

Mischa Johnson  
White River Valley Supervisory Union

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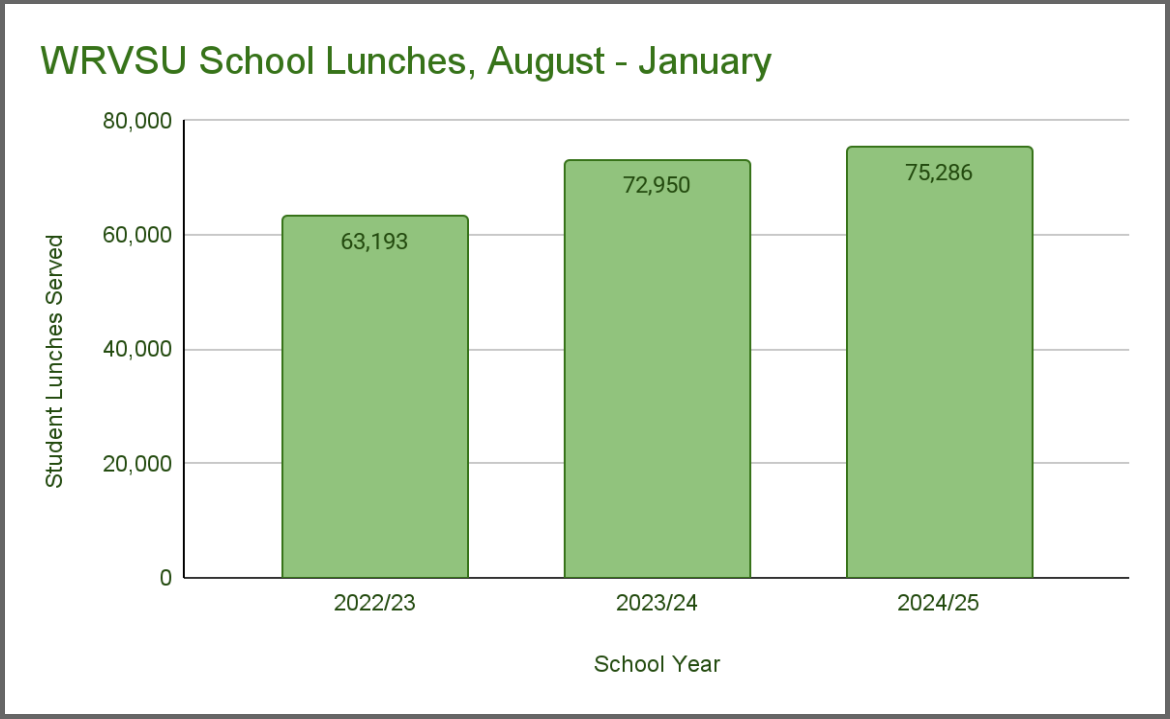
Thank you for inviting me to testify today and thank you for your support of farm to school and early childhood in Vermont. For the record, my name is Mischa Johnson, I am the Child Nutrition/Food Service Director for White River Valley Supervisory Union, located in Royalton, Vermont. Our food program serves all 8 schools within WRVSU's 6 districts, feeding close to 1,300 students an average of 1,175 school meals each day.

I am here today to ask that you please support the Farm to School & Early Childhood program and the Local Food Incentive with a level funding base appropriation of \$500,000 for fiscal year 2026, and also to continue funding Universal School Meals through the education fund. These two programs together ensure that all children receive high quality meals at school, and that we are supporting our agricultural families and businesses across the state.

My role as a Child Nutrition Director is to ensure that all children located within the walls of our Supervisory Union have access to the Nutrition they need to grow and learn. I do this by creating menus that are both nutritious and appealing to young people, offering them choices for breakfast, lunch and snacks. We offer salad bars in all of our schools with a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables and always have a fruit selection available all day for anytime a student needs a food boost.

Since 2010, I have been working in Child Nutrition in schools. Over the years, I have learned a lot and have been able to witness, first hand, the differences in meal participation when state and federal programs shift and change. In the last three years, we have been working with the Universal Meals program and the Local Food Incentive Program, and the results are significant and rewarding. The combination of these two amazing programs has meant that our team's limited time and funding can be laser focused on crafting menus and meals that meet the nutritional needs and food preferences of our students, instead of chasing Free & Reduced paperwork.

For example, since 2023 as we have shifted our focus to increasing the percentage of local foods we serve to meet the Local Food Incentive Program threshold, our lunch participation has increased by almost 20%. That translates to roughly 120 more students eating school lunch each day. The numbers, and the anecdotes from students, teachers and families, tell us that higher quality and higher value ingredients drive higher participation numbers in our nutrition program.



One of our districts, White River Unified District, was awarded a Farm to School & Early Childhood Capacity Building Grant in 2024, which has allowed our Farm to School Coordinator to jump in and boost our efforts to work with hyper local producers. Because of this work, we are purchasing from two producers in Royalton - Roma's Butchery and Moon & Stars. Beyond the delicious foods we are serving from our local partners, real-life learning and connections are possible with these local farmers and food business owners. Students know the people who are growing and making the food they are eating, and this makes a real impact.

Based on our efforts to prioritize local items on our school menus, we will receive roughly \$33,000 of supplemental spending power from the Local Food Incentive

program to invest into our meal program. This incentive fully covers the costs of purchasing 100% local beef from Roma's and tortilla chips and empanadas from Moon and Stars. These high quality foods are a point of pride for our program because we know the multiple benefits they offer to our students, and to our farming community.

**“As a family, we appreciate the free meals that are provided by our schools. Not only does it take a load off my mind that my girls are getting good quality, **locally-sourced food**, they also get variety that we cannot always provide. My girls are eating and asking us to buy fruits and veggies that we had not introduced before. They ask us to **buy from our local farmers because it's what they get at school lunch.**”**

*- WRVSU Parent*

In addition to the local beef and Moon & Stars corn products on the menu, we serve Vermont grown eggs, yogurt, apples, maple syrup, sausage, buttermilk, and pizzas, and I am always looking for new local products. My goal is to make our menu as locally sourced as possible. We are an agricultural community in an agricultural state. Serving our community's products to our children is the right thing to do, for the kids, for the farmers, for everyone.

Universal meals are also incredibly important to our food program. In the era before universal meals, heartbreaking situations of turning children away from the meal line were the norm, not the exception. I recall once such event: I was told that a particular student's meal bill was too high, and that I was to provide an “alternate meals.” When I handed the student the cold cheese sandwich, instead of the hot meal being served that day, this child - a joyful, spirited little five or six

year old - burst into tears. They could not possibly understand why this was happening. This broke my heart, and I vowed to never ever do this again to another student. Many others have had similar experiences: instances of nutrition staff paying out of their own pockets for childrens' meals are common.

Since Covid-era universal meals were turned into law in 2023, we have been able to intentionally purchase more locally grown and made foods, knowing that we have guaranteed revenues that can be invested in quality foods. So we see these two programs - Farm to School / Local Food Incentive and Universal Meals - as essential to our ability to buy local.

“We have been able to provide our students with amazing homemade meals using some of the best local products because of the Farm to School and Universal Meal funding. **Our meal counts have gone way up and I believe it’s a direct result of having meals made with better local ingredients** that kids can taste the difference. The parents notice as well, due to our advertising of the local businesses we purchase from on our monthly menus. It’s nice to **know the beef comes from the butcher down the road whose children attend the school**, handmade corn tortilla chips from a local entrepreneur, sausage and yogurt from a Vermont company, Vermont grown apples and so many more.”

*WRVSU Parent & Childhood Nutrition Team  
Member*

Thank you so much for your time here today, and for all the work you do every day to support our families and farmers. Thank you for listening to my testimony and considering the real impacts of the Farm to School & Early Childhood

program and the Local Foods Incentive. Level funding base appropriation of \$500,000 for Fiscal Year 2026, as well as the continuation of Universal School Meals through the Education Fund, means that we can continue this important work of nourishing children with foods grown and made right here in their own communities. I would be happy to answer any questions and share more information with any of you, please do not hesitate to reach out if you have need or interest. Thank you.