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## Testimony for Senate Committee on Health and Welfare, February 17, 2026

Good morning, Chair Lyons and members of the Committee.

My name is Scott Fay, and I serve as a School Nutrition Director for the Essex Westford School District (EWSD). I am also a committed advocate for school meals and the critical role they play in student health, learning, and overall well-being. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

I share the goal behind this bill. We all want students to have access to high-quality, nourishing food at school. School nutrition professionals are deeply committed to student wellness, and operate under some of the most rigorous federal nutrition standards in the country. With that in mind, I am here today to respectfully urge the Committee not to move forward with this legislation as written.

Every day, I see how school meals impact students. This year, we changed our meal service operations at EWSD's therapeutic and alternative schools. One of the Directors recently shared this story: *"Since shifting to delivering scratch-prepared lunch, we have 100% of students eating almost every day. They read the lunch menu and talk about their favorite meals almost every day, and get excited about what they will get to have. They love Jenn and often meet her at the van to help carry things or shovel her a path if it's been snowing. We've had several times when students tell us that lunch is the only reason they came to school on days when things are tough."*

That is the power of a strong school food culture and healthy meal program. Participation is not abstract; it reflects trust, consistency, and relationships. Schools need support to create stories like this: connecting with students, fostering engagement, and providing a healthy, welcoming food environment every day.

That is why I believe we should be thoughtful about how we approach this issue. S.26 proposes prohibiting certain artificial dyes in foods served or sold in schools. While well-intentioned, it functions as an unfunded mandate and adds another layer of compliance to programs that are already highly regulated and struggle to be financially self-sustaining. It also places responsibility solely on schools rather than addressing these additives more broadly in the food system.

School nutrition programs operate under detailed federal meal pattern requirements that specify calorie ranges, sodium targets, whole-grain thresholds, fruit and vegetable subgroup minimums, and milk specifications. We follow strict procurement standards, production record requirements, civil rights compliance, wellness policy mandates, food safety plans, on-site administrative reviews, financial audits, and extensive reimbursement-related reporting. Every menu, recipe, and product must comply with layered federal and state regulations before it reaches a student's plate. Adding another standalone compliance requirement without

additional funding or staffing does not simplify the system or improve its coherence. It further complicates an already highly regulated program that is working every day to feed students safely and nutritiously.

As Vermont State's Director of Child Nutrition, Rosie Krueger mentioned in her testimony last week, "*national manufacturers have already reformulated many products to remove these additives, and we anticipate additional replacement products formulated specifically for school meals programs by the enactment date, although there may be some increase to product cost.*". This means the bill may ultimately impact a relatively small subset of products, while still requiring schools to implement ongoing, time-consuming monitoring and documentation systems. When market forces are already driving reformulation, it may be worth considering whether additional regulation targeted only at schools is the most efficient approach.

If the goal is to reduce artificial additives in school meals, one of the most effective strategies is to invest in and incentivize scratch cooking using whole and local foods. Many schools are already moving in this direction: this year, grant requests exceeded the Local Foods Incentive Grant's (LFI) program's annual appropriation, and three-quarters of Vermont's school food authorities are engaging with the LFI. This demonstrates that the incentive is working, helping schools purchase more whole and local foods. When schools prepare meals from basic ingredients, fresh produce, whole grains, and unprocessed proteins, artificial dyes largely disappear naturally.

Rather than focusing on prohibition, we could:

- Invest in equipment and infrastructure that supports scratch preparation
- Expand culinary training and workforce development for school kitchen staff
- Expand farm-to-school and local procurement incentives
- Offer grant funding to transition away from highly processed items

This approach strengthens local agriculture, builds staff skills, improves meal quality, and reduces the use of additives, all without creating an additional compliance burden.

School nutrition programs are one of the most powerful public health tools available to the state. If the Legislature's goal is to improve the nutritional quality of school meals, investing in scratch cooking capacity will deliver broader and longer-lasting results than a targeted additive ban.

We are ready to continue improving. We simply need a policy that aligns with operational realities and supports long-term transformation rather than layering additional regulation onto an already complex system. For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee not to move forward with S.26, but instead to consider alternative strategies that strengthen Vermont's school meal programs in a sustainable and meaningful way.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to Vermont's students.

Scott Fay  
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