

Testimony in Support of S.100 - Farm Fresh School Meals for All

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I am writing today to voice my continued support of S.100 - The Farm Fresh Meals for All bill.

As a school food service director with experience over the past 10 years feeding Vermont school children at some 10 different schools, I see firsthand how important access to healthy nutritious meals is to the success of our scholars.

Certainly there are USDA programs that provide an opportunity for the most needy students to access school meals at no charge. But that is not enough.

I have seen what really happens under the standard "paid" model. It looks something like this:

First, when the paid model of school meals is implemented, there is undeniably a stigma attached to those who receive free meals, even though we are very careful to never reveal a student's status. I think that this is especially evident for the breakfast meal.

Second, there are many "paid" students whose families cannot afford to fund daily meals for their children. I see these kids eating nothing, and claiming they are not hungry, or eating some snack food, like microwave popcorn, in place of a nutritious meal.

At all of the schools that I serve there is a policy to allow a student to have both a breakfast and lunch meal each day, regardless of the negative balance on their account. We don't talk to the students about what is owed. This results in lots of wasted administrative time collecting on accounts, calls from upset parents who did not know their student had been running up a bill and ultimately a pile of uncollectable student account debt. It is the inevitable outcome, because the children are hungry.

I have also been privileged to work for many years at a school that has implemented a Universal Meal Program under an existing federal program. This community has recognized the value of investing in the health of their children by providing all students with equal access to breakfast and lunch at school.

The outcomes stand in stark contrast to the description depicted above. Under Universal School Meals, almost all children eat breakfast and lunch as a matter of course. They are able to have the experience of sharing a meal with their peers, without being concerned about how it makes them look to others. This serves as a great equalizer and source of community building.

Our school food staff is able to focus on offering lots of choices, fostering a willingness by students to try a wide variety of foods, and incorporating more local agricultural products into our menus.

The administrative staff does not have to worry about collecting school meal account balances from cash strapped families. Teachers appreciate the positive effects on behavioral and educational outcomes that stem from having well fed children.

With the advent of a temporary federal pandemic response this year allowing us to feed all students for free, I have witnessed similar transformations begin at all of the schools that I serve. It is clearly evident that this is the right path to tread.

The simple act of feeding everyone nutritious meals transforms a school community on many levels. The result is greater equality, better outcomes for students and building the educational experience we are striving to achieve for all of our children.

Please support S.100 as it comes up for passage in the Senate.