non-academic literature, the team conducted six interviews with school nutrition professionals across four counties in Vermont.

The interviewees were asked how the USMP changed their job duties, student participation, food waste, key benefits, key challenges, and what their schools would look like if they stopped offering free lunches. Quotes from these interviews are included throughout this brief.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Overwhelmingly in support of the program
- Participation has increased across school districts
- Many of the benefits of the program are not well-quantified
- School meals have strict nutrition guidelines that lead to inexpensive, healthy meals for kids

BACKGROUND

Vermont students have been receiving free meals at public schools since 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2023, this has been through the USMP legislation. Evidence suggests that states that extended these programs after the COVID-19 pandemic had 1.5% less food insecurity compared to those in states without extensions [1]. Food insecurity impacts children in a variety of ways, including poor physical and mental health outcomes and overall lower academic readiness. [2].

Going into the 2025 legislative session, the USMP is facing a potential cut due to state budget concerns. As the legislature prepares to vote on the USMP again, this report has been developed to provide information about the impact of the program and potential alternatives.

15%

of Vermont children live in food insecure households [19]



BENEFITS

Reductions in **stigma**, **student meal debt**, and **burden** for low income families along with increases in **local food purchasing** and perceived **school climate**.



With the USMP, a level playing field is created, no child has to worry about the stigma attached to whether they are paying for the school meal, with noted improvements in participation and cafeteria atmosphere [4].

“In the past, we had kids who qualified for free meals but wouldn’t come in for lunch. They would rather sit at the table and say they weren’t hungry than get a meal.”
-School Nutrition Director



According to a study surveying school staff in Vermont with USMP, 60.5% noted that the school community became more inclusive [3]. The school climate was also perceived to be improved, which could be influenced by a decrease in stigma [3].

“Universal meals don’t just feed kids—they change the atmosphere in schools. It’s more positive, more inclusive, and better for everyone.”
-School Nutrition Director



The income eligibility requirement for free school meals in Vermont is 185% of the federal poverty level—far lower than the livable wage in Vermont. The income threshold for free lunch for a single parent with two children is \$34,645 for the 2025–2026 school year [7].

“Kids who didn’t qualify, like the majority of the beneficiaries of universal meals, are people in the middle. There’s a big middle.”
-School Nutrition Director



After a school district in Missouri cut the pandemic Universal Meals Program, students had four times more meal debt than reported before the pandemic [10]. In 2024, the federal median for unpaid school meal debt was \$6,900, marking a 25.6% increase from 2023 [11]. If this figure is applied across Vermont’s 98 school districts, the total unpaid meal debt would amount to approximately \$676,200.

“No person wants to take a meal away from a kid. The embarrassment that comes with telling a student they don’t have enough money for lunch—that’s gone now.”
-School Nutrition Director



Universal school meals often simplify administrative processes and provide consistent funding, enabling schools to allocate more resources toward purchasing local food [5]. Programs like Vermont's Local Foods Incentive, which reimburses schools for sourcing local food, are often tied to USMP. 63.9% of Vermont school staff agreed that their schools were better able to purchase local foods through the universal school meals program [3].

“Because of the increased participation in the program, it brings in more money, more federal funds, and that enables us to purchase different foods, expand the variety of food offered, and buy more local food.”
-School Nutrition Director

ALTERNATIVES TO USMP

SCENARIO ONE: EVERY SCHOOL GOES BACK TO A PRICING MODEL.

This leads to an administrative cost of approximately \$100,000 per school and negates all the social benefits the program has provided [8].

at least
60% of Vermont children lose access to free school meals

SCENARIO TWO: EVERY SCHOOL DECIDES TO CONTINUE THE USMP AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL.

The overall cost would remain the same. However the program would shift from a categorical aid program to part of districts’ education spending and be voted on at a district level. This would impact the homestead property taxes, with higher taxes in districts with more per-pupil costs and could lead to uneven distribution of benefits throughout the state.

COSTS

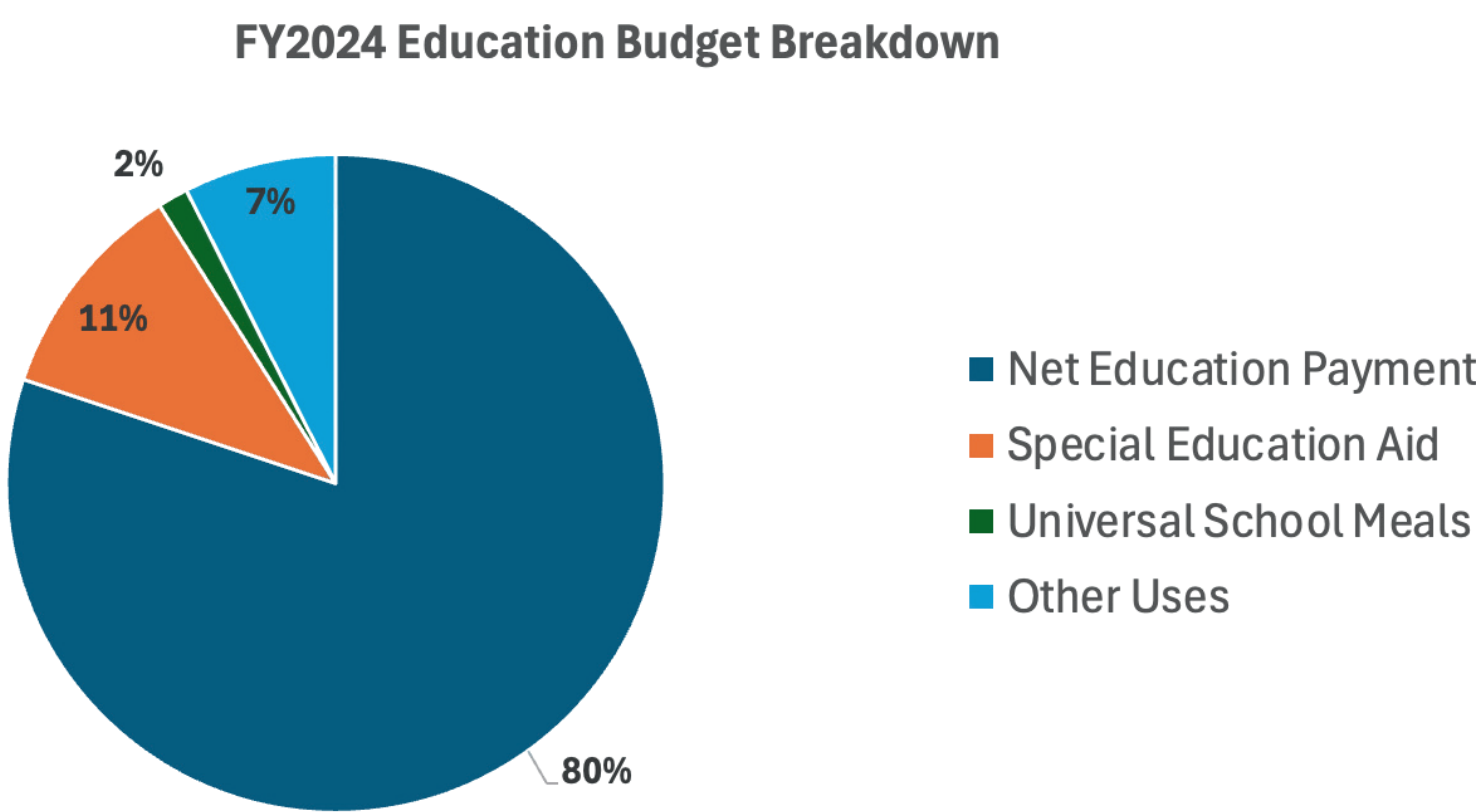


Fig.1: Data Compiled from the State of Vermont Agency of Education, 2024

Current costs for the Vermont USMP total ~\$30 million per annum. Of that, according to the State Director of Child Nutrition Programs, Rosie Krueger, the estimated cost to the state education fund for maintaining the program is around \$18.5 million from the \$2.8 billion Education Fund (fig. 1). The remaining \$17 million is reimbursed by the federal government [3]. Less than half (32,000 of 80,000) Vermont schoolchildren qualify for free and reduced lunch. USMP increases participation from non-free and reduced lunch students [4]. The USMP in Vermont is funded through property taxes. The mean cost to each individual property-owning taxpayer is \$2.50 a month [5].

OTHER PROGRAMS

“I don't mind paying to feed students and, you know, benefiting our community. That's money well spent.”
-School Nutrition Director

State	Program and Legislation	Funding Mechanism	Funding Sources
California	Universal Meals Program	Proposition 98 General Fund	State Funds (income taxes) Local Property Taxes Other Local Taxes
Colorado	Healthy School Meals for All	State Education Fund	Income Tax Increase on Earners Making over \$300k annually
Maine	School Meals for All	General Purpose Aid	55% state funds, remainder through property taxes
Massachusetts	Universal Free School Meals	4% Surtax (Millionaire’s Tax)	Portion of Revenue from Surtax (over half)
Michigan	School Meals Program	School Aid Fund	Sales tax (largest source) Income tax State Education tax Other smaller sources of revenue
Minnesota	Free School Meals for Kids	General Education Revenue	State aid payments from the state General fund budget Local funding from property tax system
Vermont	Universal School Meals	General Education Fund	State funding (largely from property taxes)
New Mexico	Healthy Universal School Meals	Public School Fund	General Tax Income Tax & Income Earnings Other taxes and revenue sources

Fig. 2: Data Compiled of Education Funding Sources for States that Offer Free School Meals

UNIQUE SOLUTIONS

- Colorado:**
Tax increase on earners making over \$300k annually
- Massachusetts:**
“Millionaire’s tax”: a 4% surtax on annual income exceeding \$1mil (through Fair Share Amendment)

Much of the diversity across programs in different states comes from how states fund them. (fig. 2) All of these states receive federal funding through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and make up the difference through other revenue sources. Funding for the USMP in Vermont comes from these federal funds as well as state funding through various sources: sales tax, purchase & use taxes, the lottery, etc. The remainder of funding is raised through property taxes (both homestead and non-homestead) [12]. Vermont is not unique in funding education through property taxes. California, Maine, and Minnesota also rely on property taxes also rely on property taxes to fund a portion of their education programs (Minnesota, for example, funds 30% of its public schools through local property taxes) [13, 14, 15]. Other funding sources include income taxes, sales tax, and other sources of revenue based on the state. For example, Michigan and New Mexico pull heavily from sales and income taxes as well as other sources of revenue [16].

A few states have found unique solutions to fund their school meals programs. In Colorado, legislators have imposed an income tax increase on earners making over \$300k annually [17]. In Massachusetts, voters approved a 4% surtax on annual income exceeding \$1 mil through the Fair Share Amendment. Over half of this tax revenue went toward education initiatives including their Universal Free School Meals program [18].

CONCLUSION

The USMP has reduced stigma, eased financial burdens of families, and strengthened local economies while transforming school nutrition. However, its reliance on property taxes raises sustainability concerns. As lawmakers shape its future, they must prioritize a solution that preserves these benefits while ensuring long-term financial viability.

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