

**Written Testimony of Laura La Vacca**

School Nutrition Director, Burlington School District  
Co-Chair, Vermont School Purchasing Group  
Executive Board Member, School Nutrition Association of Vermont

**Submitted to the Senate Health and Welfare Committee in opposition to S.26**

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Chair Lyons and members of the Senate Health and Welfare Committee,

My name is Laura La Vacca. I serve as the School Nutrition Director for the Burlington School District, co-chair the Vermont School Purchasing Group, and sit on the Executive Board of the School Nutrition Association of Vermont. I appreciate the opportunity to submit written testimony in opposition to S.26, which I do not believe is an effective or necessary approach to preventing the inclusion of the listed harmful ingredients in school meals.

I have spent 20 years providing nutritious meals to students and supporting farm-to-school initiatives that engage students in health and wellness. Over my career, I have seen important improvements in school meal regulations, including the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which ensures meals meet standards for calories, sodium, fat, sugar, and micronutrients. These regulations provide valuable guidance for feeding students well.

Vermont leads the nation in nutritious school meals through strong farm-to-school programs and scratch cooking practices, which ensure meals exceed federal nutrition requirements. The Local Foods Incentive grant has further strengthened these efforts by helping schools purchase locally grown and produced foods, benefiting both student nutrition and Vermont's agricultural economy.

Vermont Universal School Meals guarantees all students have access to nutritious breakfast and lunch without financial barriers, while reducing administrative burdens. This allows nutrition professionals to focus on preparing meals from whole ingredients, ensuring higher food quality, better ingredient selection, and improved nutritional value.

As Rosie Kruger shared, only a nominal number of foods purchased by Vermont schools contain the dyes referenced in S.26. These items represent approximately \$219,000 of nearly \$20 million in total food purchases, roughly 0.1%, and this does not include additional direct purchases from Vermont farmers. Districts have been informed, and alternative products are available.

The School Nutrition Association, Vermont School Purchasing Group, and Agency of Education Child Nutrition Programs provide guidance, tools, and education to help operators make informed decisions. A centralized monitoring system could turn compliance into a collaborative opportunity, rather than placing additional burdens on individual programs.

Vermont school nutrition programs are ready and willing partners in education. Programs like the Local Foods Incentive and Universal School Meals demonstrate how legislation can improve outcomes, promote quality, and foster collaboration creating investments that return real benefits to students and the community. Additional regulations, however, divert time and resources from these effective initiatives.

Responsibility for producing foods without harmful ingredients lies with manufacturers, not consumers. Existing legislation, H.260, correctly directs requirements to manufacturers and distributors. Vermont's school nutrition programs should continue to focus on what works: scratch cooking, farm-to-school connections, and nutrition education. Additional regulations are unlikely to improve the significant progress already being made in promoting children's health.

For these reasons, I respectfully oppose S.26 and encourage the Committee to focus on collaborative strategies that support Vermont's students, school nutrition programs, and communities.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

**Laura La Vacca**